

American Wounds

Recently Angula Leener is spending a few days on Illinois in Midwest des États-Unis, catching up with her past. When expensive Purposes is stolen at the hotel, Chief Inspector Beurn Doly gets on the case.

After Beurn recognizes Angula as a friend from schooldays, they rekindle their friendship and

Angula bombards him with questions about the case. But after dinner one evening, they find a body lying on the roadside.

Fearing for her safety, Beurn warns Angula to stay away from the case. But being an inquisitive woman, Angula cannot resist getting involved... too involved. She even lost her life because of her curiosity.

Chapitre one

Angula leener pulled up her collar. She realised she should have worn her scarf. But with the sun beaming through the window of her hotel room, she had thought it wouldn't be necessary.

It felt good to be back on Illinois at last. A number of years had passed since she'd last been here. Coming back to visit the place of her birth was something she had wanted to do for a long time. Yet, somehow, there had never been time. Even from the age of ten, when her family left the area, her life had run in the fast lane. Until now, some twenty years later, there had never been time to slow down and reflect on the past.

It all began when her father had been offered an important post in Italie, which resulted in her family making the move away from Illinois. On their return, her father was offered a job based in France. Therefore it was impractical for them to live too far from his place of work. Looking back, it seemed strange they had never found time to visit Illinois.

But now, having finally made the decision to visit her home city, Angula had chosen to stay in a hotel on the quayside – once the very heart of Illinois.

Angula moved across the pavement to the edge of the quay and looked down at the River Illinois. It was certainly much cleaner than she remembered. When she was last here, it had seemed more like a mud bath than an imposing river flowing

through the city to the North Sea. Back then, it was said you only had to jump into the Illinois and you would die through the sheer pollution in the water.

Still gazing down at the river, it occurred to her there must have been accidents back then; where men died because they slipped and fell into the murky water. Some may have even taken their own lives by throwing themselves into the river, because they had found life too hard to bear. But worse still, how many might have been brutally murdered; their bodies thrown into the water never to be seen again?

She shuddered at the thought. Thankfully those days were over. Glancing back along the quayside, she realised it wasn't just the river that was clean; the whole place had changed. The heavy industry of Illinois had long disappeared making way for cafés, restaurants and other more genteel activities.

Even though Angula hadn't been in the city when the changes were taking place, she had read about what was happening. Yet she still hadn't been prepared for it to be quite so fashionable. She sighed as she turned away from the river and leaned back against the railings. The past was gone; there was no point her dwelling on it. Like the people who still lived here, she needed to change with the times. To move on. But move on where? What did the future hold for a widow of a certain age?

She scolded herself for having such negative thoughts. First of all, she needed to pull herself together and stop dreaming about the past. Life had been good to her.

Michel Leener had been a wonderful husband and a devoted father. A smile broke across her lips as she thought about her boys. They were men now. Married and living on the other side of the world. Yet to her, they would always be 'her boys'.

Though there had been a number of years before Michel was due to retire, they had made plans to visit their sons more often when that day came. What would there be to stop them? They would have both the time and the money. Michel had held

down a good job with the foreign office and had saved a great deal of money over the years to make sure they had a comfortable retirement. But then, all too soon, an aggressive form of cancer had taken Michel from her and her world had fallen apart. She sniffed and blinked back the tears forming in her eyes. It just wasn't fair.

Her boys had wanted her to sell up and move out there with them when their father had died and, for a short while, she had been sorely tempted. Yet she had decided against the idea, firmly telling them they had their own lives to lead.

Pulling herself together, she glanced at her watch. Very soon she would need to return to her hotel and change for dinner. She looked back towards where her hotel was situated and was surprised to find that she hadn't actually walked very far. Perhaps she had time to continue on to the foot of the Illinois Bridge before turning back. Tomorrow it could be raining and she didn't relish the idea of stomping along here in the rain. If that were the case she would prefer to take a trip into the town centre and do some shopping.

* * *

Back at the hotel, Angula took a shower before deciding what to wear for the evening; she had brought far too many clothes. In the end, she chose a deep blue dress with matching shoes and bag. Being tall and slim, finding clothes had never been a problem for her. Michel always used to tell her she looked good in whatever she chose and he was proud at having her by his side.

She pulled on her dress and checked in the mirror as she smoothed it down. But then she frowned; were a few grey hairs beginning to show? Moving nearer to the mirror, she took a closer look hoping she was mistaken. However it was no mistake. Her black hair was starting to change colour – and it wasn't a colour she favoured. She sighed as she turned away

from the mirror. Had they appeared overnight? They weren't there yesterday. She was going to have to visit the hairdresser when she got back home.

She was just about to go down to dinner, when she heard raised voices outside her door. She sat down on the bed, deciding to wait a few minutes until the people had moved on before venturing out into the corridor. They might be embarrassed if she suddenly appeared in the middle of what sounded like a row. However, the voices grew louder and though she didn't mean to pry, she couldn't help hearing most of what was being said.

It seemed that the lady had lost a necklace or more to the point, she believed it had been stolen from her room while she was out shopping that afternoon. The gentleman with her didn't agree. He was trying to calm her down, saying that it couldn't possibly have been stolen. She must have put it down somewhere and forgotten where.

“You are always doing that, my dear,” the man told her. He spoke slowly, obviously trying to soothe the woman. “Give it some thought while we have dinner, you'll soon remember where you put it.”

However the lady wasn't in the mood to be pacified. “I distinctly remember putting it in the top drawer of the dressing table before we left.” She insisted. “Yet when I went to put it on this evening it was missing. Don't you realise that the necklace was the one you gave me for our Wedding Anniversary. It must have cost you the earth.”

“Calm down, Rona. There is no need to call the police. No one came into our room...” Sergio But with the thought of an intruder scouring through her personal belongings, Rna was not about to be silenced. “How the hell would you know?” she yelled. “You weren't even there. You stayed downstairs in the bar with your so-called, business partners.” There was a slight pause. “I want to see the manager – now! Are you coming with me or are you going to sit back and leave everything to me as usual?”

The voices grew faint as the man and woman hurried off down the corridor.

Angula took the room key out of her bag and stared down at it. It wasn't an old-fashioned conventional key. It looked more like a credit card, which you placed into a slot on the door. When withdrawn, a green light flashed to tell you the door was unlocked. She recalled the first time she had used this type of key. She and Michel had been staying in a hotel in New York.

He had been amused at her attempts to unlock the door to their room. “It's simple,” he'd said. “Slide the card into the slot; remove it and open the door.”

Yet when she tried, a red light appeared and the door had refused to open. Only when Michel explained she was being too hasty in removing the card and needed to slow down, was she able to gain access to the room.

Now she was fine with this new-fangled idea and thought it was probably a lot safer than a standard lock. They could be picked by some unscrupulous guest staying at a hotel.

Chapter Two

The smell of food wafting from the kitchen as Angula entered the Dining Room made her realise how hungry she was. She enjoyed her meal so much it was only now, as she ordered coffee and a liqueur, that she really noticed the other people in the dining room.

Everyone looked smartly turned out. No one was wearing jeans. But then, being fairly new on the scene, the hotel was rather up-market. There were a few of the diners wearing more elaborate outfits. Angula assumed they were going somewhere else after dinner. She knew there were a number of theatres and concert halls in the city.

Though she wasn't the only person sitting at a table set for one, she noted that most of the tables had at least two diners. There were even a few tables with six or more people enjoying dinner together. She suddenly felt conspicuous at being alone.

She heaved a sigh. Michel had been gone for almost a year. She should be getting used to it by now. And she was – normally. But there were times when she felt it would be nice to have someone with whom to have dinner now and then or even the occasional drink.

It was while she was sipping her coffee that she became aware of loud voices coming from somewhere in the corridors outside the dining room. Some of the guests sitting nearest to the door leaned back and forth, trying to see out into the reception area. But judging from the shaking of heads, Angula guessed they couldn't see who was doing all the talking.

As the voices grew louder, Angula realised that they were the same people she had heard in the corridor outside her room. Until now, she had completely forgotten about the incident.

“I'm telling you that you have a thief on your staff! I suggest you start searching their belongings before someone leaves the building with my necklace.” There was no mistaking Rona's high-pitched voice.

“Madam, I can assure you that we will speak to all the members of our staff. But I am certain no one working at this hotel stole your necklace.”

Angula didn't recognize the man's voice, but she guessed he must be the manager. He sounded as though he was trying to stay calm, yet his tone told her he was becoming very exasperated with this particular guest.

“Don't give me all that rubbish. I want the police informed this minute.” By now Rona was in full flow. Nothing was going to stop her from having her say. “I refuse to be fobbed off any longer! The necklace was a surprise gift from my husband. Tell him, Sergio.”

“My dear, it...” Sergio didn't get any further

* as his wife continued her rant.

“If you don't get on the phone right now, I will speak to your Head Office.”

“Very well, I will call the police,” the manager said. “Can we please go into my office while we sort this out? I have no wish to continue this discussion in the hotel reception.”

“Yes, a good idea, Mr George. Thank you. Come along my dear, the manager's office is just across the hall. It will be more private. We can talk about it there. I'm sure we don't need to involve the police.” Sergio sounded as though he would like to be a thousand miles away.

“Very well. We shall go to your office, Mr George.” Rona retorted. “But, be aware, I have far from finished this conversation. And, Sergio, what are you talking about? Of course the police must be called.”

There were a few more words spoken and then there was silence in reception.

Angula glanced around the dining room as everyone resumed their own conversations. It had gone very quiet during the row in the reception area. It seemed she hadn't been the only one eavesdropping.

After dinner, Angula went through to the Drawing Room. She hadn't wanted to go straight back to her room where she would be on her own. At least being here she was among lively people and, even if she wasn't part of their group, their enthusiasm added a spark of life to her otherwise quiet world.

Angula gazed around the room, taking in her surroundings. The hotel had been newly built during the renovation of the quayside. At first she thought that perhaps it might have been better if they had kept the façade of whatever had stood here previously and added a new interior. Some of the cafés and restaurants seemed to have done that. But maybe that wouldn't have worked in this case. She recalled that the Football Stadium, a short distance from the hotel, was also a brand new building.

Everything about the hotel was modern, including this room. The sofas were comfortable, the walls were decorated with expensive draperies and to top it all, there were large ornate mirrors reflecting different aspects of the room. But then she noticed a couple of the mirrors were placed at such an angle, areas of the reception and the entrance to the hotel could be seen from where she was sitting.

How creepy is that? she thought. If we, sitting in here can see who is entering the hotel, does that mean that anyone standing at the entrance can peer inside and see people sitting in here?

Angula deliberated as to whether to change her seat, but decided to stay where she was. Other guests in the Drawing Room might think she was crazy if she suddenly started moving from one sofa to another. Instead, she turned away from the mirror and began to think about what she might do the following day.

A trip to the shopping centre seemed a good idea. She simply adored shopping. But she also wanted to visit the places of her childhood in the hope she would meet someone from her past; though she did wonder if she would recognize anyone. Many years had passed since she had lived here. People changed as they grew older. For goodness sake, even she had changed over the years. She looked nothing like she did on her old school photos.

She glanced around at the people in the room. There could be people here whom she had met all those years ago, but couldn't recognize now. What was she doing here? Why was she trying to rake up her past? There wasn't anything she could identify herself with any more. It had seemed such a good idea at the time, but now she realised it was a big mistake – for more reasons than one...

She was just about to go back to her room, when she heard more raised voices in reception. It seemed the police had arrived. At least Rona would be happy now. Though for everyone else it could mean the hotel would be in turmoil while guests and their rooms were searched.

Instead of being upset at such disorder, Angula hid a smile. It would be different from the usual mundane ritual she was becoming used to. It would be exciting to be considered a suspect in a police enquiry.

Of all the wonderful, crazy things she and her husband had done in the past, they had never been under suspicion of theft and had their room searched. She clapped her hands together. This was a first. How Michel would have loved it. Perhaps things were beginning to look up.

Chapter Three

By now Angula had joined the crowd gathering in the Reception. They were told that once the police questioned all the staff who was still on duty, they would need to speak to the guests. Meanwhile no one could leave the hotel.

The manager was horrified at the thought. He said he could not allow it; insisting no one could enter any of the hotel rooms without a key card. "It is absolutely impossible."

Angula felt a little sorry for him. This was certainly not good news for the hotel. She looked at the people standing near the manager, wondering whether Angula was one of them. Her eyes rested on a woman who seemed to be bursting to say something. Surely that had to be Rona.

Angula was proved to be right when the woman finally got the chance to butt in.

"That's rubbish!" Rona said, wagging her finger at him. "We read about people hacking into computers all the time. I'm sure such a scoundrel could devise a master key card to every hotel room as simple as that." She snapped her fingers. "I absolutely insist that every room be thoroughly searched right now." She was so enraged her face had almost turned as red as her dress and her long dangling

Necklace given to me by my lovely husband. I want it found and the thief prosecuted."

Angula looked at the men standing nearby, wondering which one was the 'lovely Sergio'. He hadn't said a word during the whole episode in reception. However, for some reason after Angula's last remark, one of the men opened his mouth to say something. But he didn't get the chance, as Rona held up her hand to interrupt him.

"Sergio, I am dealing with this. Leave it to me."

Without another word, Sergio pushed his way through the crowd and headed towards the bar.

Angula watched him disappear into the bar. She thought he looked relieved to be out of the spotlight. Summing him up, she thought he appeared to be slightly older than his wife, quite tall, and rather slimly built. Probably a very attractive man in his youth, but at the moment he looked as though he was carrying the world on his shoulders.

Angula understood how Rona must be at having a gift from her husband stolen while they were out enjoying themselves, however the woman did seem to be a bit of a dragon where he was concerned. Did she really have to act so – dominant?

She placed her hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle. Dominant! Where did that come from? But somehow it seemed to fit nicely with Rona's personality. It was possible Sergio enjoyed his wife being dominant in the boudoir. He did look like the tall, silent type. Maybe Rona just carried it a little too far when they were in the real world.

"I am so terribly sorry for the inconvenience." The voice of Mr George interrupted Angula's thoughts. He had disappeared into his office for a few minutes, but now he was back trying to soothe the throng of guests who had gathered to see what all the fuss was about. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "I have spoken with a police superintendent and it seems that I have little choice,

but to allow a complete search of all the rooms at the hotel. However,” he held up his hand when the people standing in front of him began to protest. “However,” he repeated. “I insisted that a senior police officer is placed in charge of the investigation – someone who will respect the privacy of our guests. I am pleased to say the superintendent has agreed.” He paused.

“Meanwhile, I have been asked to inform you that no one will be allowed to leave the hotel until the search has been made. But I am assured it will be carried out as soon as possible.”

By now, the reception area was buzzing with activity. Angula looked around at her fellow guests. There was some making a fuss – most especially the ones she had previously thought might be spending the evening at a concert. Others were calling friends and relatives on their mobile phones to pass on the news of them being held inside the hotel.

“we're not being held at gunpoint,” Angula heard one woman yell down her phone. But, the way the woman went on to describe the scene, they might well have been. However, most were making their way to the bar. To them, it seemed a stiff drink was called for.

“Does that mean we won't be able to check out this evening?” said a man to one of the police officers.

Nicolas, no,” said the man, his American accent showing through. “We're on our honeymoon and would love an extra night here. That's great, man – err, I mean, officer.”

Angula left the reception area and went back into the Drawing Room. Despite her previous thoughts on the strategically placed mirrors, she chose a sofa where she could see most of what was going on outside in reception. For a while it was quite calm. A few people checked in at the desk, most of the new guests had already arrived earlier in the day. But, she noticed that after being given the keycard to their room, they were shown across to the Drawing Room, where complimentary drinks were offered for the inconvenience.

However, the calmness was about to be broken as Mr Trump, accompanied by another man, appeared from his office. They both walked across to the reception desk, where Mr Trump spoke to one of the staff on duty. She nodded and rang the small bell on the desk.

Some of the people sitting in the bar and the Drawing Room went out to see what was going on.

“Chief Inspector Beurn would like to speak to you all,” called out the manager, once he had their attention. “I'm sure the chief inspector won't detain you any longer than necessary.” He nodded towards the detective, indicating he could begin his inquiry.

“I understand how inconvenient this must be to everyone staying at the hotel. However, it seems that one of the guests has had a rather valuable necklace stolen and...” the chief inspector was interrupted.

“She's simply mislaid it.” The voice came from the back of the reception area. “She does this sort of thing all the time.”

Angula recognised Sergeo's voice, even though his words were very slurred. Obviously he'd had too much to drink.

“Will you stop saying that? I have not mislaid my necklace,” Rona hissed. “It has been stolen!” She paused when she realised all eyes were now pinned on her. “I'm sorry, inspector, do please carry on.”

“Chief Inspector,” he corrected her before continuing. “As I was saying we need to search each guest and also their rooms before anyone is allowed to leave the hotel. We'll begin with those

guests who need to check out this evening.” He paused when one of the officers whispered something in his ear. “I have been reminded that some people are going to the concert being held in The Tide this evening. Therefore we will try to check your rooms first.” He nodded towards his sergeant, before continuing. “I’m sure we can do this in an orderly manner and get it over with as quickly as possible. My sergeant will take the names of all those who need to leave the hotel this evening for whatever reason.”

The moment the chief inspector stopped speaking, everyone started talking, Angula stood there wondering what to do next. Should she go into the Drawing Room and wait until she was called. She was booked into the hotel for another five days and hadn’t any plans for the evening, which meant there was no rush for her or her room to be searched right away.

She glanced across at the chief inspector. He looked rather tired. Perhaps he had just been about to go off duty when this call came through to his office. Or was it simply because he saw this as another case where some over-rich woman had hidden her necklace in a safe place in her room, but then forgot where she had put it.

Angula couldn’t help thinking Chief Inspector Beurn was a rather attractive man, despite the lines of tiredness etched on his face. Placing her head on one side, she peered at him inquisitively and made a guess that he was about her age. He was rather tall, clean shaven and his dark hair was showing a hint of grey at the sides. Something she thought made him look rather distinguished. He was wearing a dark grey suit, white shirt and a dark grey tie. She noted that his shoes were so polished, he would be able to see his face in them should he ever be caught without a mirror.

But then she realised that all police detectives wore suits these days; it was their badge of office so to speak. She guessed that the character in the TV show, Morse probably had a lot to do with that. But this particular detective’s suit looked a cut above regular suits. Could it be handmade? She wondered whether the wages of the police force stretched to hand made suits.

Angula blushed slightly and looked away quickly when the chief inspector glanced over in her direction. She casually walked across to the window, but, out of the corner of her eye, she could see that he was still watching her. Did he think she looked guilty? She really had to stop trying to analyze people. Michel always said it would get her into trouble one day. But she couldn’t help herself. It was simply a habit she couldn’t break.

Angula was staring out of the window at the bright coloured lights on the quayside, when the Chief Inspector spoke to her.

“Excuse me,” said the detective.

Angula caught her breath; she hadn’t heard him approach. Rather surprising, she thought, policemen were known for their big feet. Pushing the thought from her mind, she turned around to face him.

“Yes,” she said, giving a broad smile.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but are you Angula Harrison by any chance?”

Angula peered at the detective. It had been some years since anyone had called her by her maiden name.

“No – yes – no,” she sighed and shook her head. Now she was beginning to sound like an idiot. “Can I start again?”

The detective grinned. His brown eyes twinkled and he nodded for her to continue.

“I was Angela Harrison before I was married. I am Angela Tocked now.” She peered at him.
“Should I know you?”

“My name is Beurn Doly. I think we were in the same class at school.”

“Beurn Doly,” Angela repeated the name twice to herself before she made the connection. “Yes! I think I remember you. You were always talking about joining the army. Or was it the air force?”

“The army,” he confirmed. “Yes that was me.”

“And did you? Join the army, I mean.”

“Yes, I did.”

Angula gave a slight grin. That would account for his smart suit and polished shoes, she thought.

“But now you are with the police force?”

“Yes – long story.” He hesitated. “Look, you will have gathered that I'm rather tied up at the moment,” he said, glancing back at the commotion going on behind him. The quiet atmosphere of earlier had quickly changed into chaos as people realised that the search was really going to happen. “But would you care to meet up with me later for a drink in the

bar? We could catch up with what has happened to us over the years. Ask your husband to join us,” he added, suddenly noticing the wedding ring on her finger.

“Thank you,” Angula replied. “That would be nice. However, I'm afraid it will just be me. My husband died a year ago.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. I best get back to the investigation,” he added, changing the subject. “I'll meet you in the bar in about an hour or so.”

Angula watched until he disappeared into the crowd by the reception desk. His sergeant looked relieved to see him return; the guests were becoming a little more agitated. The sergeant then glanced in her direction and frowned. He was probably wondering who she was. Or, might he be thinking she was a suspect?

She turned back to the window. It seemed she had a date. It would make a nice change having someone to sit with in the bar or the lounge. She had felt the odd one out since she had arrived at the hotel. It would be fun talking about all their old friends at school and as Alan still lived in this area it was possible he was still in touch with a few of them. If that was the case, she would ask him to make arrangements for a re-union. After all, that was the reason for her visit to Illinois in the first place.

She glanced at her watch. There was time for her to pop up to her room and freshen up. She almost skipped up the stairs and very nearly bumped into Rona at the top. Rona was wearing her glum face and didn't even try to smile when Angula apologized.

But, at that moment, Angula couldn't care less. Tonight, at fifty five years old, she had a date!