

Witchy Woman

By Jack English

Chapter One: New Client

Jack English just finished his third cup of coffee or was it his fourth, when his secretary, Buick, buzzed him.

“New client,” was all she said.

“Who is it?”

“They didn’t say.”

“Did you ask?”

“No. They just said they wanted to see you. I figured you knew them.”

It was pure Buick. English’s secretary never did anything unless she was told to do it, and maybe not even then.

“Send them in.” English put the finishing touches on an email and sent it on its way. When he looked up, he saw a woman that looked like she had just stepped out of a vampire movie. She had pale skin, high, teased, jet black hair, and she was dressed head to toe in a black, form fitting dress. She had a narrowest waste he had ever seen on a mature woman. Her dress was cut low so that it showed her considerable cleavage and she wore ruby red lipstick. A scar, concealed by makeup, was on her left cheek.

“Have a seat,” he motioned to a wing chair opposite his desk.

As soon as she started to move, another figure appeared at his door. It was a large man who had to duck to get through the doorway. He too had pale skin. His black suit was worn and his shirt was probably white once. A thin black tie hung down in front of his shirt.

“Have a seat,” English pointed the man to another wing chair.

The woman waved the large man away, “That’s just Burns, my man servant. Burns, wait for me in the lobby, will you?”

He grumbled something inaudible.

“Mr. Burns,” English extended his hand toward the lobby, “help yourself to coffee.”

The man nodded and mumbled something inaudible again.

“How may I help you?” English asked the woman.

She leaned forward and planted an elbow on the edge of his desk. “I need a lawyer. My husband just died and I need help with the estate.”

“I’m sorry to hear about that. You have my condolences.” English turned toward his computer, “I don’t practice estate law, but I know of several good firms that can help you.”

“I don’t want another firm. I want you. Perhaps I should introduce myself. My name is Sabina Pruitt. My late husband was Roland Pruitt of Pruitt Investments. Any other firm I go to is going to be thinking about how they can capture Pruitt Investments as a client. They are not going think about what is best for me.”

“I know a lot of small firms that only do estate law. They probably wouldn’t be interested in a corporate client.”

“I looked at a lot of those firms. They are all paper pushers. I’m going to need a litigator. That’s you,” she pointed at him with a long, ruby red fingernail.

“How did you pick me?” English asked.

“I know you are not a corporate lawyer and I liked the way you handled the Cruikshank defense.”

“What makes you think you are going to need a litigator?”

“There is a lot of money in Pruitt Investments...”

“And?” English said.

“I’ve got three step children who are bound to make trouble.”

Chapter Two: Tarot

“Did your husband leave a will?” Jack English asked.

“Yes,” Sabina Pruitt said.

“Do you know what it says?”

“No.”

“But you think there is going to be trouble.”

“Yes.”

“Why?” English asked.

“Do you believe Tarot cards can predict the future?”

“I’m just a simple country boy,” English said. “I believe in what I can touch, taste and feel.”

She produced a deck of Tarot cards out of nowhere. “Shall we see what the cards tell us?”

English shrugged. Despite her witchy look, she was throwing off a huge amount of sexual heat. *She must be producing pheromones*, he thought. One of English’s old girlfriends was a doctor and she explained that pheromones are chemicals that animals, and some humans, produce to influence the behavior of others. He pretended not to notice and focused on the cards.

She turned over a Death card. It had her husband’s picture on it. “This is my husband, Roland. The Death card signifies the end of a cycle and change. His death was foretold in the cards.”

“How did he die?”

“Where did he die might be a better question. He died in a hotel room in the Sphinx Casino.”

“What did he die of?” English asked.

“The medical examiner hasn’t determined that yet, but when the police made the death notification, they asked if he had any medical reason to use nitrous oxide.”

“Laughing gas?” English leaned in, “Did he have any medical reason for using nitrous oxide?”

“The short answer is no. But he used it recreationally.”

“And you know this because?”

“I’m his wife. I know a lot more than I am supposed to. Roland liked to keep secrets; he just wasn’t very good at it.”

“Where you there when he passed away?” English asked.

“I was at home. And, for the record, I had no idea that he was at the Sphinx last night.”

“Where you alarmed when Mr. Pruitt didn’t come home last night?”

“More annoyed than alarmed.”

“Why?”

“He likes to play away from home.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I was good with it when I was the away game. Now that I am the home game, it pisses me off.”

“Did the police say whether they were treating his death as suspicious?”

“They left the distinct impression there was something suspicious about it.”

“How old was he?”

“Sixty.”

“Health?”

“Excellent.”

“Did the police provide any details as to what happened?” English slid a yellow notepad onto his desk.

“No, they only told me what I told you, and then asked me to identify the body. I came here directly from the morgue.”

“Then how did you have time to research me?”

“Like I said, my husband’s death had been foretold by the cards.”

“What else have the cards told you?” English asked.

She laid another Tarot card next to the first. It was the Chariot Tarot card. It had a man’s picture on it. “This is Jacob Pruitt, my youngest stepson by my husband’s first wife.” She tapped the card with a long red fingernail, “Pruitt Investments manages trust funds and pension plans. Jacob is the Vice President of Marketing. He finds trust funds and pensions that need someone to manage their investments. He has a lot of direction, control and willpower. No doubt, he will contest the will. He will become your adversary.”

“My adversary?”

“Your adversary. When anyone stands between him and what he wants, he takes it personally. He’ll be as angry with you as he is with me.”

She laid a Judgment Tarot card on English’s desk. It had a man’s picture on it. “This is Esau Pruitt, my eldest stepson by my husband’s first wife. Esau is the Vice President of nothing in particular and draws a nice salary for it. Esau is full of self-doubt and self-loathing because he never made anything of himself. As long as he gets something, he is unlikely to contest the will.”

She laid The Emperor Tarot card on English’s desk. It too had a man’s picture on it. “This is Frank Cardinalli. He is our chief investment officer. He finds low risk, high return situations to invest in.” She tapped the card, “He represents authority, structure and

control. My husband, Roland, hasn't spent much time at the office in the two or three years. So, while he still had the title CEO, he hasn't provided much leadership and direction. That has set up a contest between Jacob and Frank. For some time now, Frank has encouraged Roland to retire and appoint him CEO. As a matter of fact, Frank has been functioning as CEO for the last few years. That puts him in direct conflict with Jacob." She tapped her stepson's card. Now that my husband is gone, Frank sees himself as the natural heir apparent.

"If Pruitt is a family business, it doesn't take Tarot cards to see where the chips are going to fall."

Sabrina raised one finger theatrically, "Would it change your tune if you knew that Frank Cardinalli owns ten percent of the company? Giving Frank an equity stake in the company was the only way my husband could hold onto him."

"Who owns the other ninety percent?" English asked.

"My husband did."

"Do you expect that to come to you?"

"I don't know. Roland liked to play games. He liked to keep people off balance. It wouldn't surprise me if he cut all of us out of his will."

"So, you don't think your husband planned to hand the company over to Jacob?"

"There is no way to tell until the will is read."

She laid The World Tarot card on English's desk. It had a woman's picture on it. "This is Sarah Foxglove, a stepdaughter by my husband's second wife. Her card signifies harmony. Her title is Vice President of Communications, but her main job was to keep the peace between Frank and Jacob. They are in a constant tug of war, each trying to outdo the other."

"Sarah also had to keep the peace between Jacob and Roland. There was always tension between them. Roland demanded more and more from Jacob. Jacob complained he wasn't given enough authority to do what needed to be done. Deep down, I think Roland wanted to be proud of Jacob, but Jacob just couldn't measure up."

"The noble image of my son's youth, is overspread with weeds," English said.

"What?" Sabina asked.

"It's from Shakespeare's Henry IV. The king's son could never live up to his father's expectation."

"Whatever. Last week there was a screaming match between them. I wasn't there, but I heard about it. And, it wasn't just screaming. They were throwing things."

"Like what?"

"Files, reports, stuff like that."

"Did anyone throw a punch?"

"No, but I heard it came damned close to that. At one point, Roland stormed out of his office, marched down the hall and used a pair of scissors to pry Jacob's name plate off his door."

"Do you know what the argument was about?"

"Finance stuff, I suspect. It's all just numbers zero to nine to me. I don't really understand what they do or how they do it. All I know is that they seem to make a lot of

money. There is one more card you should see, it's the Justice Tarot card reversed." There was a man's picture on this card too. "This is Weldon Dosh. He runs a competing investment company. For some time, he has been trying to convince my husband to sell Pruitt Investments to him."

"And was he going to?"

"Like I said, my husband liked to play games."

"What kind of games?" English asked.

"Picture someone sitting in a wagon dangling a carrot on a stick in front of a donkey. As the donkey steps forward to get the carrot, it pulls the cart forward which moves the stick just out of reach."

She laid The High Priestess Tarot card on the table. It had her picture on it. "This is me. I am intuitive and draw on an inner voice, but death lurks in the shadows, just beyond the light."

"Are your husband's first or second wives still alive?"

"No. They are both are dead."

"How did they die?"

"Mysteriously."

Chapter Three: Reading

"What do you mean the first and second Mrs. Pruitt's died mysteriously?" Jack English asked.

"They were both killed in hit and run accidents," Sabina Pruitt said.

"Was anybody caught?"

"No," Mrs. Pruitt said. "One hit and run might be an accident, but two? I don't believe in coincidences."

English thought about asking her what the Tarot cards said about the deaths of Mrs. Pruitt #1 and #2, but then figured that would make him look like a wiseass.

She looked him in the eye and raised one eyebrow, "Just in case you are wondering what the Tarot cards said about their deaths, I should tell you, Tarot is about the future. The past is the province of the police."

That surprised him. How could she know what he was thinking? He tried to regroup. "I wasn't even going to ask. So, what exactly do you want me to do?"

"We plan to bury my husband as soon as the medical examiner releases his body. My husband's attorney expects to read the will the next day. I want you to escort me to the will reading."

"You said your husband only died a few hours ago. But obviously, it took a while to have these Tarot cards made up and to research myself and estate lawyers. What aren't you telling me?"

"Everything is in the cards if you know how to read them. I knew for some time that my husband was marked for death."

“When you say, marked for death, do you mean you thought someone was going to murder him? Or that he had health problems or that he took chances a man of his age shouldn’t take?”

“All of the above.”

“I don’t understand. What exactly are you saying?”

“Consider the scale of life,” she theatrically held her hands out to the side, palms up, making an imaginary scale, “Roland, or rather his life force was on one side of the scale. On the other side of the scale is death. Grow old, and that puts some weight on the death side of the scale. Make enemies and that puts weight on the side of death. Take chances...”

“You mean using nitrous oxide and... shall we say playing away.”

“Of course, that puts more weight on the death side of the scale. At some point, death wins out. The scale flips. Fate, karma, destiny, pick your word, in the end, it will have its due.”

“Did the medical examiner say when he was likely to release your husband’s body?”

“No. However, I understand you’re connected. Is there any way speed up the process?”

“Let’s see what the medical examiner has to say. I’ll let you know. Where is the will to be read?”

“It will be read at my house. Here’s the address,” she dropped slip of paper on his desk and stood. Can I count on you?” Sexual heat radiated from her like she was a furnace.

“I’ll be there,” English said.

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Jack English called Will McDuff, Atlantic County’s top detective. “Hi Will, it’s Jack. I hear you have a celebrity corpse in the morgue.”

“What celebrity?”

“Roland Pruitt of Pruitt Investments.”

“When you said celebrity, I thought you meant a ball player or actor or something.”

“You’ve got to widen your horizons, Will. There’s a big world out there and lots of kinds of celebrities.”

“What’s your interest in Pruitt?”

“I am representing his widow.”

“Why does she think she needs a lawyer?”

“She thinks there is going to be trouble over the will. So, what’s the story? Are you treating this as a suspicious death? Or what?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I want to know when you are likely to release the body.”

“Why?” McDuff asked.

“You’re full of questions this morning, aren’t you?”

“You’re pretty full of it yourself,” McDuff responded.

“Mrs. Pruitt wants me to be at the will reading. She thinks her step children are going to make trouble.”

“Isn’t it usually the wicked step mother who makes the trouble?”

“Have you met Mrs. Pruitt yet?”

“No, why?”

“Let’s just say she makes an impression.”

“Something’s up, Jack. What is it?”

“What makes you think something’s up?”

“Because I know you. You’re a personal injury lawyer who occasionally strays onto my turf. One thing I know is that you haven’t sunken so low that you are practicing estate law. So, what gives? Does Mrs. Pruitt have something to hide?”

“I can say without reservation that she isn’t hiding anything. Whoever did the death notification told Mrs. Pruitt that her husband was found alone in a hotel room at the Sphinx. Then the officer asked whether he had any medical reason for using nitrous oxide.”

“Nitrous oxide? You mean laughing gas?”

“That’s what the officer asked.”

“You still didn’t tell me why you want to know whether we are treating the death as a suspicious,” McDuff said.

“If it’s not suspicious, I’d like to have the body picked up today and prepared for burial.”

“Let me talk to the medical examiner and I’ll call you back.”

“Thanks, Will, you are a prince among men.”

“I know... It’s just one more burden I have to bear.”

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McDuff called back an hour later. “Jack, it’s Will. I just got done talking to the crime scene investigators. We’ve got to call this one suspicious. It will be a day or two before we get an autopsy so releasing the body is going to take some time.”

“Thanks, Will.”

“I’m going to need to speak to Mrs. Pruitt. Since you’re her lawyer, I thought I’d give you a heads up.”

“When and where?” English asked.

“Her house. I’m leaving the office now.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

Chapter Four: Motts Creek Road

Jack English jumped in his Porsche and set out for his client’s house. Sabina Pruitt’s house was on Motts Creek Road in Port Republic between Atlantic 610 and Route 9. To say it was in the middle of nowhere would be an insult to nowhere. There were no neighbors. The house was surrounded by scrub pine, cedar trees and soggy ground. Port Republic is only about seven feet above mean high tide.

As he drove, he put on the radio. The Eagles’ “Witchy Woman” was on. “She had raven hair and ruby lips. Sparks fly from her finger tips...” He changed the channel.

A long, curved driveway, paved in oyster shells, lead up to the house which was a three-story Victorian, badly in need of painting. It had a large turret at one corner, and three gables spread across the front of the house. At first glance it looked like there was a

gargoyle perched on the peak of each gable. On closer inspection, they were three-foot tall, plastic owls meant to scare away sea gulls.

Will McDuff parked his Sheriff's Department Crown Victoria in front of the house and Jack English parked his Porsche 911 alongside. They got out and stood looking at the place.

"Creepy, no?" McDuff asked.

"It needs a little tender, loving care, I'll give you that," English said

They walked to the front door. English knocked.

Burns answered. The door was big enough that he didn't have to stoop down.

"Detective McDuff and I are here to see Mrs. Pruitt," English said. "Is she in?"

Burns mumbled something inaudible, stood back out of the way and extended his hand inside. English and McDuff took that as an invitation and stepped into a cavernous, wood paneled entry hall. Burns mumbled something and pointed toward a couple of hall chairs.

English sat until Burns walked away, then he started poking into the rooms that extended off the central hall. Will McDuff followed him.

The interior of the house was much better cared for than the exterior. All the rooms had fireplaces, large windows, wainscoting and wood flooring. The furniture was all very stylish, for the 1890s.

One of the rooms toward the back of the house had cabinets all around and a large wooden table in the middle. Several rows of potted plants were on the table. A mortar and pestle sat on a counter, as did two dozen glass jars containing dried herbs. More herbs hung from a string in front of a window.

"I hope my house meets with your approval," Sabina Pruitt seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

"Very nice... and big," English glanced toward McDuff who simply shrugged. "Sabina, this is Detective Will McDuff of the Atlantic County Sheriff's Department. He's looking into the unusual circumstances surrounding your husband's death."

McDuff was taken aback by her witchy appearance, "Are you going somewhere?"

She put her hands on her hips, "What an odd question."

McDuff extended his hand toward her, "Well, I thought you were dressed for..."

"For what?" Pruitt asked. "I always dress like this."

McDuff looked away and placed his hand on a counter which looked like it was covered in neat bundles of dried weeds. "Is this your kitchen?"

"The kitchen is in the back. This is my herbarium."

"What?" McDuff asked.

"The place where I store and process herbs. I don't believe in any of those chemical pills that doctors try to force on people. Mother nature supplies everything we need. Now, what exactly do you want?"

McDuff stepped forward, "I have a few questions, Mrs. Pruitt, if you don't mind."

"Shall we sit in the dining room," she pointed the way. "Aren't questions usually asked across a table?"

"Not necessarily," McDuff followed her lead and sat where she indicated.

"Would either of you like coffee? Tea? Something stronger?" she asked.

“I’m good, thanks,” McDuff said.

“Me too,” English added. Then he turned toward McDuff, “A few ground rules, Will. You may ask background questions, but I am going to instruct my client not to answer any questions about where she was in the last 48 hours. Clear?”

“Clear,” McDuff said as he turned toward Mrs. Pruitt. “Where were you last night between eight and midnight?”

“Don’t answer that,” English said.

“Are you telling me your client doesn’t have an alibi?”

“I’m telling you my client isn’t going to answer that particular question,” English said.

“Did your husband have any enemies?” McDuff asked.

“Lots.”

“Like who?”

“Competitors, people who lost money betting against him, people who thought they should have gotten more than they did, former employees, former lovers.”

“That’s quite a list. Do you have names for these people?”

“I don’t call people names,” Mrs. Pruitt dismissed the question with the back of her hand.

“No,” McDuff leaned in, “I mean can you tell me the names of your husband’s enemies?”

“A few. I don’t know the particulars of his business, other than he made a lot of money and angered a lot of people. Roland did mention one person a couple of times, Weldon Dosh.”

“Who is he?”

“He runs Montpellier Investments. Pruitt Investments and Montpellier are in competition with one another.”

“Is it a friendly competition?” McDuff asked.

Sabina Pruitt leaned back in her chair a little. “Where you ever really in love with a girl and just when you were going to propose to her, somebody else steals her away?” She was throwing off sexual heat again. There were small tells in McDuff’s behavior that it was affecting him.

McDuff blushed a little, “Well no, not exactly. What’s that got to do with Mr. Dosh?”

“Dosh and Montpellier Investments had been trying to get the Sanitation Workers Pension Fund account for years. And just when Weldon thought he had it sewed up, Roland came in and snatched the account away from him.”

“That had to hurt,” McDuff said, “but was it a motive for murder?”

Sabina tapped her long red finger nails on the table for a few seconds then said, “Is \$5 million a year in fees a motive for murder?”