

The Hoods

Harry Grey

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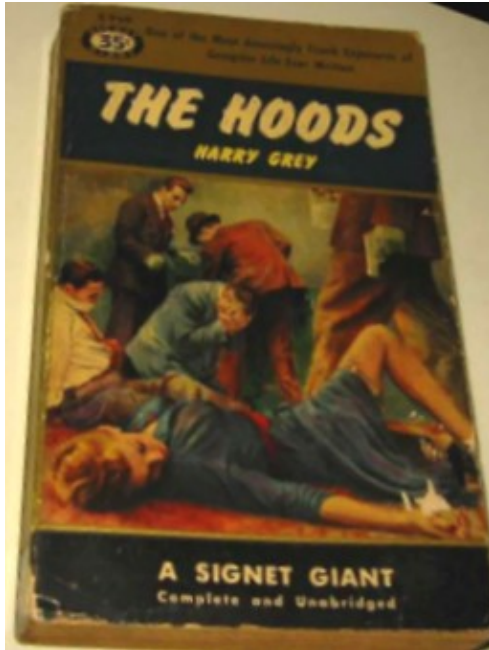
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To my true and loyal mob M., B., H. and S.

CHAPTER 1

Cockeye Hymie leaned excitedly across his desk. His blue eyes were completely out of focus. His manner was insistent and earnest. His tone was obsequious.

“Hey, Max, aw, hey, Max. Listen, will yuh, Max?” he pleaded.

Big Maxie darted a glance at our teacher, old Safety–Pin Mons, sitting sternly at her desk far up front, at the head of our seventh grade class. He put his paper–bound Western on his lap and looked disgustedly at Cockeye. His eyes were sharp and direct; his manner, calm and authoritative. His tone was disdainful.

“Why don't you just read your book and shut up?”

He picked up his Western and muttered, “Pain in the ass.”

At that rebuke, Cockeye gave Maxie a hurt and reproachful look. He slouched back in his seat, sulking, feeling abused. Maxie eyed him good humoredly over the top of his book.

Resigned, he whispered, “All right, all right, Cockeye, what's on your mind?”

Cockeye hesitated. His excitement had cooled somewhat from Maxie's chiding. You could tell because his eyes were back to normal focus.

“I dunno. I was just thinking,” he said.

“Thinking? About what?” Max was getting impatient.

“How about we skip school and go out West and join up with Jesse James and his gang?”

Big Maxie gave Cockeye a look of deep disgust. Slowly he untangled his long legs from under the small desk. He stretched his long muscular arms leisurely, far above his head. He yawned, and nudged me with his knee. In wise–guy fashion he spoke through the corner of his mouth: “Hey, Noodles, did you hear the dumb cluck? I ask you? How can one guy be so dumb? Go ahead, you talk to him. Jesus, what a shmuck.”

“He's a shmuck with ear laps,” I agreed. I leaned over to Cockeye, with my habitual sneer of superiority, and said: “Why don't you use your noodle? Them guys are dead, long ago.”

“Dead?” Cockeye repeated, crestfallen.

“Yeh, dead, you cluck,” I sneered.

He smirked, “You know everything. You got some noodle on your shoulders. Hey, Noodles?” He gave me a sycophantic laugh. I ate up his flattery. He put it on thicker. “You're smart, that's why they call you Noodles, hey, Noodles?” He laughed again in the same fawning manner.

I shrugged in false modesty, and turned to Max, “What else can you expect from a putsy like Cockeye?”

“Expect what, about Cockeye, Noodles?” tough–looking Patsy asked. He sat on the other side of Max.

Miss Mons shot a warning angry glance in our direction. We ignored her.

Patsy brushed his black abundant hair away from his bushy eyebrows with a defiant push. He affected a snarl by curling the corner of his upper lip, making his most commonplace utterance a challenge. In a deliberate, pugnacious staccato, he asked: “What did the stupid cluck say this time?”

Pudgy little Dominick, closest to Cockeye, volunteered the information. In his high–pitched voice he said, “He wants to go out West and join the Jesse James Mob. He wants to ride a horsey.”

Dominick bounced up and down, holding an imaginary rein with one hand. With the other he beat his fat flank.

“Giddeyepp, giddeyepp, Cockeye!” he taunted.

He made a clicking noise with his tongue. The four of us joined the act, clicking and bouncing up and down together.

Cockeye smirked in embarrassment. “Aw, fellas, cut it out, I was only kidding.”

“Pssst. The old battle axe,” Patsy whispered.

Like a dark cloud traveling swiftly across a bright sky, an enormous billowy disheveled figure came down the aisle. Her gargantuan hips were covered with a multitude of black skirts fastened with safety pins. She stood looming over us.

“You—you—good—for—nothing young tramps—what are you up to?”

Miss Mons was bursting with rage. With a quick sweep of her hand she snatched the Western thriller out of

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Cockeye's hands. Her cheeks blew with gale-like fury.

"You... you... hoodlums! You... you... gangsters! You... you... East Side bums, reading such trash! Give me that filthy literature immediately."

She stuck her hand under Maxie's nose. Slowly, impudently, Maxie folded the Western and put it in his back pocket.

"Give me that book instantly!" She stamped her foot savagely.

Maxie smiled sweetly up at her. "Kish mir in tauchess, dear Teacher," he said in distinct Yiddish.

I could see by her shocked expression she understood what part of the anatomy Max wanted her to kiss.

For a split second the class sat in shocked silence. The only sound in the room was the laboring asthmatic noise from the crimson jowls of our teacher. Then a chorus of suppressed giggling broke loose. She whirled around, spluttering and wheezing. For a moment she glared angrily around the room in a furious silence. Then she retreated to her desk, her prodigious backside bouncing in angry rhythm.

Dominick slapped his left hand on the middle of his stiffly extended right arm: an obscene Italian gesture.

"Gola Tay, Old Safety-Pins," he shouted after her.

Patsy whacked Dominick on the back and chuckled, "Yours is too small; you need a broomstick for that one."

Maxie made a jeering vulgar noise through the side of his mouth. The whole class broke into a hilarious roar. Miss Mons stood in front of her desk surveying the rowdy scene. She was shaking in uncontrolled fury. After a moment she regained her composure. Her passion subsided into a quiet, icy bitterness. She cleared her throat. The class became still.

"You five hoodlums who started this abominable disturbance will get your just deserts," she said. "All through the past term I have had to put up with your filthy, vulgar East Side conduct. Never in my entire teaching career have I come across such vicious young gangsters. No, I am mistaken." A triumphant smile played on her lips. "Years back I had some miserable scalawags of like character." Her self-satisfied smile broadened. "And I read in last night's paper all about the illustrious end of two of them. They were ruffians exactly like you." She pointed her finger dramatically at us. "I prophesy that you five, in due time, will also complete your careers in the same manner as those two—in the electric chair!"

She sat down smiling at us, nodding her head in happy anticipation.

Patsy growled, "She means Lefty Louie and Dago Frank."

Maxie spit through his teeth. "A couple of dumb clucks, them guys!" He turned to me. "That Lefty Louie, was he really your uncle, Noodles?"

I shook my head regretfully. I would have been proud to admit kinship.

"No, he was just a friend of my uncle Abraham's, you know, the one his friends threw off the boat when they were diamond smuggling."

Maxie nodded.

Our teacher took a heavy brass watch out of the folds of her black skirt. "Thank goodness, only fifteen more minutes before the dismissal bell," she said.

She sat looking at us with a half smile on her face, pleased, relishing the end she had prophesied for us.

Maxie took his Western out of his back pocket. With an insolent look at the teacher he slouched down behind his desk. The rest of the class went back to work.

I imitated Big Maxie's careless slouch and lolled deep down behind my desk to listen to the familiar clamor of New York's lower East Side through the open window. I indulged in my favorite make-believe: the outside pandemonium was like a discordant operetta. The piercing police traffic whistle was the orchestra conductor's starting signal. The cloppetty-clop, cloppetty-clop of dray horses pulling squeaky, rumbling wagons over cobblestones was the steady rhythmic beat of the drum. The blare of truck and passenger car horns were the wind instruments playing up and down the scale. The thin whimpering of hungry or ailing infants was the sad music of the violins, and the distant low rumble of the elevated trains was the palpitating beat of the bass viol. The medley of voices calling and shouting in a profusion of dialects was the background chorus, and the stentorian singsong of the peddler calling his wares, the male lead. Finally, dominating this musical uproar, was the ear-splitting screech of a fat woman. I fitted her in as the soprano voice, the primadonna. She was leaning out of an upper window.

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“Shloymie... Shloymie... Yoo-hoo, Shloymie, don't forget, tell the grocer a nice fat schmaltz herring!”

Then I imagined goblins and witches riding on these waves of sound, and on the different stinks floating in. They flew in on the stink of rotting garbage from open cans, on the stink from sewers, mingled with the sharp cooking smells from the dank tenements and the acrid urine from the school toilet in the play yard. They came through the window in suffocating waves, particularly offensive goblins discharging fetid secretions. Forever after these sounds and smells of the streets of the East Side were branded in my memory.

I came back to reality after a few moments. I looked around at Big Maxie, Patsy, Dominick and Cockeye Hymie, wondering what they were thinking. I visualized all of us on horses, six-shooters in our hands, banging away at a pursuing posse. That would be fun, I thought. I laughed to myself—me, Noodles, having kid ideas. Another few months I'll be bar-mitzvah. And I still have these dumb-cluck thoughts, like Cockeye Hymie. I laughed to myself.

“What's funny, Noodles?” Max put his book away and looked at me.

“Nuthin', just thinkin'.”

Max chuckled, “You too? About what?”

“I dunno—about Cockeye joining the Jesse James Gang.”

“Yep, pretty dumb, that Cockeye. We join up with them, them small town guys.” Maxie gave a scornful grunt. “Not that Jesse James wasn't pretty hot with a six-shooter, but you know what I mean, Noodles— using horses on a heist. That small-town old-style crap. When we get started, we'll show them.” Maxie wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “We'll make a million bucks sticking up banks and then quit.”

Dominick asked, “A million for the five of us, Max?”

“Nah, a million apiece. How would you like a million bucks, Noodles?”

Maxie was very serious.

“A million? Yeh, I would like it, but maybe a half a million is enough and we quit. A million bucks is a lot of bucks, Maxie,” I said sententiously.

“Maybe a half million is a lot of bucks for some guys, but for me it's gonna be a million.” Max looked defiant.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Yeh, all right, so we'll go out for a million. What the hell's the difference now?”

“We gonna quit when we get a million?” Patsy challenged.

“Yep, we'll quit and move up to the Bronx and be big shots.” Maxie's tone was final.

“Hey, fellas.” Cockeye leaned over. “How much is a million bucks?”

Maxie slapped his head in disgust. “How d'ya like that question? The guy is past thirteen and he asks how much is a million bucks?”

Dominick cut in, “Cockeye, you're a real cluck, a million bucks is a million bucks.”

“Yeh, that's right,” Cockeye smiled agreeably, “but how much is it? You tell me, Dommie. How many thousands?”

Dominick scratched his head. “I think a million is ten thousand bucks.”

“Whattcha talkin' about, it's more than fifty thousand, ain't it, Noodles?” Patsy jeered.

I was proud. I knew all the answers. That's why they called me Noodles. I said importantly, “It's ten hundred thousand bucks!”

Pat smiled sheepishly. “Yeh, I was just gonna say that.” To hide his embarrassment he quickly changed the subject. “When we gonna start collecting wood for the election fire, Max?”

Maxie gave it judicious thought. “We start collecting this Sunday.”

Cockeye was excited. “We gonna have a big fire this year, like always—even if Wilson loses?”

“Yep, don't we always have the biggest in the neighborhood? We don't care who's elected, Wilson or Hughes, we have a big fire just the same.”

The dismissal bell rang; we grabbed our books. The rest of the pupils stood respectfully to one side as we made for the door. Miss Mons stood up. She put her hand out to stop me as I passed.

“You!” she said imperiously.

“Who, me?”

I was ready to push her aside. Maxie edged up beside me ready to help.

“Yes, you, young man. Mr. O'Brien wants to talk to you.”

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"The principal, again?" I said in dismay. "What for?"

"None of your impertinent questions, young man. You just march upstairs."

I turned to Maxie. "Wait for me, I'll run up and see what the old cluck wants."

Max walked with me to the stairway. "We'll be outside if you need any help," he said. "Holler and we'll come up and throw the old bum out the window."

"Nah, he's all right, he ain't such a bad guy, this O'Brien."

"Yep, for a principal he ain't too bad," Max agreed.

He walked outside. I waited until he was out of sight. I did not want him to see me take my cap off. I knocked timidly on the door. A pleasant bass voice said, "Come in, please."

I stood politely at the open doorway. "Did you want to see me, Mr. O'Brien?" I said.

"Yes, yes, come in."

His large red face smiled a welcome. "Come in and shut the door. Have a chair, young man, I'll be through with this in a moment. I was looking through some of your test papers; they are very good, very good."

He looked at me. He frowned. "But your application for work papers is a disappointment to me."

He went back to his inspection.

I sat opposite him, fidgeting uncomfortably. He pushed his chair away from his desk and tilted his chair, rocking back and forth with his hands behind his head. His understanding blue eyes twinkled. He just looked at me. He took his time about talking. I began to feel uncomfortable. Then suddenly he stopped rocking and leaned across his desk. A grim expression spread over his face.

"Sometimes I wonder why I take an interest in you," he said. "I guess it's because I see possibilities in you. According to your school reports, you are an exceptionally intelligent boy. I thought I would talk to you—"

He stood up and began pacing the floor. "Now don't take this as another lecture. It isn't. You haven't many more months of school here, so your behavior one way or another isn't too important to us— but," he raised a finger dramatically, "your conduct from here on is very important to you and to you alone. This moment may be a turning point in your life. I repeat, if you weren't an intelligent boy, I wouldn't waste my time with you. I wouldn't try to make you understand the road you and your companions are following—the road that leads to no good. Believe me." He said it with excited earnestness.

I sat thinking, let the old man talk himself out. What does he know about boys, an old guy like him? Yeh, he's at least forty-five with one foot in the grave. He's a pretty good Irishman, though. And for a principal he's the best we ever had in this dump. Not like that last old bastard, always hitting.

The principal continued, "Your environment is partly to blame. Do you understand what I mean by environment?"

For a moment I forgot myself. "Do I know what environment means?" I sneered.

He laughed. "I forgot, you're the one they call Noodles; you know everything."

Crestfallen, I changed my manner. I mumbled, "Environment. You mean the East Side?"

"Well, yes and no, mostly no. Many, very many, successful and good people have been born and brought up in this neighborhood." He stopped and looked intently at me for a moment. "The last scrap you and your friends were in—what was the real reason for it? Why did you boys do it?"

I shrugged.

"Do you know what I'm referring to?"

I shook my head. I was lying. My face was burning. How did he know about it?

"You know what I'm referring to." His voice sharpened. "Look here, young man, let's be frank with each other." He continued his pacing. I felt like a prisoner being cross-examined.

"I'm talking about Schwartz' candy store, the one you and your friends broke into a few days ago."

I wanted to sink through the floor. So he knew. So the hell with him.

"Don't you realize that if it wasn't for your rabbi and the priest of your Catholic friends, and a little help from me with the authorities, you boys would have been sent to an institution of correction?"

I shrugged. That's what he thinks, the cluck. He don't know who squared the rap for us. I wonder if I should tell him it was Big Maxie's uncle, the undertaker, who squared it? He went to Monk, the gangster, and Monk went to the Tammany district leader, and he's the guy who gave the judge his orders, before the rabbi, the priest, or O'Brien ever spoke to him. Dumb clucks, all of them. Monk and the district leader—there's two

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guys to keep in with. They're everybody's boss— police, judges, everybody.

"I'm talking to you, young man. Why don't you answer?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I couldn't look him in the face. He continued pacing up and down. "I ask you, why did you do it? For the mischief? The money? Tell me, boy, do you get any spending money, an allowance from your parents?"

"Sometimes, when my father works," I muttered.

"Is he working now?"

I shook my head.

"How many times have I told you it is impolite to shake your head or shrug your shoulders. Speak up, don't give answers with bodily movements. They're getting to be a ridiculous habit with you."

I shrugged my shoulders.

He threw up his hands in despair. "Oh well—there's another thing I'd like to know." He hesitated for a moment. "All term I have been curious—mind you, I am not prying into your personal affairs—I just want to know for my future guidance why it is you and your companions do not take advantage of the hot free lunches provided for in the school? Instead, I have noticed you boys play basketball in the yard every day at lunchtime. You're pretty slim, and I imagine you could do with hot soup at midday." His tone was kindly and hesitant. "Tell me, is it because it isn't what you call kosher?"

I shook my head. "Nah, it don't mean a thing to me, kosher."

"Why then? I'm interested to know."

I didn't answer; I shrugged my shoulders.

"This city is going to quite a bit of expense and bother to provide these free lunches," he continued, "and a lot of you children who should take advantage of the city's generosity do not."

"Generosity," I sneered.

"Yes, generosity," he repeated. "What's wrong with the lunch?"

"Soup," I said derisively.

"Soup?"

"Yeh, charity soup," I muttered.

"Hmmm... yes, unfortunately, it does seem that soup and bread is the main dish to be supplied free of charge to supplement the home diet of you undernourished children in these overcrowded areas."

"Soup schools," I said contemptuously.

He smiled sadly. "Yes, yes, I've heard that before. Soup schools. Well, let's forget soup for the moment, shall we?"

I nodded.

"All right, all right, where were we?" he asked, smiling. "Oh yes, your father is one of the unfortunate unemployed?"

I nodded. He shook his head sadly. With his tongue he made a sympathetic, "Tsk, tsk, tsk." I began feeling uncomfortable.

He sighed deeply. "That's why you put in your application for working papers? And why you aren't going to finish public school? You want to go to work and make money to help your family?"

"Yeh."

"It's very commendable, but wouldn't you rather continue school?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well, yes or no?"

I shrugged again.

"Look. I want to help you. I can help you if you change your ways. Keep away from your troublesome companions, continue going to school. Only by learning—"

I cut him off. "I can't finish school. I gotta go to work. My father ain't working." I blurted it out defiantly, all in one breath.

"How long has your father been out of work?"

"How long? About three months."

"Hmmm." O'Brien rubbed his chin. "Well, I have an idea and I'll do it in your case. You're intelligent

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and fundamentally all right.”

He hesitated. As an afterthought he added, “I think, with proper guidance, you can still develop into a good and successful citizen. I’ll have a social agency look into your case and help your family, so that you can continue your schooling. Keep away from bad companions.” A confident smile broke over his face. He thought he’d solved the problem. His voice was joyful. “Well? Isn’t that a good thing? They will help you to help yourself. You will continue your studies, and by behaving yourself you can succeed. You want your share of success in life, don’t you? To acquire your share of the world’s goods you have to specialize. I see you’re pretty good in mathematics. Why not continue and try to be a bookkeeper, possibly an accountant? Don’t just go floundering through life without a definite goal. Specialized knowledge is like a sharp knife. It will help you cut your way through the entanglements of life to your goal. To success. You understand what I mean?”

Yeh, I knew what he meant, but I played dumb.

“Yeh, I’ll get myself a big knife,” I said.

He blew his top for the first time.

“Damn your stupidity,” he exploded. “I thought you knew what I was talking about.”

I shrugged. I was getting annoyed.

“Well?” his voice was agitated.

“What?” I made out I didn’t understand.

He stared at me. I lowered my eyes. Then he knew that I understood what he meant.

Yeh, I knew what he meant. He wanted me to continue school, break away from Max and miss out on the million bucks we’re gonna make on heists and everything. I’m gonna get help from a social agency? Huh! Everybody will look down on us. Charity, feh. What good is education? I had enough for what I wanted to do. I can write. I know arithmetic. I can read. I’m smart. I use my noodle. Yeh, that’s why people call me Noodles. Because I’m smart. Yeh, and I’ll get me a real sharp knife. That’ll be my knife of specialized knowledge. O’Brien stood in front of me, a stern expression on his face.

“I’ll get the social agency to help your family, and you, continue school,” he said.

His tone was definite.

I stood up. I felt heroic, like Nathan Hale. “I don’t want or need your charity. I’m quitting school.”

He was a pretty good guy. I felt sorry for him. He seemed so sad for me, for all of us kids.

“All right, all right, that’s all, son.” He patted me on the back.

I walked towards the door.

I turned and said, “Well, will I get my working papers?”

He didn’t answer. He just looked at me and sighed hopelessly.

I was insistent. “I want them, Mr. O’Brien,” I said.

He nodded sadly. “You will have them.”

My friends were waiting downstairs.

“What did the old cluck want?” Maxie asked.

“Nothing much. He was talking to himself mostly. He wanted me to continue school.”

Cockeye took his harmonica out. We walked down the street harmonizing “Goodbye, My Coney Island Baby.”

Maxie had a pretty good baritone. Patsy had a so–so bass voice. Dommie sang in a high falsetto, his voice was changing, and I sang what I thought was tenor. Anyway, we were pretty proud of our street corner quartet.

We swung down the street in step with the music. Suddenly, we stopped and gawked: there was the biggest man in the world. He was bigger in our eyes than George Washington was to most school kids. He was looking right at us.

“Hello, kids,” he said.

We stopped in awe. Maxie was always the nerviest one. He answered, “Hello, Monk.” It was Monk, the toughest man on the East Side, and, as far as we were concerned, in the world.

“I want you kids to do me a favor,” Monk said.

“Anything you say, Monk,” Max said.

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“O.K., follow me.” He gestured with his hand.

We would have followed our hero to hell if he had given the word. He led us into a saloon on Ludlow Street where ten husky pug-uglies were sitting around guzzling beer.

Monk laughed and said to them, “How do you like my new gang?”

They looked at us and smiled. “Tough looking gang, all right, Monk. How about some beer, kids?” one of them said.

It was the first time we had drunk the stuff. It tasted awful, but we drained our glasses, feeling a little dizzy and important.

Monk Eastman explained what he wanted us for. We were given two baseball bats apiece and told to meet him and his gang in Jackson Street Park. A gang of Irish hoodlums had made a habit of swooping down on the park and of annoying the old Jews who congregated there. This time, the Irish were in for a surprise. Monk had gathered together the ace man from every neighborhood on the East Side for this event. It was an all-star gang, as all-star as a baseball team made up of the star players from both leagues. Besides Monk, there was Kid Dropper, Pulley, Abie Cabbagehead, Big Louie, Crazy Izzy—all big-name guys.

If Monk and his men were to carry the bats through the streets and into the park, it would be a dead giveaway to the cops and to the Irish mob. That was the reason we were invited along.

Monk and his men filed into the park one by one, pretending not to know one another. They sat on benches, with the older members of their religion, took Jewish newspapers out of their pockets, and buried their heads deep in the papers so they wouldn't be recognized. We stood a little distance away ready with the bats. We didn't have long to wait. From the river side of the park we saw the Irish coming—about fifteen tough-looking dock wallopers. Immediately, the meek and religious Jews left the park.

Abie Cabbagehead was closest to the advancing mob. Abie was famous for his large head, which wasn't soft like a cabbage. It was as hard as a rock. The biggest of the Irish gang walked over to Abie and growled, “Twenty-three skidoo, sheeny. Out of the park, you goddamn mocky.”

Abie rose slowly from the bench, as though he was about to retreat. Then, with his head lowered, he charged in like a bull. We didn't wait for any signal from Monk. We ran in with the bats. Monk and his men jumped off their benches. Each grabbed a bat from us, and the slaughter began. We stood watching, with rocks in our hands. If an Irish head came into view, the five of us would conk him. We were having a hell of a good time.

That's where we first laid eyes on Pipy, Jake the Goniff, and Goo-Goo. Maxie was the first one to notice something queer. Three kids about our own age were jumping in and out of the thickest part of the fighting. Max said to me, “Watch the two Jew kids and that Irish kid. They're working together. They're up to something, sure enough.”

They would be in the middle of one fighting group; then they would break away and dive into another.

I said, “They aren't fighting, what are they up to?”

Maxie shrugged his shoulders.

The clanging pie wagon finally came along, the cops in their high stiff helmets swinging their clubs. Everybody who could, ran.

Maxie and I grabbed a bat apiece. Max shouted for the rest to follow, and we started chasing the two young Jews and the young Irish kid. We cornered them by the East River. The young Irish kid was all out of breath, but smiling.

In a brogue he said, “Didn't we have enough fighting? Let's be friends.”

He stuck his hand out, introducing himself. “My friends call me Pipy, and these are my two pals, Jackie and Goo-Goo.”

Jake stuck his hand out, smiling, and said in a marked Jewish accent, “Pleased to meet up with you boytchiks.”

Maxie lifted his bat ready to swing, and said, “Can this friendship crap. Noodles, go through their pockets.”

I gave Patsy my bat. He held it ready to swing while Dominick and I went through their pockets. We were amazed at what their pockets held. There were three wallets and four watches with gold fobs among the three of them. We took the money out of the wallets, about twenty-six dollars. Maxie handed Pipy, Jake and

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Goo–Goo two bucks apiece. After considering a moment, he threw them each a buck more.

Jake the Goniff was a tall kid. Pipy was short and stunted. Goo–Goo was squat with enormous, questioning popeyes. They were so different in appearance, I thought them a peculiar combination. When I got to know them better, I saw that underneath they were alike. They were greenhorns,—greenhorns from different countries, but with the same sly humor and instinct for thievery.

Then we stood around listening to some of Pipy's exploits. That was our mistake. Whitey, the cop, came running over. First he whacked Jake on the backside with his club.

“You're the kids the men in the lock–up described. Hand over those wallets and watches,” he said.

He went through our pockets. He took all our new–found possessions. “Go ahead, beat it before I lock you up,” he said. Sullenly we walked away.

“That goddamn Whitey,” Maxie muttered bitterly, “he's a crook. I'll bet he don't turn that stuff back. He keeps it for himself.”

“What did you think?” I said sarcastically. “Don't you know everybody's a crook? Everybody's illegit?”

“Yep, you're right,” Maxie said.

“Sure, Noodles is right,” Patsy agreed. “Everybody's a thief.” We were outside the park.

“Hope to see you fellows again,” Pipy grinned at us. He, Jake, and Goo–Goo walked away in the direction of Broome Street.

“Yeh, come around,” I called to them. “We hang around in Gelly's candy store on Delancey Street.”

“Yeh, we'll be seeing yuh,” Jake the Goniff called back. We walked down the street. We had already forgotten the unpleasant episode with Whitey.

It was Friday afternoon. The sun, the streets, the people, everything seemed different on a Friday afternoon. We were happy and carefree. We had all eternity before us: two whole holidays, wonderful days with no school. I was hungry, and tonight we ate the big meal of the week—the meal of the Sabbath, the only substantial meal of the week. No stale bread rubbed with garlic, washed down with tea tonight. Momma baked. And there's hot choleh bread and gefuellte fish and fresh horseradish for supper. My mouth was watering. I licked my lips in anticipatory pleasure. Boy, was I hungry. It seemed I wasn't the only one.

Cockeye stopped playing his harmonica, and said, “How about we go to Yoine Schimmel's Knish Bakery and get a couple?”

Patsy said, “Who's got money? You got money?”

“I got one cent that Whitey didn't take,” Cockeye said.

“Anybody else got money?” Maxie stuck his hand out for Cockeye's penny.

Dominick took two cents out of his secret pocket. The rest of us were broke.

“We'll buy one knish for two cents and a bag of haiseh arbes for the other cent.”

After we'd bought the knish and the hot chickpeas we stood on the street corner, and each had one bite of the knish and a few chickpeas. It tasted wonderful, but it made us hungrier. We walked through Orchard Street, where the pushcart peddlers were gathering up their wares to get home early for the Sabbath. They eyed us warily. They recognized us. After a few intricate maneuvers, Max and Patsy clipped an orange apiece. The peddler shouted curses after us as we ran.

“Banditten, a brock zu eich!”

As we shared the oranges we strolled into Delancey Street, the street I lived in.

“There's Peggy, the Bumehkeh,” Cockeye stuttered excitedly.

On my stoop, leaning languorously against the door, was blonde Peggy, the janitor's nymphomaniac daughter.

“Hi, boys! Give me a piece of that orange, Noodles,” she called out.

“I'll give you a piece of my orange if you give me a piece of your...”

Patsy didn't finish his sentence; he stood there smiling hopefully up at her.

“Fresh boy.” She was giggling, pleased with the idea. She waved him away. “Later, not now, twenty–three skidoo. But not for an orange, bring me a charlotte russe if you want me to give you a good one.”

I walked past Peggy, giving her a feel.

“Oh, Noodles, stop it, not here, let's go under the staircase,” she whispered.

I was young. I said, “Not now, I'm hungry.”

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Maxie shouted after me, "Meet us at Gelly's after supper, Noodles."

"I'll be there!" I shouted back.

I ran up the five flights of creaky stairs into our dark railroad flat. It was full of nice baking smells.

"Supper ready, Momma?" I yelled as I threw my books in a corner.

"It's you, my good boyeleh, my schayneh?"

"Yes, Ma, I asked is supper ready?"

"You asked?"

"Yes, Ma, I asked is supper ready?"

"Yes, yes, it's ready, but wait till Poppa and your brother come home from schul and I light the Shabbes candles."

"I'm hungry, Ma. Why do I have to wait for the Shabbes candles, and Poppa?"

"Because if you was like Poppa and your brother, you wouldn't be in trouble all the time, and maybe you wouldn't be so hungry all the time, and think of schul once in awhile, maybe."

Momma gave a deep sigh.

"I think of food, and making money, a lot of money, Ma, a million dollars."

"A million dollars? You're so foolish, sonny, believe me. For the millionaires is the million dollars; for the poor people is the schul. Now don't bother me, please, I have to finish the wash so we can all take baths in the washtub before we make Shabbes. And don't forget to remind me: I got to rinse your head with kerosene."

"Did Poppa borrow any money for the rent, Ma?"

I could hear Momma sighing deeply from the kitchen.

"No, sonny."

I picked up a copy of *Robin Hood* that Maxie had loaned me and began reading it over again. I was a voracious reader. I would read anything I could get my hands on.

I could still hear Momma vigorously rubbing clothes at the washtub. Gradually the light grew dim. It was difficult to read by it. I struck a match and climbed on a chair. I tried to turn the gas on, but no gas came out of the fixture. I called out, "Ma, there's no gas."

She sighed heavily. "I used it all up for the baking and the hot water for the wash."

"So give me a quarter for the meter, Ma."

"I'm sorry, son."

"Why, Ma?"

"We'll have candles tonight."

"But I can't read by candles."

"I'm sorry, sonny, the quarter I can't spare. I'll put it in tomorrow night. That way it will last for next week maybe."

I slammed the door and went out to the hall toilet used by all six of the families living on the same floor. It took me a full minute to get used to the stink. In a hidden niche above the watercloset, I had a box of cigarette butts I had collected from the gutters. I smoked three butts to kill my appetite. I noticed there were no orange tissue wrappers hanging on the nail.

"No crap paper," I muttered.

I made a mental note to gather some up on Attorney Street, where the fruit peddlers discarded them when they unwrapped their oranges, or, as second choice, to clip a telephone book out of Gelly's candy store.

I heard footsteps coming my way. I waited hopefully. The toilet door opened. Yes, it was Fanny, who lived down the hall. She was my age.

"Oh, it's you," was her pleased and startled exclamation. "Why don't you lock the door like you're supposed to?"

She smiled coquettishly.

I bowed mockingly. "Come in, come in, said the spider to the fly."

She stood in the doorway smiling. "What for, you fresh thing, so you can feel me all over with your fresh hands?"

She giggled. She put her hands on her wide hips and swayed back and forth. She smiled provocatively. Her tight short dress revealed her plump round breasts and her fat, full little figure. It got me all excited. I reached

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down through the top of her dress. I fondled her warm, smooth young breasts. Gently I squeezed her nipples. She swayed with her eyes closed, breathing quickly.

“Don't it make your titties feel good, Fanny?” I whispered.

She opened her eyes. She smiled. “Titties are for babies, to give milk, not for boys to play with.”

“Come in,” I whispered in anxious excitement, “so I can lock the door and play around good with you.”

I took her by the hand.

She held back. “Go down to Gelly's, and buy me a charlotte russe first.”

“Where did you learn that? From Peggy?” I grumbled.

She giggled. “Well, will you buy me one? If you buy me two, I'll let you play between my legs.”

“Yeh, yeh,” I panted, “I will buy you a whole box full of charlotte russes.”

She giggled at the desperation in my voice. I grabbed her around her soft, large buttocks and pulled her in with me. I was about to lock the door. A deep bellow, like a cow calling its calf, resounded from the other end of the hall.

“Fanny, Fanny, hurry up with the terlit.”

Fanny whispered, “That's my Momma. We're going to my Tanta Rifke's for supper. Better leave me go. I'll let you play with me some other time.”

I was reluctant to let her go. I was too excited.

“Please let me go, I got to make a pea,” she said. “If you don't, I'll pea in my bloomers.”

I let go of her. She picked her dress up, pulled her bloomers down and sat down on the bowl. I walked out in disgust. I thought she was vulgar.

I went downstairs, hoping to meet Peggy. I went down the cellar. I looked in every toilet on every floor. I looked on the roof. She was nowhere around. Disappointedly I stood on the stoop watching the girls, making obscene remarks as they passed by.

Big Maxie came hurriedly along. He waved to me. “Come on, Noodles.”

I ran down the stoop, falling into step beside him.

“What's up, Max?” I asked.

“Come on, we grab a ride with my uncle in the Pierce Arrow.”

“The uncle picking up a stiff with the hearse?” I asked delightedly.

“Yep; up in Harlem. Madison Avenue. We give him a hand. He's got an unexpected job.”

We reached the parlors all out of breath, just in time to give his uncle, the undertaker, a hand carrying the long wicker basket out to the hearse. Proudly we sat on the large front seat. Driving on upper Fifth Avenue along the park, Maxie's uncle pointed out the palatial homes.

Sarcastically, he commented, “Just like down the East Side. I'll bet they've barely got enough to eat in those houses.”

The remark reminded me of my chronic hunger. I whispered to Max, “Maybe we can promote your uncle for some hot dogs or something.”

Maxie nodded and winked. He nudged me. “Some day we'll be able to buy plenty of hot dogs.”

“It can't be too quick for me,” I said.

“You kids like a couple of hot dogs?” Maxie's uncle grinned. “O.K., I can take a hint, after we pick the stiff up.”

Riding back to the East Side after we had picked up the stiff, Maxie's uncle stopped at a hot dog wagon and bought us each two frankfurters. We leaned against the hearse, eating our hot dogs. Back in the hearse, as a joke he handed us cigars. To his surprise, we took them, lit up and puffed away. He chuckled in admiration.

“You kids are okay.” We helped him into the funeral parlor with the body.

“Thanks, boys.” Then he chuckled and corrected himself, “Thanks, men.” He tossed us each a quarter.

Maxie said, “Glad to have been a help to you, uncle. Any time you need us, let me know.”

He looked fondly at Max. “You're growing up to be a big boy.” He patted him affectionately.

“Thanks for the ride and everything,” I said.

“Not at all,” he said. “So long, men.” He smiled after us.

We walked into Gelly's candy store smoking the cigars, feeling like men of the world. Patsy, Dominick and Cockeye were already there, waiting for us. Patsy called out, “Hey, big shots, where you been?”

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Maxie tossed his quarter on the counter and said, "Malted and charlotte russes for everybody."

Gelly's son, Fat Moe, was behind the counter, with a dirty apron around his large middle. He picked up and examined the quarter.

Patsy snarled angrily, "Whatcha looking at, Fat?"

Fat Moe murmured apologetically, "Nothing, Pat, nothing."

"Okay then, get busy on them malts."

We sat on the stools loudly sucking the whipped cream off our charlotte russe cakes. We watched the electric malted machines whirl; they were the newest sensation on the East Side.

Jake the Goniff, Goo-Goo and Pipy, our new found friends from Broome Street, sauntered in. We exchanged hellos.

Jake said, "How would you guys like to hear a nice poem?"

"A poem?" Maxie asked dubiously. "About what? What are you— a poet?"

"Jake's always got poems and riddles," Pipy volunteered. "He makes them up himself."

"Yeh, dirty ones," Goo-Goo added. "Good, too."

"Yeh, they're the only ones that are," I agreed.

"Okay, let's hear one." Max appeared bored.

We swung around on our stools, facing Jake. He took a stance before us. With a grin on his dirty face he recited:

"Said the good little girl to the bad little girl
Gee, it's hard to be good.
Said the bad little girl to the good little girl
It's got to be hard to be good."

He stopped. He looked at us for approval. "That's all?" Maxie asked.

"Yeh, how did you like it?" Jake asked hopefully.

"It stinks," Maxie said. Jake appeared crestfallen.

Pipy suggested, "Try a riddle on them, Jake."

Jake turned, a hopeful smile on his face. "Why is the East River like a girl's legs?"

None of us knew the answer.

"Because the higher up you get, the nicer it is."

He smiled at us, trying to read approval in our expressionless faces.

We gave them a sip each from our malts. Pipy spied the box of charlotte russes on the counter. The three hurried over to them.

Fat Moe yelled over, "Hey, you guys, lay off. You guys got dough?"

Pipy produced a dollar bill. Jake the Goniff took it out of his hands and waved it in the air.

He called out to us, "You guys want some charlotte russes?"

We took two apiece.

Max asked, "Where did you guys get the buck?"

"Pipy rolled a lush on the Bowery," Jake proudly put his arm around Pipy's shoulders.

"Aw, he was a pushover," little Pipy said modestly. "I took this off him, too." Pipy produced a large knife.

I remembered O'Brien's knife of specialized knowledge for success. This was some sort of omen. This knife was for me. I had to have it. It would give me a magic power, I thought. "Let's see it, Pip?" I asked.

He handed it to me. It was a spring, push-button knife of German make. It made a fascinating click and a large shiny blade swished out. There was no question about it. I was going to keep it. I kept opening and closing it in front of Pipy's nose. Alarmed, he kept backing up.

Maxie was eyeing me. He said: "You like it, Noodles? You going to keep it?"

I said, "Yeh, it's a beaut."

"So keep it, it's yours. Ain't it, Pip?"

Maxie turned his saccharine smile from Pip to Jake to Goo-Goo. They understood that that smile of Maxie's and my attitude meant bad business. Patsy bent his face down close to Pipy and snarled, "Yeh, you're

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giving Noodles a present, ain't you, Pip?"

Dominick and Cockeye walked behind them, ready for action. I kept staring at Pipy and clicking the knife open and shut at his throat. The atmosphere was tense and very quiet in Gelly's candy store for a moment. Jake finally broke the tension with his good-natured laugh.

"Yeh, you can have it, Noodles, it's too big and dangerous for a little guy like Pipy anyhow," Jake said.

I walked over to the shelves of paper-bound books, fondling and examining the blade. It was beautiful. It was sharp on both sides and came to a strong needle point on the end. The blade itself was at least six inches long. A push of the button, the blade clicked into the six-inch handle. It made a formidable weapon. It fitted just right in my pants pocket. My eyes wandered to the tempting display of dime paper-bound books. To me it was a hypnotic display of Nick Carters, Diamond Dicks, all sorts of Westerns. I thumbed through Horatio Alger's *From Rags to Riches*, debating with myself whether to buy a book, or use the quarter that Maxie's uncle had given me for the gas meter at home. I thought, if I bought it, I wouldn't have any light to read by tonight in bed.

Fat Moe came over to me and whispered, "Go ahead, Noodles, stick one in your pocket before my old man gets here. Don't bend it too much, but bring it back tomorrow, all right?"

I stuck *From Rags to Riches* in my pocket, feeling happy and grateful, saying: "I'll take care of it. Thanks, Moe, I'll bring it back in the morning."

I felt as if life was complete. I had a quarter for the gas meter, a new knife and a book to read tonight.

"All right, fellas," Maxie was taking his tie and jacket off, "let's get going. You guys want to come along?" He turned to Jake, Pip, and Goo-Goo.

"What are you going to do?" Jake asked.

"We're going to do a little long distance running," Max answered.

"Nah, not for us," Jake said. "Well see you some more."

They walked out.

We followed Maxie's example, putting our clothes on a chair. We jogged downtown into the night, starting on our daily long-distance run. Maxie, in the lead, set the pace. He was a Spartan when it came to exercise.

"When we grow up, it will come in handy, we'll have muscles and wind, and be tough as nails."

We were jogging along in a compact group right behind Maxie's long flying legs. After ten blocks, pudgy Dominick, gasping and puffing, called out, "I had enough, Max. I'm all pooped."

Maxie turned his head, he was breathing easy. "The trouble with you, Dommie, is that you eat too much spaghetti. Some day you'll be sorry."

Dominick dropped out. We continued downtown, changing pace, running fast one block, then slowing up the next. We made our way downtown to the financial district. We stopped and rested at the curb. An immense building was in front of us. The windows were covered with thick iron bars. The entrance was a heavy steel door.

Patsy remarked, "It looks like a prison."

"There's no prison down here," I said.

Patsy said, "How do you know?"

Maxie laughed, "Don't argue with Noodles. He knows everything. Hell even admit it himself."

"Yeh," I smiled. "I'm a smart feller."

"You mean a fart smeller, hey, Noodles?" Maxie said.

We all laughed at my expense.

Maxie called out to a passer-by, "Hey, mister."

The man stopped.

"Yes?"

"What kind of building is that, a prison?"

The man smiled. "A prison? No, that's where they keep all the money."

Patsy interestedly asked, "A lot of money?"

"Why yes." The man was amused. "Quite a few million. That's the Federal Reserve."

He walked away smiling.

Maxie walked over and tried to look in. He came back and said, "Some day we're gonna heist this joint."

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What do you think, Noodles?"

"It's okay with me, but it looks like a tough job," I said. "Yeh, it looks tough. How you going to heist this joint?"

Maxie replied, "Don't worry, I'll find out some day."

I looked at Maxie. He was staring at the building. It reminded me of a cartoon I saw someplace of a mouse defying an elephant.

He muttered, "For a million bucks I'll heist this joint some day."

We ran all the way back to Gelly's candy store. Dominick was standing outside, talking to Fat Moe's pretty brunette sister, the untouchable Dolores. We all had a secret crush on her. She had a pair of dancing shoes slung over her left shoulder. She smiled coolly when she saw us approaching. Her greeting was only for Cockeye.

"Hello, Hy," she said, "do you mind playing for me tonight while I practice?"

"Sure, Dolores, it's a pleasure." Cockeye was overcome with delight. "Anytime, anytime, for you, anytime," Cockeye repeated effusively.

They adjourned to the back room of the store. We followed and watched as Dolores changed her shoes and went into her dance. She improvised a dance routine to Cockeye's playing. Her limb movements thrilled me. My eyes followed her every motion as she kicked and pirouetted easily, gracefully, around and around. She stopped after awhile to catch her breath. She sat talking to Cockeye.

Maxie called out to her, "Hey, Dolores." She turned and stared coldly at him.

"Hay is for horses. Who do you think you're talking to, Peggy? I'm not accustomed to being addressed in that manner."

She turned her back to Max and continued her conversation with Cockeye. A tingle of delight went through me. That was the moment I felt my first deep pang of pride and overwhelming infatuation for Dolores. It was a clean, uplifting emotion, entirely different from the feeling which Peggy or other neighborhood girls inspired in me. Looking at her sitting daintily aloof on the chair, I felt she was like a dancing angel—something ethereal. Yeh, this was it. I loved Dolores.

I smiled and walked over to Dolores. "What kind of dancing is that? What do they call it?"

She looked haughtily over her shoulder. "I thought you knew everything. That was interpretive dancing. You're not as smart as you think you are."

I stood there, red-faced, at a loss for an answer.

Cockeye volunteered, "Dolores is practicing to be a professional dancer. She's going to be a star in a Broadway show some day." He tapped his harmonica on the palm of his hand. In a swift tempo he played, "Yes Sir, That's My Baby."

She floated around the room again in time to the music. Somehow her attentions to Cockeye didn't seem to bother me in the least. It was Maxie who aroused my jealousy. While she was dancing, Max mischievously picked up her shoes and threw them behind the bench.

She stopped after that number, smiled at Cockeye and said: "Thanks very much, Hy. You play that harmonica beautifully."

Cockeye blushed and mumbled something. She looked angrily around for her shoes. I walked behind the bench and picked them up and handed them to her. She misunderstood. She gave me a furious look. Without a word she put them on. I could have killed Max. She left the room, her green eyes flashing and her head held high.

Unhappily, without a word, I walked outside. I stood in the doorway, feeling as if the world had crumbled around me. Dolores meant a lot to me, and Maxie had loused me up with her.

A placating voice cut through my unhappy mood: "You wanna Sweet Caporal, Noodles?"

Maxie offered me a cigarette. I took his peace offering.

We stood there smoking. Mr. Gelly came walking down the street.

When he reached his doorway he whispered: "You boys bring me some bundles in the morning?"

Maxie nodded and said, "Yep, don't we always supply you with morning papers?" He patted Maxie on the head.

"Pick me up a bundle of *Tageblatts* tomorrow, yeh?"

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Maxie said, “Yep.” He nudged me. “We get up early tomorrow, Noodles.”

I nodded. “What time?”

“About four–thirty, I’ll meet you on the corner.”

“I’ll be there.”

We stood there, finding it difficult to make conversation.

We blocked the doorway. A customer made for the door. We stood aside with deference for the well–dressed, mustachioed “Professor.” We tingled with pride and pleasure when he greeted us with a pleasant smile.

“How are you boys?”

“Okay, Professor,” Max said.

“Fine, Professor,” I echoed.

“You boys wait for me, I’ll be right out.”

Max said, “Sure, Professor.” We saw him enter the telephone booth.

“He’s smart; he’s got plenty of brains, that guy.” Max was overflowing with admiration. “He’s only out of jail a week, and I’ll bet he’s back handling ‘junk.’ He’s a smart Wop. I wonder where he gets the stuff,” Maxie mused.

“He’s got connections. He imports it, I guess. It don’t grow in this country,” I said importantly; in my know–it–all manner.

“From where do you think, Noodles—Italy?”

“Could be, maybe China. Chinks smoke it mostly, I read somewhere.”

“Why do people smoke opium?”

“It gives them nice dreams.”

“Wet dreams, about girls?” Max grinned.

We both laughed. I said, “I would like to smoke a pipe of that stuff sometimes.”

Max said, “Me, too. That’s what they call kicking the gong around, hey, Noodles?”

I nodded and smiled affectedly.

The Professor came out, puffing on a big cigar.

“I have a job for you boys; follow me down to my place,” he whispered.

We walked behind him. He rounded the corner, and went down a dark store cellar. He held the door open for us, and bolted it after us. We followed him in the dark into a rear room. He struck a match and lit the gaslight. The Professor had a complete workshop with assorted carpenter tools, hand drills and a small mechanical punch press in the coiner. I spied a small honing stone. I stuck it in my pocket when his back was turned. On a bench there was a large wooden box with the lid open. Inside, I could see some gears and wheels. It had slots cut into the front and back, with handles on the sides. Max and I walked up close to the box. It was highly polished and looked out of place in that dirty cellar. The Professor stood there looking at us, twirling his mustache.

Maxie gestured with his head, “What’s that?”

“That?” The Professor was amused. He closed the lid and said, “Let me demonstrate my new invention, something every home should have.”

He turned a handle, we heard the gears inside revolve, and before our amazed eyes, a crisp ten–dollar bill came out of the slot. He walked away and said, “All right, let’s forget all about this machine for awhile. I want you lads for—”

He stopped. He stood looking at us, twirling his flowing mustache. “You boys want to make some money, right?”

I said, “Sure, Professor, that’s what we’re here for.”

He looked gravely at us, “I know you lads are smart, and I can trust you to keep your mouths shut, right?”

We both echoed, “Right.”

He smiled, showing his large white teeth. “Fine, fine, you’re good lads, just the type I can trust. I wouldn’t ask anybody else, because most young boys talk too much. Now, here’s what I want you to do for me: you know where Mott Street is?”

“Yep, Professor,” Maxie answered proudly. “Noodles knows this city like a book.”

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"Mott Street is in Chinatown," I said.

"That's right."

He took a small round ball, resembling putty, out of a drawer. "Keep this in your pocket. Deliver it to the store at this address. Just leave it on the table, and walk out. That's all you do. All right?"

He made us repeat the number of the store over and over again until we had memorized it.

"Be careful with it. It's valuable, and don't play with it."

Maxie nodded. "Yep, Professor, we know what's inside."

The Professor raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Junk," I said.

The Professor chuckled. He patted me on the back.

"Smart boy, I'll wait here for you, and I'll have a dollar apiece for you when you get back."

When we reached Chinatown, we found the store easily. As we opened the door, a cop swinging his club passed us without giving us a second glance. The bell hanging over the door gave a faint, creepy tinkle as we walked in. In the murky light, we were barely able to distinguish a large, fat Chinese seated at a table. He was staring bale-fully at us. I was glad I had the knife in my pocket. It gave me a feeling of supreme confidence. I gave him back stare for stare. I toyed with the release button on the knife. In my imagination I dug it into his fat throat again and again; then I slashed him across the face.

A funny thing happened: I actually saw his eyes bulge with fright. I swear he knew what I was thinking. I was sure of it. He knew that all I had to do was to take one step. With my magic push-button knife I would cut his face into chop suey. He turned his white flabby face away in terror. I laughed and spit on the floor. Max put the ball on the table. We walked out.

"What was you laughing at, Noodles?" Max asked.

"At the Chinaman."

"Them Chinks don't like to be laughed at, Noodles."

"That Chink I could handle, or anybody else," I boasted.

Maxie looked curiously at me. "He was a big Chink."

I shrugged. "So what? I'd cut him down to my size."

Maxie laughed and patted me on the back. "Yep, I forgot, you got Pipy's knife."

"My knife."

"Yep, your knife. It makes you feel good to have something like that handy, hey, Noodles?"

I nodded. "Yeh, it makes you feel like you're somebody."

"I'm going to get something to carry around myself," Maxie said. He picked up a cigar butt from the sidewalk. He put it in the corner of his mouth. "Someday I'm going to get me a revolver. I'll ask the Professor."

He handed me the butt. I smoked it awhile, then passed it back to him.

The Professor held the door open for us as we walked downstairs into his place. "Everything all right? You boys delivered it?" he asked anxiously.

"Yep, everything's all right, we delivered it." Maxie spit on the floor. He puffed on his cigar stub. I looked coldly at the Professor.

He laughed and gave us a dollar apiece. "You kids will go a long way; you got the goods all right."

"Yeh, Professor, we're looking to make money. We need it," I said.

"You boys will make plenty, and I'll show you how."

"You're the Professor," Maxie wisecracked.

He chuckled, and rubbed his hands. "Yes, yes, I can teach you lads plenty of tricks, maybe, for our mutual benefit."

"Hey, Professor," Maxie was shuffling awkwardly with his feet.

"Yes, Max?"

"Can you get me and Noodles a couple of rods?"

"Rods?" The Professor was surprised.

"Yep, a couple of rods, you know, revolvers."

"Yes, Max, I know what you mean."

The Hoods

He was twisting his mustache. He looked at us intently.

“What do you need them for?”

“Well, we thought it would come in handy some time.”

“For instance, when, and what for?”

“You know, to make a heist.”

“Who are you going to heist, Max?”

Max hesitated for a moment. Then he said, “Well, of course, we still got to case the joint.”

“Well, let's hear about it. Maybe I can give you lads a few pointers on how to go about it. Who you going to heist, Gelly's candy store?”

“Nah, we're going to heist the Federal Reserve Bank,” Max said impressively.

The Professor turned his back and put a handkerchief to his mouth. At first it sounded as if he was laughing. But we were mistaken. He really was coughing violently. When he caught his breath, he apologized. He wiped his wet eyes.

“I have a bad cough, this damp cellar you know. Now, about this Federal Reserve heist. You lads are a little too young yet. Wait a few years. After a little experience on small stuff, like candy stores, drug stores, then gradually you work your way up to the Federal Reserve. All right, lads?” He was smiling broadly. “You can always come to me for help.”

“Can you get us revolvers?” Max was insistent.

“Yes, yes. I can get anything. Leave it to me, Max. When I think you boys are ready for them, you will have them. Is that satisfactory? One thing you have to learn, not to be too impetuous, my lad.”

He patted Max on the back.

“What's the name of the book you have in your back pocket?” he said to me.

I took it out and showed it to him. He looked at it distastefully. He grunted, “*From Rags to Riches*. Isn't it juvenile for a boy your age?”

I shrugged.

“You like books?” he asked, smiling.

“Yeh, I like to read.”

“Why don't you get good books, join the Public Library?”

“The library is for sissies.”

He laughed. “Well, I'll tell you what, I'll let you belong to my library. Go on, help yourself, in there.”

He gestured toward the toilet.

“You got books in there?”

“Yes, go on help yourself, that's the best place for the library. That's where one can really concentrate on what one is reading.”

I walked into the toilet. Both walls from the floor to the ceiling were covered with shelves of books. They all had unfamiliar titles. *The Education of Henry Adams*, a book by a guy named Yeats, and others I never heard of.

“Well, have you found something you would like?” the Professor called to me.

I spied a title that made a little sense to me. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Yeh, I thought, this must be pretty good. All about Jack Johnson, the champ. I walked out with it.

The Professor said, “What did you pick out?”

I showed it to him. He looked doubtfully at me. “Do you think you will like it and understand it?”

“Who you kiddin'?” I snorted.

“It's kind of deep stuff for a kid,” he said.

“You don't know Noodles, Professor, he's a smart guy. The smartest guy on Delancey Street.”

“All right, Noodles,” he said, “after you finish it I'd like to know what you think of it.”

“Yeh, I'll let you know,” I promised.

CHAPTER 2

"I'll keep in touch with you," he whispered after us as we walked upstairs. We walked back to Gelly's.

Maxie asked, "What was that he said, I have to learn not to be... that word, imp... something, you remember, Noodles?"

"Impetuous?"

"Yep, that's it, impetuous. What did he mean?"

"Not to rush into things, you know, without figuring."

"That's a good tip. The Professor is a smart one. Yep, you got to plan things out; that's one thing I'm gonna remember."

Patsy, Cockeye and Dominick were standing in the doorway, waiting for us. "Where were you guys?" Patsy asked.

"Noodles and I made a buck apiece." Maxie walked into the store. We followed him in.

"Give me your buck, Noodles," Maxie said.

"Give you my buck?" I was unwilling. "What for?"

"We all share," Max said decisively.

Reluctantly I handed it to him. He walked over to old man Gelly.

"Give us some change." He threw the bills on the counter.

Maxie split the two dollars five ways. I took my forty cents with a feeling of disappointment. He smiled reassuringly.

"Don't worry, Noodles, there's more where that came from."

Maxie bought a pack of Sweet Caporals. We went outside. We smoked, whistled, and made nasty remarks to the girls passing by.

Dominick's father came by. He slapped the cigarette out of Dominick's mouth and chased him home. We jeered after them.

I was looking up at Dolores, who was gazing out of her window across the street. Maxie waved to her; she shut the window in a huff. I stood there daydreaming about her. My first love. I imagined her in all sorts of trouble, being pursued and molested by strange ruffians. In my daydreams I cast myself in the heroic role of her protector—me and my knife. Then my thoughts wandered off to Peggy. A new strange inner excitement overwhelmed me. I wondered if she would be on the stoop. Maybe I'll grab a hold of fat little Fanny.

I said, "I'm gonna hit the hay, fellas," and walked down the street towards my house.

"What's the hurry all of a sudden?" Maxie called after me. "Don't forget, early tomorrow, Noodles, four-thirty."

I answered over my shoulder, "I'll be there, don't worry."

Peggy wasn't on the stoop. Like a tomcat I slunk through the halls, up and down the stairs looking for her or for Fanny. I felt foolishly dissatisfied as I walked up the five flights into our dark apartment. It was quiet. The family was asleep.

The Sabbath candles were sputtering on the table. Alongside them was a plate of gefuellte fish and choleh bread which my mother had thoughtfully left for me. Hungrily I wolfed the food and gulped down a glass of cold water from the kitchen sink.

I put a quarter in the gas meter and went into my windowless bedroom. I lit the gaslight, undressed, pushed my snoring kid brother over to his side of the narrow iron bed and opened the book, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. I turned to the first page. It was an introduction, about the guy who wrote the book. I skipped it. Who the hell was interested in the author? I wanted to know all about the champ, his fights and if it was true he ran around with plenty of women and was married to a white woman. I started to read. What the hell is this crap, I said to myself. It's about a guy named Samuel Johnson, a doctor.

I put it down in disgust and reached for Alger's *From Rags to Riches*. Then I remembered how the professor had practically laughed at me when he saw the book I had chosen. I wouldn't understand it, he said. Me, Noodles, wouldn't understand what any lousy book is about? It was a challenge. I began to read it.

The Hoods

I had to go to the kitchen shelf to get my dictionary. Boy, was it a load of dry crap. All this guy Johnson did was bullshit about this and that; no action. I forced myself to read. I fell asleep with the gaslight on.

CHAPTER 3

I woke up with a start; the gaslight was still on. I wondered what time it was. My kid brother was lying on his back, snoring. I pushed him over on his side.

“You lousy son-of-a-bitch, put the light out,” he mumbled.

I put the light out. I felt my way in the dark to the kitchen where I lit the gaslight. It was still early. The battered old alarm clock showed 3:30. As usual, I felt hungry. I opened the window and looked into the tin box fastened to the window sill which served as an ice box.

There were small pieces of gefuellte fish and kishkeh on separate plates, intended evidently for Saturday's and Sunday's dinner. I sliced off a thin piece of the kishkeh with my knife. I cut a piece of bread, brushed the roaches off the table, and ate. I wondered what my old man was going to do about the rent, what he was going to do about getting himself a job before we were thrown out in the street. I was wondering how many months we were behind, two or three? I thought of our lousy landlord, how he comes around all dressed up and yelling for his rent. I was thinking, the bastard's always got a white flower in his lapel, he must be a pansy or something.

My dopey old man, why can't he get a job and make some dough? Yeh, the old cluck, I guess because he don't feel so good; maybe he's always sick. Why the hell does he go to schul so much? Two hours every morning, and two hours at night, too. Saturday he stinks in that joint all day long, all them old clucks with their beards and shawls, shaking back and forth in their prayers, back and forth, mumbling all kinds of crap in their beards. What the hell is it all about? I'll bet the dopey rabbi don't know either. My old man would be better off looking for work instead of wasting his time with that crap. None of that for me! I'm smart. When I grow up, all I'm going out for is plenty of do-re-mi. Jesus, what the hell am I sittin' and mopin' for? It's getting late.

I washed the two dishes I had used, brushed the crumbs and roaches from the table onto the floor, and drank a glass of water. I took the forty cents out of my pocket and put it on the table. I laughed, thinking, Momma and the old man will cover the dough with a piece of paper and leave it there until sun-down. Some clucks! I laughed to myself—Orthodox Jews don't touch money on the Sabbath—some clucks!

Not this Jew-boy. Show me where there's money, and I'll handle it all right, any day in the week, beginning Friday and all the way through the Sabbath. Boy oh boy, even a million bucks! I looked at the clock; it was twenty after four. I turned off the gaslight. I closed the door and crept quietly down the dark stairs. On the first floor I stopped. I heard a noise underneath the staircase. I put my hand in my pocket; the knife reassured me. I fingered the button and listened. I heard a rhythmic shuffling noise and labored breathing for a few minutes. Then a sharp male gasp.

“Oh Jesus, this is good.” Then a female giggle, and a man's laugh joined the giggle. I recognized the giggle. It was Peggy the Bumehke's. I walked down the remaining flight of stairs, whistling loudly. There was a sudden silence under the staircase. I went out to the street. Maxie was already there, waiting for me.

I said, “I heard Peggy and some guy screwing under the staircase.”

“No kiddin'.”

Max had an interested leer on his face. “Come on back and let's watch them in action.”

Max and I tiptoed into the hall. We stood there; we heard whispering under the staircase for awhile. When the rhythmic shuffling noise and the loud, heavy breathing started, Max and I tiptoed noiselessly closer and closer until we were right on top of the tightly interlocked swaying couple.

Maxie called out, “Hello, Peggy!”

I never saw two people jump apart so fast. Then it was our turn to be startled. In the dim light we recognized Peggy's companion: he was Whitey, the cop on the beat! The four of us stood gaping at one another. Peggy regained her composure first.

In a matter of fact way she said, “Whitey, these kids are friends of mine. Meet Maxie and Noodles.”

She pulled her bloomers up and her dress down. Whitey buttoned up his fly.

He was peeved. “What the hell are you kids sneaking around for? What are you doing out at this hour?”

The Hoods

Maxie answered insolently, "What were you doing under the staircase with Peggy? Pounding your beat?"

Whitey couldn't make up his mind whether to get mad or to take Maxie's question as a joke. Finally his face broke into a grin, then from a grin it changed into a broad smile, then into a chuckle, from a chuckle he began laughing uproariously.

Tears were running down his face.

"You kids caught me with my pants down, all right."

He tried to smother his hysterical laughter. We left them both. She was trying to stifle her giggling. He was breathless and gasping for air.

A few blocks away on Hester Street outside of Spevak's candy store we saw three bundles of newspapers. We walked over. Each of us picked up a bundle and slung it on his shoulder.

Maxie remarked as we hurried towards Gelly's, "This is one time we don't have to look out for Whitey the Cop. We know where he is."

I added, "Or any other time. We got the goods on Whitey, enough to hang him. From now on we can do anything on his beat."

Maxie looked at me with a delighted excitement. "Geez, you're right, Noodles, we got him by the balls. Peggy's under age; she's jail-bait. Boy, can we get him into trouble!"

We left the bundles of papers in Gelly's doorway. Let's go over to Sam's and get some coffee, until Gelly opens up," Maxie said.

I hesitated, saying, "I got no dough, Max. I left it home for the family."

"So what? What are you worrying about? I got dough."

Max gave me a carefree flip on the shoulder.

A Ford taxicab was standing outside Sam's All Nite Coffee Pot on Delancey Street.

Maxie said, "It looks like Cockeye's brother's hack."

Inside Sam's, sitting on a stool by the counter, we saw Hooknose Simon, Cockeye Hymie's brother, reading a newspaper and eating ham and eggs.

Maxie called out, "How ya, Hooknose?"

Hooknose picked up his head, waved and went back to his paper and food. We sat at the far end of the counter and ordered coffee. We dug into the basket of hot bagels on the counter. We sat there dunking our bagels.

Maxie whispered, "Look who's coming in."

It was Whitey, the cop. He didn't see us. He sat next to Simon and began ribbing him.

"Be careful, Hooknose, you'll get your long nose caught in the eggs."

Simon picked his head up and grunted. "One of New York's lousiest! Why ain't you outside pounding your beat?"

"Pounding my beat? I had something else to pound this morning." He gave a hearty laugh. "Something that made me very hungry."

He looked at Simon's dish. He called out to Sam behind the counter, "Hey, Sam, give me the same as Hooknose, ham and eggs."

He nudged Simon with his elbow. "Tell me, Hooknose, how come a mocky is eating ham and eggs? Or, is this kosher ham from a circumcised pig?"

Simon put down his paper in disgust. "Why don't you go blow, before the sergeant catches you in here?"

Whitey was enjoying his baiting. "Hey, Hooknose, what would the rabbi say? Does he know you eat ham?"

Simon muttered, "Go on, get yourself arrested. Skidoo. Do you tell your priest everything you do in confession?"

Like Whitey's conscience, Maxie called out, "Do you?"

I followed up, "Hey, Whitey, you going to tell the priest, you know what?" I winked at him.

Startled, he looked over at us. We stared coldly back at him. In that exchange of looks we had reached a complete understanding. He dropped his eyes; he knew we had him.

Sam came over and took the basket of bagels off the counter. "How many do you kids expect for a nickel? Youse ate six bagels apiece."

The Hoods

We gulped the last of the coffee. With an arrogant sneer I called out, "Hey, Whitey, take care of our bill."

Max looked at me with startled admiration.

Sam, astonished, handed Whitey his ham and eggs. "Fresh kids, goddamn fresh kids. How come, Whitey?"

Whitey mumbled, "It's okay, it's okay."

Sam wiped the counter, mumbling to himself and shaking his head. "You going to pay for twelve bagels, twelve bagels and two coffees? Twenty cents? For them fresh kids?"

Whitey soberly nodded his head.

We said, "So long," and went out laughing.

We walked along the curb, looking for butts. Max spied a pretty big cigar butt with the band still on it. He lit it up and puffed critically as he looked at the wrapper with the air of a connoisseur.

"A pretty good smoke, Noodles, try it."

He looked at the name on the band as he handed it to me. "Ah, a Corona Corona. When I get in the dough, that's my brand."

I puffed on it awhile. "How you like it, Noodles?" he asked.

"A pretty good cigar to find on Delancey Street," I commented.

Max laughed. "Later in the day we'll go down to the financial district and look for some more of these Corona Corona butts."

"And break into the Federal Reserve Bank, Maxie?"

"Quit your kiddin' on the Federal Reserve Bank, Noodles. Someday, you'll see, we're gonna take that joint over, after we get plenty of experience."

He looked gravely at me.

We walked into Gelly's. Gelly was cutting the cords off the bundles we left to put the papers on display. He gave us fifteen cents apiece.

"How about the malteds and the charlotte russes?" Max asked.

I edged up close. I snarled at Gelly, "A deal is a deal."

"All right, so I'll make malteds," he said. He set the machine in motion. "Take one charlotte apiece; why argue?" He shrugged his shoulders and repeated, "Why argue?"

"How about an egg in it?" Max said.

Gelly answered: "How about? All right, so I'll put an egg in it. Why argue?" He cracked one into the spinning mixture.

While his back was turned, Maxie clipped a Hershey bar off the counter. Gelly poured us two large glasses. We sat there slowly sipping the malteds. Maxie nonchalantly unwrapped the Hershey bar and gave me half. We nibbled the chocolate and drank the malteds.

Gelly eyed the chocolate bar. "Where did you get the Hershey chocolate?" he asked sternly.

Max answered with exaggerated reproach, "Why, Mr. Gelly, we bought it from Spevak's when we picked up the bundles there."

"Yeh," I said, mimicking Gelly. "Why argue? We bought it."

"You bought it from Spevak? You should both live so long, you goniffs, you."

He glared in righteous indignation.

"How do you like that? Goniffs he calls us," Maxie said mockingly.

"How about yourself, Mr. Gelly, are you so legit?" I said.

"Legit?" he questioned.

"So honest, I mean, that you call us goniffs?"

"Oh, that's what you mean, legit?"

"Yeh, that's what I mean, legit."

"So, I'm legit?"

"No, you're like everybody else, illegit."

"Illegit? What means it, illegit?"

"A thief, a goniff is illegit."

"You steal, and you call me, an honest man, who don't steal, who goes to schul, a goniff? Illegit? Why? How?"

The Hoods

He glared at us.

“We steal for you, you send us. You buy what we steal, so you're the same as we are: illegit,” I explained genially.

“You think you're smart. You twist things around so instead of you being a goniff, I'm the goniff.”

He chuckled. “All right, all right.” He threw up his hands as if he didn't understand. “So I'm illegit, and you're all right.” He laughed. “You twist things; you're a smart boy. You use your noodle, hey, Mr. Noodles?”

“Yeh, I use my noodle, you know what I mean, you—you.—”

I was just about to call him a shmuck, when I remembered Dolores. This shmuck might turn out to be my father-in-law some day.

Max tried to explain it to him. “Hey, Gelly,” he said, “this is what Noodles means, when you run a crap game in the back room late at night, it's illegit.”

“That's illegit? Even when I pay Whitey, the cop, ten per cent for permission?”

There was a sly twinkle in Gelly's eye. He was just playing dumb.

“How about my competitors around the corner? What would you call them, my smart Noodles? They also illegit?”

“Who do you mean?” I asked.

“The church around the corner. They have gambling games in the basements. Maybe twice, three times a week. They play bingo. That's a gambling game, and they don't have to pay Whitey, the cop, for permission.”

He laughed. “They got themselves a good business, hey, smart boy, hey, Noodles?” he jeered. “You call them illegit? Maybe?”

“Yeh,” I said with a shrug, “that's the way I see it. You're illegit, Whitey, the cop, is illegit, and your competitors around the corner are illegit.”

Old man Gelly chuckled, “So you say everybody is illegit?”

“Yeh,” I grunted, “everybody is illegit.”

CHAPTER 4

Cockeye walked in. We dropped the subject. He said, “Hi ya, fellas.”

Cockeye looked too cheerful. “What's doin'? Anything happen?” he asked.

“Happen?” Max said sarcastically. “Where do you think you are, out west with the Jesse James Gang? Nothing happens on the East Side.”

“Aw, hey, Max, can't you forget it?” Cockeye's cheerfulness evaporated. “I was only kidding about joining the Jesse James Gang.”

“All right, Cockeye, forget it. I tell you what you do. Go and wake up Patsy and Dominick and tell them to meet us in the school.”

“Where ya gonna be, in the gym?” Cockeye asked.

“Boy, oh boy!” Max hit his head in despair. “Where else on a Saturday? In the classroom, studying history?”

“Dominick's old man will raise hell if I bang on the door,” Cockeye grumbled as he walked away.

Max and I climbed over the spiked school fence. We pried the back basement window open, and dropped the five feet into the gymnasium. We took all our clothes off except our underwear. We jogged up and down the gym in our bare feet until we worked up a sweat. Max spread out the padded mat. He took his paper-covered instruction book on jiu-jitsu out of his jacket pocket. We practiced various holds on each other until Maxie hurt my arm. I lost my temper and kicked him in the groin with my bare foot.

In spite of the pain, he gasped admiringly, “Atta boy, Noodles, get rough.”

We started a violent rough and tumble match, kicking and punching furiously at each other. Maxie grabbed me in a viselike hold, bending me over backwards with his thumb squeezing my windpipe. I began choking and seeing black spots before my eyes.

I was happy to hear the window open. Max released his grip. Patsy and Cockeye dropped down into the gym.

Max patted me on the back. “You're getting pretty good, Noodles.”

Turning to Cockeye, he said, “Where's Dominick?”

Patsy answered, “He had to go to church, Bible class.”

“Church,” Maxie snorted, “a waste of time. All right, you guys, get undressed.”

The three of us followed Maxie through our regular routine of weight-lifting, chinning and fancy tricks on the parallel bars. Then he gave us a short rest while he read his book of instructions. For hours we practiced jiu-jitsu and rough and tumble fighting. Then we each put in fifteen frantic minutes of bag punching.

Cockeye was the first to quit. He said he had to go home to lunch. We wiped the dirt and sweat off with our undershirts. We put the rest of our clothes on and boosted ourselves out of the window.

Cockeye went home. Max, Pat and I walked over to Katz's delicatessen on Houston Street. As we entered, the intoxicating smell of steaming corned beefs and pastramis, displayed on the counters, hit us. Like three voracious animals we stood fascinated, sniffing and gazing at the hot meats. We trembled with ecstasy. We decided on three corned beefs and three hot pastramis with pickles. I gave Max the fifteen cents I had got from old man Gelly. He added his fifteen cents and put it on the counter.

In an authoritative voice he said, “Put plenty of meat on them sandwiches.”

With baited breath, with tongues hanging and saliva dripping, six hungry eyes followed the counterman's every move.

With meticulous care, as if carrying the most fragile, the holiest of possessions, we maneuvered through the crowded store carrying our plates to a rear table. We ate with deliberate slowness to make the sandwiches last longer. We didn't talk. We nibbled around and around the sandwiches. We smacked our lips and made all sorts of animal noises of delight. My two sandwiches disappeared far too quickly. I sat picking up the shreds of beef and breadcrumbs on my plate. I licked the dirt and mustard off my fingers. I would have given five years of my life for two more sandwiches. We looked enviously at a man at the adjoining table: he had three corned beef club sandwiches, a knish, a piece of hard salami, french fried potatoes, and a bottle of Dr.

The Hoods

Brown's celery tonic before him.

Max nudged me. "Some day we'll eat like that guy."

I thought to myself, Max and his promises.

Reluctantly we left Katz's and walked along the curb, looking for butts. We ignored the many cigarette butts. Finally Max stooped and picked up a cigar butt. He sniffed it and threw it away.

"Cheap tobacco," he said.

By the time we reached Gelly's, each of us was puffing contentedly away on a different brand of stogy. Cockeye and Dominick were standing outside, talking to Dolores. For the first time in my life I was aware of my shabbiness, my uncleanliness. Dominick, Cockeye and Dolores had on their Saturday best, especially Dominick, who had his brand new church-going longies on. I felt uncomfortable in my tight, worn-out shorties. I was conscious of my dirty, frayed shirt collar, and the rip in my father's old jacket seemed very noticeable. Red in the face, I stood speechless and ashamed, looking down at my scuffed shoes. For the first time in my life I was really clothes conscious.

I looked at Maxie with the broken peak on his cap pulled at an angle on the side of his head. He wasn't dressed any better than I was. Neither was Patsy. That made me feel a little better. Then I thought of the coming cold weather, the freezing winds that would blow along Delancey Street. I began feeling sorry for myself. Will I have to stuff newspapers in my jacket lining again to break the cold wind and put cardboard in the holes of my shoes? I'll bet the old man won't get a job, and we won't have coal for the stove either. I'll bet I freeze my balls off; I'll bet I'll be sniffing and coughing and my nose will be running all winter. Yeh, I'll bet my dopey old man don't get a job, and I'll bet the bastard of a landlord throws us out into the street! Yeh, I'll bet I'll cut the flower-wearing bastard of a landlord's throat if he does. No use, I got to get movin'; I gotta get a job. I got to do something for money.

Just then Dolores gave me a frigid glance and turned her back on me. I felt awful. If I could only disappear, me and my dirt and my shabbiness. If I could only sink through the sidewalk.

I was sick with despair. Life was lousy. What was the use of living? There was a lump in my throat. With a supreme effort, I held back the tears. I felt wretchedly sorry for myself. Unnoticed, I edged away from the group. I shuffled aimlessly through the streets, feeling unhappy and morbid, full of self-pity. I walked all the way over to the West Side docks. I looked at the dark, cold, wet Hudson River. I hiked over to Chinatown. I wandered around for hours. It was getting late. I was tired, hungry and miserable.

I found myself walking under the thundering elevated. I was on the Bowery. There were drunks lying on or staggering along the street. I thought of Pipy, smooth fast-fingered Pipy, rolling a lush. Yeh, that's a good idea. I'll roll me a lush. And if he makes trouble, I got my knife.

I looked carefully up and down the street, and darted into a doorway. I rolled an unconscious, evil smelling drunk over and went through his pockets. They were empty. Even his shoes had been stolen. Then I remembered Pipy's expert observation: "The stiff's lying in the doorways are clean and dry. They never have a penny on them. Get the bums that are still on their feet."

Like a jackal I stalked a big, staggering drunk down the side street. I was thrilled; this was exciting. Maybe he has a big bundle of dough? He flopped in the doorway. From nowhere a rough-looking old man swooped down on him. I was too startled to do anything. I watched in amazement. Hurriedly and skillfully, he went through him. He found something and put it in his pocket. Swiftly he unlaced his shoes and darted away to sell them on Bayard Street in the outdoor thieves market. I felt cheated. I was disgusted and disappointed with myself. That drunk should have been mine. I saw him first. That's the way people are. Grab, grab things right from under your nose. I vowed next time it wouldn't happen. I was angry with myself.

"You shmuck," I said to myself, "you got to grab and grab quick, or the other guy will beat you to it. To hell with people, grab, grab for yourself."

The morbid, abused feeling came back to me. The whole world stinks. Everything and everybody is against me. Suddenly a club hit me sharply over the backside. An excruciating pain shot up and down my spine. I lost control. I wet my pants.

The cop growled, "What the hell ya doing out so late? Beat it, you little tramp, before I whack you again."

Like a whipped, unwanted, filthy mongrel, I slunk through the deserted streets, homeward bound.

CHAPTER 5

Wilson was elected President. As usual, we celebrated the election with the largest bonfire on the East Side. For a short period longer, I remained in “soup school.” Then I went to O'Brien and demanded my working papers, which he reluctantly okayed.

For weeks I tramped the streets looking for a job. Finally I got one as a helper on a wet wash laundry wagon for \$4.50 a week.

The first week was a back-breaking ordeal. Work started at six in the morning. The driver and I loaded the wagon to capacity with wet, heavy bundles. All day long we made our stops, laboriously climbing flights of stairs, carrying up the wet bundles and carrying down the dirty bundles. It was crippling drudgery. My back, my legs, all the muscles in my body, ached. In spite of the rain and sleet and snow and the cold of that severe winter, I was in a continual sweat from my strenuous work.

The driver worked on a commission basis. He was greedy, and he had a prodigious capacity for work. We took ten minutes for a sandwich. That was our lunch hour. Then we began again and labored far into the night. After a meager supper, I would crawl numbly into a cold bed, completely drained of any ambition ever to move again. I had peculiar dreams of walking with a bundle of wet wash tied to each leg and another balanced on my head. When I awoke in the cold dawn, stiff, hungry and aching, miserably contemplating my lot in life, a fierce resentment surged through every part of me. I gave vent to my feelings by cursing. I started with the driver, went on to the boss of the wet wash laundry, then to everybody in general. The \$4.50 I brought to Momma when I crawled home from work ten o'clock every Saturday night was barely enough for the little food we had.

The old man was spending more and more time in schul. His face and beard grew whiter and whiter. His coughing spells lasted longer and longer. As the months rolled by, we fell further and further behind in our rent. Life was bitter for mama and us. But it wasn't black enough.

The dread “dispossess” came. Then the cold matter-of-fact marshall and his men came. We were out in the biting cold—all our miserable, broken-down belongings piled in a heap on the sidewalk for the callous world to gaze at. All around our piled-up belongings, the restless life of the East Side seemed to pursue its indifferent, hurried course.

It seemed as if the old man's schul-going, his praying, the rabbi— nothing, nobody seemed to want to help. The old man was taken away to Bellevue Hospital in an ambulance the same day.

Finally, my friend, big Maxie, arrived. He brought his uncle over to talk to my crying Momma. Then Maxie's uncle went and spoke to the Tammany district leader. The Tammany leader came to our rescue. He had us moved into a flat farther down on Delancey Street. He paid two months' advance rent for us. He sent five bushels of coal and a new pot-bellied stove. He sent potatoes and groceries—a two weeks supply. But the old man never came home again. He died in Bellevue the next day, from pneumonia.

Maxie's uncle buried my father without charge.

Numb with the hopelessness of it all, I went back to carrying more wet wash bundles.

One day a delegate from the Teamsters' Local arrived outside the wet wash laundry. He questioned some of the drivers and their helpers about working conditions.

My driver said, “Everything is all right. Things aren't bad.”

A few others told the truth. They insisted that conditions were bad. I told the delegate that we were being exploited; we were working more than eighty hours a week. My driver told me to shut my fresh mouth. I talked too much. I looked at him scornfully. The delegate signed those who wanted to join the union. My driver and a few others refused. The delegate drew up a fifty-four hour work week contract with a ten percent increase in pay and submitted it to the boss. The boss told him to drop dead, and go to hell. The delegate called the union men out on strike.

I walked a picket line. My driver and most of the others scabbed. We were jeered at and called lousy agitators and socialists. For days we trudged wearily back and forth. Everybody crossed the picket line. It was disheartening. I did strike duty fourteen hours a day.

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One day the cops on strike duty purposely disappeared. A car pulled up with four men in it. They flashed badges. They were from a private detective agency. They told us to keep away from the laundry. They said the strike was over.

The other picket and I refused to go away. They took away our picket signs and beat us both up.

The cops with smirks on their faces came back and asked, "What happened?" They smiled with malice. "Ain't it too bad, wise guys? All right, beat it."

They chased us away. The driver and his new helper stood laughing at my black eye and bleeding head.

I said, "What the hell you laughing at?"

"Go ahead, punk, beat it before I give you a workout," he answered me.

I looked at him. I was on the verge of taking him on. Something inside me kept repeating, "Use your noodle, use your noodle, this guy is too big for you." I walked away thinking: so this is what you have to contend with to make a lousy miserable living? This ain't for me. I had my belly full. What the hell am I going to be, a helper on a laundry wagon?

That night I met Maxie, Pat, Dominick and Cockeye.

We waylaid my driver and his helper on the third floor of a house on Henry Street.

I slashed out at fate by cutting my driver's cheek with my spring-knife. I took his collection money away. We beat them both into insensibility. We drove away with their horse and wagon to an open East Side pier. We unharnessed the horse and pushed the wagon and bundles into the East River. The horse vigorously nodded his head, as if he thought it a good thing. He kicked his heels and ran away.

That night we ate good at Katz's delicatessen.

Fat Moe came looking for me. He said, "The bulls were around. They asked questions about you. Better not go home."

Luckily I found the Professor in his basement. I explained the pickle I was in. He went for a blanket. It was the first night I had ever been away from home.

I couldn't sleep too well. I wasn't scared, just nervous. I spent most of the night reading *Don Quixote* in the toilet.

In the morning the Professor brought me a container of coffee and hot cross buns. He gave me a key to the store and said, "Make this your hideaway until things cool off."

He slipped me two bucks. He was a swell guy.

I heard that the union delegate was looking for me. I got in touch with him.

He said, "Good work, Noodles. One more job like the one you did on your driver, and the strike will be over. The scab drivers are afraid to go to work."

That slash on the driver's face gave me the reputation of being a good man with a shiv. I was referred to as Noodles, the shiv, from Delancey Street. I was proud of the title.

We waylaid one more scab driver and helper. I cut them up and put them both in the hospital. It did something to me. I felt wonderfully exhilarated and happy. I found I had enjoyed the experiences immensely. When I clicked the knife open, people jumped. They showed me a new respect.

The other drivers were afraid to go out on their routes. The boss called the union. Grudgingly, he signed a fifty-four hour work week contract with an overall ten percent increase.

The delegate met us in the Professor's basement. He had a proposition. "Do you boys want to work for me and the union as sort of union organizers? Ten dollars a week, apiece?"

That was our first steady racket payroll.

We organized many of the workers in that laundry teamsters local thereafter. In our experience as organizers, we saw all the cruelty, greed and irresponsibility employers unrestrained by the union were capable of. It justified our hatred for all authority. Their standards were, in our eyes, society's standards.

Most of the time the cops were looking for me, so I kept away from home, but I sent money every week to Momma, by messenger.

CHAPTER 6

President Wilson declared war on Germany. An aura of adventure enveloped everything. Glory and brutality went together. They were the order of the day. The five of us tried to get into the swing of authorized violence by joining the Army. We were laughed at; we were too young. The exciting tempo of the country was exhilarating, like the speeding up of an immense carousel. We jumped on our own private little carousel, and took firm grips on the rails. We operated the speeds faster and faster.

With our union ten dollar a week payroll as a beginning we sought and found other means of increasing our incomes in the toughest and most competitive field of all, general hoodlumism. We entered the field pretty well equipped, for we had already taken our elementary course in the hardest soup school in the city.

Now we were entering the sophomore phase of our education. Our classrooms were the backyards, the cellars, the roofs, the market places, the river and the gutters of the East Side. We roamed the maze of streets, like jungle hunters seeking big game. We were curious about everything. We soaked in all sorts of information, experienced bizarre adventures. We carried black jacks of our own manufacture, made from the lead solder melted off the covers of milk cans. We waylaid prosperous-looking pedestrians on dark narrow streets.

We took a postgraduate course in sex, from a skilled and experienced teacher, Peggy the Bumehke.

After our bi-weekly delivery of "junk" from the Professor to the address on Mott Street, we would explore the streets of Chinatown, interested and entranced by the strange sights and smells. There we observed the habits and distinctive antics of the addicts to various narcotics.

Under the Professor's expert tutelage we learned the secrets and skills of many illegal professions. He initiated us into the soothing, dreamy pleasure of opium smoking. He supplied us with an assortment of guns and other lethal weapons necessary in the skilled art of committing mayhem.

We became more callous and hardened, and truly adept at acts of violence.

Cockeye Hymie had been practising driving on his brother's taxi-cab. He developed a skill in handling an automobile that was sheer wizardry. On many occasions we utilized this skill and his brother's hack, with the license plates removed, for a small heist. We developed a style all our own in the heist profession. We took our victim's pants off before we made our getaway. The newspapers headlined us as the young pants burglars. We were proud of our originality and the publicity. We became cocky and conceited. That was our undoing.

On a small-time drugstore heist which netted us \$22.50, the proprietor immodestly ran out of his store into the street without his pants, and gave the alarm. In the getaway in Cockeye Hymie's brother's cab, with the police after us, we ran out of gas on Delancey Street. We leapt out of both doors and ran in all directions. We were too fast for the cop and sergeant who were pursuing us. Silently, I thanked Maxie for the vigorous physical training he had insisted on. It stood us in good stead. I heard shots. I thought we had all made a safe getaway.

Later, in the back of Gelly's candy store I got the sad news. Dominick was dead. He couldn't keep up with us. Little pudgy Dommie got a bullet in the back of his head. The police sergeant shot him. The precinct detectives rounded us all up. Maxie's uncle's influence with the Tammany district leader came in handy. We were allowed under custody, to attend poor Dommie's funeral. At the funeral parlor where Dommie was lying at rest, his parents and relatives gave us harsh and sullen looks. They muttered and cast imprecations upon us in Italian. In an undertone Patsy interpreted them for us. We attended the funeral mass at the church. The quiet, sorrowful moaning of poor Dommie's parents was heart-rending. When the priest walked all around poor Dommie with incense and blessed him, I felt a heavy cramp in my heart, as if it was tearing apart. My insides were numb with pain.

I couldn't cry.

From the church we followed poor Dommie out to Long Island to his grave. I watched as they put him in a hole. Everybody was weeping and praying as the priest blessed the grave and asked God to forgive poor Dommie for his sins.

On the ride back to New York, I tried to figure it out for myself.

The Hoods

Good old Dommie, laughing and joking only a few days ago, had been full of life, a nice smile on his face, when he called me, "Hey, Noodles." Now he was lying cold in a box with a bullet in his head at the bottom of a hole. I couldn't figure it out. It was hard to understand I wouldn't see my friend Dommie again.

CHAPTER 7

The district leader did everything he could for us. He said he couldn't help it. He had to make a deal. Two of us had to face the music. Pat and I decided to take the rap.

Max promised to deliver the ten dollar union money, maybe more, every week to my home.

Patsy was sent to a Catholic Protectory. I was sent to the Jewish Home, Cedar Knolls, up in Hawthorne, New York.

My stay wasn't too bad. The food was good, and there was enough of it. This was my first time out of New York, so the country atmosphere was a novelty. We weren't treated as criminals; the place was run more on the style of a boarding school. I was pleasantly surprised at the amount of freedom of movement allowed. A great deal was left to our honor. Rarely did anybody abuse his privileges.

To tell the truth, I enjoyed my stay. The change of air did a lot for me. The clean, open country smells were so different from the hemmed-in stink of the poverty-stricken ghetto. What I took delight in more than anything else was the library. I buried myself in books. Through that medium I visited every country in the world as well as other worlds—the moon, Mars and other planets. I flew in planes and explored the bottom of the seas. I was a pirate, a missionary. I was a highwayman, a priest, a minister, a rabbi. I was a surgeon and his patient. I was one of the arrogant rich and a man of the people. I was a king and his lowliest subject. I was everybody and everything. I was there with Moses on the Mount: I looked over his shoulder as he sat on the rock and wrote his ten commandments. On the way down he and I discussed the best way to present it to the people. I chuckled with admiration when he told me the story he was going to tell.

I sat at the feet of Jesus, with the rest of his disciples. I listened with awe to his revolutionary teachings for the betterment of all peoples. I helped him carry the cross up Calvary. My heart bled as I watched the pain and suffering on the face of Jesus as they drove spikes into him. Then I saw how, ever after, the same type of people, in every generation, who were afraid of progress and Jesus' true teachings, prostituted his name, twisted his meanings, and crucified him over and over again for their own selfish purposes. I saw how other poor unfortunates were encouraged to use his anguished image as a fetish to fill a gap in their lives, or to cover a neurosis of some sort. All of it made me very sad.

The day I was to be dismissed from Cedar Knolls, the rabbi called me into his study and gave me his final sermon, "How a good Jewish boy should behave." It went in one ear and out the other. In conclusion, he smiled and gave me a pat on the back.

He said, "I have a surprise for you; there's a friend outside to drive you back to New York."

I wondered who it could be. Jauntily I walked out of the building. Leaning up against a new shiny black Cadillac, smoking a cigar and grinning at me, was Big Maxie.

Even though we had grown up together, and he had been my intimate companion since the days at Soup School, now, somehow, he seemed like a stranger. I guess it was the eighteen-month separation. He looked entirely different. Maxie had grown tall: he was well over six feet. He was big all right, big all over, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. He must have done plenty of gym work while I was away. He looked in the pink. His sharp black eyes were shining. He had the same contagious grin, and showed his white perfect teeth.

"Noodles, old boy, it's good to see you. How are you?" he said.

He extended his hand; his grasp was like a vise.

A warm, embarrassing surge of affection swept over me. I returned his grin. "I'm okay. You're looking good, Max."

"You don't look so bad yourself, Noodles. I hardly recognized you; you're almost as tall as I am."

He turned me around.

"Some pair of shoulders on you, Noodles, you certainly developed, up here in the country. Plenty of exercise, hey?"

"You mean plenty of work," I said, "to keep us out of mischief. We're a mutual admiration society, hey, Max?"

We both laughed.

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He opened the door of the Cadillac. I felt like a man of the world, stepping in and sitting next to him. He swung the car around dexterously and shot over the gravel driveway.

"Where did you get the Caddy, Maxie?" I asked.

"This is one of my funeral cars," he said.

He handed me a cigar in just as nonchalant a way. I bit the end off, spit it out the window and lit it. I puffed awhile; I looked at the label. It was a Corona Corona.

"Did I write to you," he asked, "my uncle kicked the bucket?"

"Yeh," I nodded. "What from? You didn't say."

Maxie spit out the window. "Cancer of the liver."

"Too bad, he was a nice old guy."

"Yep, he was a swell guy; he left me the business. I take over when I'm twenty-one."

"You're going to be a big shot with that business, hey, Max?"

"Yep," Maxie smiled at me. "We'll all be big shots. We're still partners, you, me, Cockeye and Pat."

I was thrilled. "You going to cut us in, Maxie?"

"Yep."

I leaned back feeling secure and comfortable. My friend Maxie, I reflected, always was the generous one, an okay guy if there ever was one.

On the drive to the city, Maxie gave me a complete resume of all that had happened on the East Side during my enforced vacation.

"Yep, we're still on the union payroll. I been up to your house with your share every week. Everybody's okay. You know your kid brother is working on a newspaper? He's a reporter."

"Yeh," I nodded.

"Peggy turned professional, did you hear about that, Noodles?"

"No." I shook my head, "Professional what? Dancer?"

For a minute it made me think of Dolores. I still had her in my mind.

"Dancer?" Maxie laughed. "Yep, she dances in bed. She turned from an amateur to a professional. She charges now."

"How much?"

"A buck a throw."

"She's worth it."

"Yep, she's pretty good."

"You remember we used to lay her for a charlotte russe?"

We both laughed.

"And you remember Whitey, the cop?" Maxie continued.

"Do I remember? How could I forget?"

Max continued, "Well, he's a sergeant now."

"Honesty pays off for Whitey," I commented drily. We both laughed.

"Yep, he's a pretty smart Irishman. He's on Peggy's payroll," Max said.

"I bet he takes it out in trade."

"I'll bet," Maxie laughingly agreed.

I was dying to ask him about Dolores. I wrote her every week, but she never answered me. Instead I said, "How's Patsy and Cockeye doing?"

"Well, Cockeye took out his hack license and once in awhile he jockies one of his brother's cabs."

"Hooknose got cabs?"

"Yep, he worked his way up to a four-cab fleet. Patsy hangs out with me; he helps around the parlor. And if we get a good steer, we step out."

"On a heist?"

"Yep," Maxie nodded. "It's got to be more than a couple of grand, or we don't bother. And since prohibition went into effect a few months ago, there's plenty of dough around. Once in awhile we get a contract from one of them bootleggers to lump somebody up."

"I hear there's dough in bootlegging."

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“There must be; there're plenty of speakeasies opening around town.”

“Speakeasies?”

“Yep, that's what they call them: closed-door beer joints with peep holes on the doors.”

“Oh.”

We had reached the lower East Side. Maxie was driving the big car recklessly in and out of the heavy traffic. He almost grazed a fender off another car. Maxie leaned out of his window and yelled at the driver.

“Hey, stupid, where did you learn how to drive? At a correspondence school?”

The elderly well-dressed driver shouted back as he turned the corner, “You slum hoodlums act like you own the whole city.”

Maxie chuckled as he pulled into the garage. “You know, Noodles, that ain't a bad idea.”

“What?”

“What that guy just said, the hoods from the soup schools taking over the city.”

“The whole city?”

“Why not? You know, organize.”

CHAPTER 8

In the eighteen months I had been away from the city, four memorable changes had taken place. The war was over. Prohibition was in effect. Dolores was a minor dance sensation in a Broadway musical comedy. Big Maxie, Patsy, Cockeye, with a sort of subsidiary contribution from Jake the Goniff, Pipy and Goo-Goo, had built up quite a reputation among the hoodlums of the city as a tough East Side mob.

I also discovered that in my absence a legend had grown up about my powers with the shiv. I was considered an expert shiv man. Maxie told me of some of the stories that were being told around the East Side. We both laughed at my mythical knife exploits.

Our reputation as all-around tough guys and so-called killers was the force which hurled us into the actual violence incubated by prohibition.

People came to us with what we called "contracts." From all over town, from people we had never met or heard of came unsolicited propositions to heist big payrolls, wholesale jewelry firms, banks. Bootleggers and racketeers came to us with contracts to murder their business partners, sweethearts, brothers, husbands, wives or enemies. We were offered ridiculously small fees as well as fabulously large sums of money.

At first we ignored and laughed at this deluge of unsought assignments. Then, either because we were flattered to be sought after by people in high and low places, or because we wanted the money or for a combination of these reasons, we finally capitulated. We began living up to our reputations, but we screened the contracts we took on through the wide mesh of our peculiar code of ethics.

Like robber barons of old, by physical force and gall we took over most of the illegal activities on the crowded East Side. It was a large and lucrative domain. We were comparatively young as years are counted, but we were efficient veterans in all matters requiring nerve and brutality. Fate was kind, and our success gave us an air of cool arrogance.

In a comparatively short period we had become acquainted with little mobs which had suddenly sprung up from the soup school districts of the city. To redeem a load of whiskey we had hijacked uptown, we had a slight encounter with Arthur Flegenheimer, the Dutchman, and his mob, who came from a wretched, cheerless and impoverished section of the Bronx. On a matter relating to cigarette machines we met with Joe Adonis, Leo Bike and some of their crew, who were recruited from the unhealthy, congested, dilapidated sections of Brooklyn. We had a slight brush with Tony Bender and Vito Genovese and their outfit, who originated from the stinking hovels and pigsties of the lower part of Greenwich Village. We had a tryst with Charlie Lucky and Lupo the Wolf, who came from the destitute, stable-like tenements of east midtown Manhattan. We discussed the "Black Hand" shake-down of one of their countrymen who was currently residing in our domain, where he had come seeking our protection. We met and formed a coalition with the most gentlemanly, the most honorable and the boldest hoodlum in the city, Frank or Francisco, from a miserable, overcrowded section of east Harlem. We met them all. It was a startling and irrefutable fact that without exception, they came from the same kind of poverty-stricken background we did. They came from different parts of the city, but they were all soup school alumni.

We had six speakeasies, including the one on Delancey Street which was our general headquarters. We called that one "Fat Moe's," in honor of Gelly's son. Fat Moe became our chief bartender and manager. Besides, we had a piece of the number racket that was being introduced into the East Side by a Porto Rican banker, and we were on many of the "off the track" bookies' payrolls. Bootleggers and "speakie" operators came to us for protection from jackal hoodlums who were shaking them down. Obviously, we charged a fee for our services. People found it hard to understand and wouldn't believe that, owing to our past experiences and deep sympathies, we shied away from profiting by labor racketeering, by selling narcotics or by prostitution.

Despite the fact that we were spending money pretty freely, there was so much of it around and more coming our way, that we were all filling up safety deposit boxes.

I was our head bookkeeper and kept the accounts of our diversified illegal enterprises. But we had one legal enterprise: the funeral parlors and undertaking business which Maxie's bachelor uncle had left him.

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Maxie was true to his promise; he cut us all in as equal partners. This was our cover up. On the books, and as far as the federal income tax people or any other authority was concerned, the undertaking business was our only source of income. This business was very convenient for our general scheme of operations. It answered many purposes: our funeral cars were always on call for the district Tammany leader and the politicians in general. On the surface we ran it as a legitimate business, but, for a price, we buried many a "stiff" who wasn't so legit.

On occasion we reluctantly participated in a big heist, and then only when the finger was an old and dependable connection. We had such a heist on the fire, an old commitment which had been brewing. We were waiting for the all clear signal from the finger. Supposedly it was a hundred thousand dollar diamond heist.

Sometimes, from sporadic and slight clashes between mobs, violent and open warfare broke out on a national scale. The newspapers raised a clamor, and the public became alarmed, the federal and local authorities sent word to the underworld "to pipe down," or they would "clamp down."

But greed and hate conquered. The mob war continued until, after awhile, a leader arose, our old friend Frank, from the Harlem slums. He called us up. We met, and he outlined his plans. We assured him of our unequivocal support. He told us he would send word when he was ready to put his plans into action. We assured him we would respond to his call, day or night.

In spite of the fact that I ran around with all sorts of women and had been intimate with many of them, I could not overcome my deep childhood worship of Dolores. I had not seen her outside the theater. She never gave me a date: she wouldn't have anything to do with me. I went to the theater where she was performing an average of twice a week just to sit and look at her. She was unaware of my presence. I sat in a trance watching her night after night, loving her more intensely as time went by. It was puzzling to me, a knock-around guy, acting like a schoolboy. I sent her flowers and a diamond wristwatch which she refused to accept. There were times when I was desperate and made foolish plans to force myself on her, to have her at any cost. With an effort I would control my crazy thoughts. She became an obsession with me. Everything else was secondary. I was in a bad state.

Luckily, an exciting event took my mind off Dolores. We received word from Frank. The gigantic conclave of the mobs from all over the country was to be held. He sent us the address. We attended.

It was a fantastically colorful gathering. The meeting came off just as Frank had planned, and the national criminal combination was formed with Frank as supreme authority.

When we got home from that meeting, there was word from the finger: we must go into action on the diamond heist tomorrow. He left full instructions. I was against it.

"Why take a chance on a heist? Guys in our position?" I argued.

Big Maxie was adamant. First of all I gave the guy my word; secondly, taking chances is our stock-in-trade," he said. "We go through with it tomorrow. I got it all planned out."

"But Max," I continued, "we just got back from a trip. We're tired—"

Max cut me off. "We'll take a quick pick-me-up. We'll go over to Joey's place and kick the gong around."

We piled into the Caddy. Cockeye was at the wheel. We drove to Joey's place. Secretly, I was becoming addicted to opium smoking. I indulged in the pipe more frequently than the rest of my companions because I seemed to need it more. I don't know if it was because I was tense, or because of what I called in my mind "my Dolores phobia." Perhaps it was because there, I actually possessed Dolores, and it was the only place she did not shun me. In my pipe dreams she ardently reciprocated my love to the point where it gave me real and complete physical gratification.

But I wasn't sure of the real reason I craved the pipe so much. I do know I looked forward to the peculiar dreams of current happenings mixed with Elizabethan adventure, to the vivid colorful dreams of kings and barons in exotic places. Some I participated in; others I just watched as an excited and interested observer. I enjoyed reading English history, so I supposed that was the reason my dreams invariably had an old English flavor.

I hid my impatience until I got out of the car. I was the first to relax on the cot, with the pipe in my mouth. I lay peacefully back on the pillow, reviewing the excitement of the last few days. The pipe tasted just right. Hazily I thought, good old Joey, he always has the best opium, and he certainly knows how to prepare it for

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smoking. I inhaled the moist, sweetish vapor. It began to give me a feeling of peace and supreme happiness. A blurred vision of Dolores danced briefly before my eyes. I inhaled deeply, slowly, languidly. I exhaled. I watched the moist, shadowy vapors rise and take shape above me. Big Max appeared as a baron, a robber baron. We followed him into an inn. We went into the back room, where we sat down at a table. Big Max pounded the table; he roared, "Bring us ale." Grinning, Fat Moe appeared carrying large foaming mugs of ale on a tray.

The picture in my mind disappeared again in the thin curl of vapor, and I lay in a happy stupor, with the memory of the exciting message from Frank running through my mind.

CHAPTER 9

It was a dream of how the criminal combination was formed.

There we were, dressed in fancy Elizabethan clothes. We were swashbuckling robber barons. We lost our slangy, East Side intonations, and spoke in the stiff, stilted speech of the period. We were seated around a table in the back room of the “Moosehead Inn.” We were drinking strong ale from large tankards, playing a card game. Large stacks of gold coins were piled before each of us. Short muskets were under our chairs within easy reach. Our beaming host, known as the Fat Moose, was kept busy running in with fresh supplies of ale.

In the midst of the noisy playing, a dusty courier ran in with a message from the notorious Baron Francisco, the Lord of Harlem.

Big Maxie put his pasteboards down and unfolded the note. Moving his lips, he read the message to himself. We looked on curiously. He took a sip of ale, cleared his throat, smiled grimly at us, and said, “Gentlemen, this is what we have been waiting for.” He tapped the paper in his hand. “This is the summons to attend the meeting of all the robber bands in the land, at our friend Francisco's castle. This meeting is being called to formulate a plan of action, which will transcend in daring and importance any organization of barons in all history. It is a very ambitious scheme for uniting all the robber bands in the land under one supreme leader. Methinks my good friend Baron Francisco hankers after the leadership. And I swear by all the good and holy saints that he shall have our support.” For emphasis Big Maxie banged the table a shattering blow with his powerful fist.

“What say you, my comrades? A toast to our friend Baron Francisco and all his plans.”

We raised our tankards in salute and shouted, “Success and good fortune to our friend, Francisco.”

We drank our ale in one gulp.

Big Maxie smacked his lips and wiped them with the back of his hand. “Let us make haste, for it is a long journey.”

We mounted our powerful steeds and flew like the wind through the night, thundering through small hamlets, shooting our muskets in the air, awakening the frightened villagers out of their peaceful slumbers.

At daylight we made a hurried stop at a wayside inn. Swiftly we gulped some food and large quantities of ale. The foolish innkeeper made the fatal mistake of asking payment. We joyously shot him to death and burned his inn to the ground.

At nightfall, dusty and tired, the horses covered with lather, we arrived at Baron Francisco's well-fortified castle. Armored guards with pikes and muskets were stationed all over the well-kept grounds. Other heavily armed barons were arriving. Torchbearers escorted us over the drawbridge and into the brilliantly lighted castle.

We were assigned comfortable quarters, where we rested. Then bathed and freshly attired in brightly colored velvet doublets and cavaliers' plumed headgear, we strutted around the room admiring each other's costumes. We swaggered into the immense dining hall where we were embraced in warm greeting by our host, Baron Francisco.

A serving man led us to our seats at the vast table. I thought to myself, this is indeed royal repast to set before murderous and bloodthirsty cutthroats. There were golden platters filled with the choicest viands: whole wild boar, roast pig along with all sorts of game and fowl cooked in wine and spices. There were heaping bowls of a new, exotic dish called spaghetti cooked in true Siciliano style. There were platters laden with every variety of knish, salvers filled with a Jewish delicacy, chopped chicken livers, and tureens filled with kreplach soup. There were platters of strange fruits from distant countries across the sea, and trays of cakes and pastries in all shapes and sizes soaked in liquors.

Baron Francisco sat regally at the massive table. At his right sat his most trusted counselor, the fastidious, the cold-blooded dandy, Philip of Kasetel.

Seated at the left of the Baron was the glib Hugo, nicknamed the Jolly Rogue, Prince of Man and Haton with a secret ambition to be the Lord Mayor of all York. He was dressed in a luxurious garment of tiger skins

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signifying membership in the ancient powerful clan of Tam-on-Knee.

Standing behind the Baron in a group were his personal bodyguards, the fiercest knights in all the land. One of them was the scowling, vicious, truculent Joseph, laughingly called Joseph the Ray-o-Sunshine.

I recognized Sir Charles the Bullet, dealer in plain and fancy methods of violent death, and Sir Michael, the Trig of Cappolah, a bloodthirsty deadshot with his pistol, as well as many of the assassins from Francisco's baronial domain of Harl.

Seated all around the table as far as the eye could see were all the name robber bands of the land: Sir Joseph, the Adonis, Lord of Brook; Sir Arthur, the Dutch, Lord and Master of the Bronks. And standing behind them was the mad-eyed killer, Vincent of Coll. Alongside him was a tall muscular garroter, the Bow-Legs from the Wine-Burg Country. There was the notorious scar-faced one of the Midland Country of Chi, Lord Capone and his motley crew. There were the destructive, murderous, purple knights of the Northern Country of De-Troy. Wild William, Lord of the far southwestern country of Tex and his wild skillful riders. Peter the Printer, Lord of Thompson, whose dexterity at counterfeiting documents and money was legendary. There was the sly and unscrupulous Charles the Lucky, leader of the fearsome black-hand secret Guild of Sicilies. There was the cunning and ostentatious Edward the Elder, the senior brother of Baron Francisco and his Latin crew called the Forty Thieves.

On the other side of the table was the long-legged Baron Zwill, Keeper and Protector of the New-Ark and South Jersey Countries. Next to him was Owney the Madden, Lord of West-Town with his murderous Celtics. There was Erik the Book and William the Moore of Passaic and Lord of the Northern Jersey Countries. There were the cold calculating pair, the Leopard and Gurrah, Lords and Masters of East-Town and their fierce and vicious Semites. There were Meyer the Lance and his partner the Buggsy Eagle with their mercenary crew, a mixture of drug-crazed Latins and Semites who kill for hire to the highest bidder.

I turned to my comrades and said, "In all history such an aggregation of blackguards and corrupt politicians never before or since has gathered together under one roof."

"Did you include yourself in that statement, Sir Noodles?" the big one gravely inquired. I ignored his comment.

All through the feasting, between mouthfuls of food, there were growling curses and murderous side-glances, promising death. The air was heavy with evil. Only out of fear and respect for our host, Baron Francisco, did this devilish gathering refrain from self-destruction.

After we had our fill of food and drink, an earsplitting clang from an immense gong rang out. An abrupt silence fell over the dining-hall. The startled guests looked furtively at each other. A figure stood up with arm raised for attention. All eyes were centered on him. It was the Dandy, Philip of Kasetel. There was scorn on his handsome countenance as he stared coldly up and down the massive table.

In a clear, unhurried, cultured voice, he said, "Now we come to the business at hand. I will explain briefly why my Suzerain Lord..." he made a courtly bow to Baron Francisco, "has called this unusual gathering of sworn enemies together. To operate in unity is for your common advantage. Fighting and slaughtering among yourselves for territories is pure waste. There are enough spoils for all. Bloodshed has to stop! We are going to combine all the robber bands in the land into one organization. This organization shall be called the 'Combination.'"

There were mutterings and a negative shaking of heads from a few guests. Philip of Kasetel stared them into silence. He leaned over the table; his piercing eyes looked ominously from one group to the other, reading their thoughts. He was tense as he continued.

"This 'Combination' will require a supreme leader." With a sly smile he said, "Of course, you have free choice who he shall be."

The smile left his face, his voice changed to a vicious growl as he continued slowly, measuring and emphasizing every word. "But, there is no question as to who it shall be, for there is only one who is truly fearless and of royal blood amongst us."

Philip of Kasetel hurriedly signaled to Sir Joseph the Rayo, standing behind the Baron Francisco. Joseph reached behind on the sideboard. He handed Philip a wrapped packet which he calmly uncovered, disclosing a gold and jewel encrusted crown.

The audience looked on in startled amazement as Philip put the crown on Baron Francisco's head. He said,

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“By the unanimous consent of all the Lords of the land gathered here, I crown thee King Francisco. The first supreme leader of the 'Combination' of robber barons.”

In a regal manner King Francisco rose and smiled to the hushed and startled assembly. There was resentment on the face of some of his guests. He threw a challenging glance around the table. He bowed in mockery.

“Thank you for this great honor, my Lords.”

He allowed his listeners no time to recover from their shocked resentment. In a suave, confident manner, he unfolded his ambitious scheme for the welfare of the Combination: plans for building distilleries to manufacture strong drink; for leasing large sailing vessels to import foreign liquors; for gigantic projects to acquire tremendous revenues by distributing and operating the peculiar gambling contrivances called slot machines; for controlling all houses of chance throughout the land and all manner of gambling such as lotteries and games called numbers.” His Majesty detailed his ideas for controlling the parks where the sport of kings takes place, horse and greyhound racing. He pictured the future in glowing terms of power and riches for all.

The tension lifted as the king continued developing his many novel schemes for squeezing huge revenues from the common peasantry. There were happy smiles as His Majesty parceled out bountiful lands to the various lords. He made two strict royal proclamations: no trespassing on one another's territory was the first. Then, he paused and smiled.

“Murder among the members of this combination is taboo, unless,” King Francisco paused again and smiled graciously, “given special permission by the Crown. Every Lord is to be of equal rank with the exception of Philip of Kasetel who next to myself shall be of highest rank. I designate him as the Royal Chamberlain and Minister to the Crown. Peter the Printer of Thompson shall be the Royal Minter of all Monies and all Crown Documents. I designate as Provost Marshall, Chief Executioners and Royal Undertakers Extraordinary, Sir Maxie, Sir Noodles, Sir Cockeye and Sir Patsy, the Lords of the Lower East Lands.”

His Majesty King Francisco shifted his crown at a pugnacious angle.

“Any objections or questions, my Lords?” he asked.

Sir Maxie stood up, musket in hand, Sir Patsy, Sir Cockeye and I followed suit. There was a heavy silence in the room. Nobody moved or spoke. Big Maxie picked up a glass and held it aloft. He gestured violently.

“On your feet, my Lords, a toast to our King.”

One by one the hesitant robber bands rose, glasses in hand, facing King Francisco. They shouted their allegiance and toasted in unison, “Long live the King.” King Francisco bowed and waved his hand in royal acknowledgment.

The immense gong rang out again. Musicians came in playing their instruments, followed by page boys carrying trays laden with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and baskets heaped with gold ducats, gifts from His Royal Highness to all his new subjects.

The gong rang out once more. Beautiful, scantily dressed maidens streamed through every entrance. They came dancing and singing in a heavenly chorus.

“What a breathless spectacle,” I said with admiration.

The guests waited with ill-concealed impatience to take one of these delectable dancing morsels for their very own.

The dancers were of every race and of every color. Smooth, cool, white skins with perfect bodies swayed in a slow sensuous tempo; warm pink-tinted maidens danced languorously. Voluptuous, olive-colored Venuses stood in one spot, their hips rolling in tantalizing, rhythmic gyrations. There were red, blue and green-skinned beauties. There were bewitching tawny and black Amazons, all dancing slowly. Then the dancers, their bodies swaying, their hips moving in thrilling, suggestive slowness, formed a circle. Their dance quickened, then faster, faster, still faster in a mad whirl of color and movement. They went around, around and around, in a whirlpool of passionate frenzy. Suddenly, out of the vortex, a lone nude female was discharged! She came sliding, face down, on the marble floor. She rose in all her naked beauty, the most startling creature in all creation! She was not a slim maiden. She was a woman, a voluptuous, curvaceous, ample-bosomed woman. Seductive in every movement, she was created for only one purpose—for the

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pleasure of man!

A slight mist enveloped her alluring nakedness. The mist was like a silken web spun from a heavenly scent. She pirouetted around and around, her seeking arms waving and exuding wondrous music, like angels playing on harps. The heavenly scent, the wondrous music, the voluptuous body came excitingly closer and closer! She was frantically whispering, “Darling, come to me, come to me.”

It was a startling revelation. The dancing figure was Dolores! And she was calling me! It was me, Noodles, she was dancing toward. I could feel her exciting sweet-smelling womanly warmth drawing me to her like a powerful magnet. The exciting, stiff rosebuds on her ardent full breasts were two beckoning signals of unashamed passion! She was at her moment of white hot, excruciating, joyous agony! She was at the moment of frenzied hip and wild limb movements. She was at the moment of sweet swooning surrender. She was heaven's supreme gift!

I embraced her violently. My soul, my life plunged into her. We were bound together, melted as one, in a soul-connected rapture. My soul swelled with love deep in a heaven that was Dolores. It soared in and out of heaven, throbbing in a wondrous exquisite sensation, straining and eager. It was like a pent-up volcano. It was a sharp delicious, celestial explosion of shooting stars.

CHAPTER 10

Suddenly someone was patting my face. The mist cleared completely. A gruff voice growled in my ear, “Wake up, wake up, hey, Noodles, wake up, we got a heist to do.”

I looked up. There was Big Maxie standing over my bed. I sat up and turned around. Patsy was standing before the mirror, adjusting his Roscoe in his shoulder holster. I got out of bed. I could smell the heavy sweetish odor of opium, but I felt fairly good, a little high but good.

Boy, what a dream! I was still tingling all over with the realism of it. If I could only have Dolores in my arms as I had in that dream. I sighed longingly.

Maxie was reloading his forty-five and wiping it carefully with his handkerchief. He put his gun in his holster, nodded his head toward the sleeping figure of Cockeye and said to Patsy, “Wake him up; we better get moving.”

There was a knock on the door. I opened it. Joey the Chinaman came in smiling. “You boys up already?”

He chuckled.

“Have pleasant dreams, boys?”

He turned to Maxie and asked, “Can you spare a few minutes? I want your opinion, Max. I got a fresh shipment of the stuff this morning.”

Maxie was putting on his jacket. He said, “Okay, Joey, let's see it. A few minutes we can spare for a friend.”

We followed Joey down into the cellar. He unlocked a large steel door. We went through a long narrow hall. He unlocked another steel door. We came into a well-lit room. Five Chinese were sitting, bent over a table.

Joey introduced us to his smiling compatriots. They were members of the same Tong he belonged to, the On Leongs. They spoke better English than we. I commented on it to Joey. He whispered, “They got their degrees from Columbia University.”

The five Chinamen had their sleeves rolled up. We watched them awhile, kneading little balls that looked like dark dough moistened with water.

Joey explained with pride in his voice, “This is the way opium is prepared for smoking. It has to be moistened and kneaded. This operation requires real skill.”

He patted the nearest Chinese on the back. “And they certainly are artists,” he added.

Joey pointed to the box in the corner and asked Maxie, “What brand, Max? What do you think of the quality?”

I bent over the box curiously and said, “I thought opium is opium, that there was only one kind.”

Maxie assumed the didactic manner of a schoolteacher explaining a lesson to his pupil.

“Yuh see, Noodles, while you were up at Cedar Knolls, the Professor taught me a lot about this stuff. There are Patna, Benares and Maliva. They each have a distinctive taste and smell because they come from different soils and countries.”

Joey and I nodded, impressed with Maxie's knowledge.

In the box there were about forty four-pound balls packed tightly together in neat rows. Max picked up one of the balls, peeled off about one inch of poppy leaves, “The packer used these leaves as a wrapper,” he explained. He pinched off a piece of the uncovered dark mixture, rubbed it between his fingers, smelled it, put a speck on his tongue and remarked, “This is okay stuff, Joey. Pure Patna.”

Joey nodded his approval. “I thought so, Maxie, but I wasn't quite certain. Thanks for your opinion.”

We said, “So long,” to Joey and his smiling workmen and went upstairs. A hissing, snarling tomcat was pursuing its mate down the dark, narrow, deserted street. We watched with interest as he cornered her among the garbage cans. She yowled with pain and pleasure as he jumped on her back and sank his teeth into her neck, forcing her into a submission.

We piled into the Caddy, laughing, feeling a vicarious thrill. Maxie sang a risqué parody to “Everybody's doing it, doin' it.”

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Cockeye at the wheel turned to look at Maxie for instructions.

Max looked at his watch and said, "Three a.m., plenty of time left for a bath to really pick us up." He rubbed his chin reflectively. "Yep. And at the same time, we'll fix up the alibi with Lutkee."

Cockeye turned the key, kicked the starter, shifted into first and swung the car uptown on South Street. Those are the motions he actually went through, but it seemed as though all he did was to slip behind the wheel and the big car responded to his slightest wish, like Aladdin's magic lamp.

With Cockeye at the wheel the Caddy was alive. It was a "she," and in an emergency, when we were in a tight fix, he would talk to her affectionately. He called her "Baby" in the tone of voice a fervent lover uses. He was what we called a "bitch at the wheel." He could do tricks with that car a Hollywood stunt driver would never dream of doing. He had developed into the most skillful driver on the East Side. He had something solid to handle, for the Caddy was a special job, bulletproof throughout, and geared to do one hundred twenty-five miles an hour.

We hummed speedily and quietly through the night. The big, black car like a chameleon blended into the darkness of the deserted streets. Abruptly, we were in the midst of bright lights and a beehive of activity.

"Ah!" Cockeye exclaimed as he breathed in deeply. "Chanel number five."

Maxie leaned forward, digging his fingers deep into Cockeye's back, and said, "Hey, Cockeye. How many times have I told you to close your window when we're driving through the Fulton Fish Market?"

Cockeye laughed at our discomfort. We were holding handkerchiefs to our noses.

"You guys are too sensitive. To me it smells delicious. Just like overripe pussy."

We breathed in deep as we left the market behind. The stinking East River air smelled good by comparison. We glided swiftly through the labyrinthine streets of the lower East Side.

Then, in the distance, a dim electric sign shone, "Lutkee's Turkish Baths." Cockeye kicked the gear into neutral and taxied smooth as silk under the sign. He turned the purring motor off. We walked into the baths.

There was a peculiar combination of fear, respect and pleasure in Lutkee's manner as he smilingly shook our hands. He escorted us personally to the choicest rooms in the place. We undressed and walked naked toward the hot room. As we swung through the baths with Big Maxie in the lead, the soft padding sound of our bare feet on the stone floor and the sight of naked, hairy bodies, gave me the odd thought: Darwin was right. I bet we have more wild beast than homo sapiens in our make-up. I could not help imagining we were a ferocious animal pack traveling through a hot, steaming jungle. Big Max was sleek muscled in his dark nakedness, his catlike gait covering the length of the long hall with the speed and grace of a man-killing tiger. Patsy walked a step behind, his long legs and arms moving in fine rhythm. His powerful muscles flowed in an easy ripple beneath an abundant growth of dark body hair. His slinking movements were a vicious black panther's on the prowl. Cockeye, somehow, reminded me of a leopard. I chuckled to myself, wondering what animal I resembled.

We pushed through a swinging door into the dry heat room. The sudden heat hit our cool bodies like a gust from the terrific heat of a blast furnace.

The floor was burning hot. Cockeye hopped around from one foot to the other. I still felt a little high.

I said, "What's the matter, boy? Too hot for you? Better get used to it. You don't want our friend Mephistopheles laughing at you when we finally get down below, do you?"

Cockeye asked, "Who the hell is this guy Mephistopheles? He sounds like Greek to me."

I laughed.

"He's a hell of a Greek, all right. He's the guy with the horns and the pitchfork, down below."

Cockeye bent down and pointing to his backside said, "If I ever meet him, he can kiss my tauchess."

Cockeye spied the reclining chairs, hopped over on one foot and sat down. He jumped up in the air with a stream of startled curses. "Goddamn son of a bitch."

"Better get used to it. You remember what old Safety-Pins Mons said, that we'll all wind up in the hot seat?" Maxie laughed.

Cockeye hopped around on one foot and rubbed his backside. "She can drop dead, that bitch," he said.

An attendant came into the room with cool white sheets, laid them over the wooden reclining chairs, and we stretched out on them. We felt comfortable and relaxed.

In a short while the sweat poured off us in continuous trickles. It was a fiery heat. Cockeye slapped his

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thigh. "How do you guys like your meat, rare or well done?"

Patsy eyed him speculatively.

"You look too lean and tough to eat, Cockeye boy."

Maxie walked over to the thermometer hanging on the wall and exclaimed, "Jeez, the temperature is 177 degrees."

People in the room were nudging and whispering to one another. Evidently they knew we were hoodlum celebrities. We were growing accustomed to that sort of attention. We nodded to them in friendly fashion. Maxie had an attendant bring cold beer for everyone in the place. They called out their respectful thanks from all sides of the room.

Two good looking young men came over to thank us, simpering like embarrassed school girls. One of them lisped.

"We heard tho much about you boyth, Mithter Maxth. We came over to thank you perthonally for the beer," he said.

The other one held his sheet with one hand on his hip and brushed his long bleached hair back with the other with a typical feminine gesture.

"We wanted to see if you men were as handsome without clothes as with them," he said.

"Are we?" Max asked, amused.

"You men thertainly are and what beautiful manhood. Good-neth!"

I growled through the side of my mouth. "That's enough, girls. Scram. Take a powder."

The two young men hurriedly adjusted their sheets tightly around their bodies. "Come away, these boys are too rough, Fwankie," the lisper called to the other.

Frankie waved as they scampered away. "Bye, bye, you sweet darlings."

Cockeye spit in disgust.

"Goddamn those peter-eaters. We ought to smack them around. Maybe that would cure them."

"It would be silly to smack them around. That won't cure them," I said.

"Yep, they're to be pitied, that's right, Noodles," Max agreed.

I nodded and said, "Yeh, I guess their sex habits are beyond their control."

Patsy asked, "What really makes a fairy a fairy?"

"Mostly environment," I replied.

"What do you mean by that?" Cockeye asked.

"Well—" I thought a moment how best to explain it to Cockeye. "Take us, for example. Our environment, the way we were brought up, or the way we brought ourselves up, we all had us a good piece with Peggy, Fanny and a few others."

We all laughed at my recollections.

I continued. "We are the opposite of fairies. We, too, are funny in a sense. We are the other extreme. Maybe we developed an overabundance of male hormones. That's why we're tough and hard-boiled. Like I said before, it is believed the causes of homosexuality are mostly environmental. In some cases a congenital element may be present."

"Say that in English," Cockeye grumbled.

Maxie laughingly volunteered the interpretation. "It means some of them were born that way in their mother's belly."

"Hey, Noodles," Cockeye called, "how come you know all the answers? Was you born that way?"

"Well, as long as you asked me, I'll tell you, Cockeye boy," I began facetiously. "I wasn't born a big brain. I developed it by reading this and that. I'll let you in on a little secret. Due to my reading a book now and then, you consider me a smart feller, right?"

"Fart smeller," he corrected.

"Okay, okay, don't interrupt, so, compared to you, who don't read anything, I know all the answers, right?"

"So?" he said.

"But," I continued, "compared to people who really read and have an education I am an illiterate, the same as youse guys. Everything is relative."

"Relative like Einstein's theory?" Patsy jibed.

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“Yeh,” I said, “like Einstein's theory of relativity.”

“So you admit you're not the smartest guy in the world? Einstein is?” Cockeye asked.

“Yes,” I modestly admitted, “I'm the second smartest guy in the world after Einstein.”

“Okay, enough of that,” Maxie said drowsily.

We sat for awhile longer, and then went to the next room where we were washed by an attendant.

Afterward Maxie went into Lutkee's office for about ten minutes. When he came out, he nodded. “Everything is arranged okay.”

We adjourned to our separate rooms down the hall. I took an uneasy catnap.

At seven-thirty a.m. Maxie tapped gently on my door and whispered, “Okay, Noodles. Time to get up.”

I got up with a start. I had a mixed-up dream. I guess I was still under the effects of the pipe. Funny, just a little while ago up in the hot room my head felt pretty clear. Now I felt a little high again.

We dressed quickly and tiptoed out to the street, using the back way. No one saw us leave.

We walked towards Yoine Schimmel's on Houston Street for a light breakfast.

The morning sun was already well over the East River. Busy housewives were at work airing bedclothes from their windows. A woman was shrieking from a top floor. “Iceman. Iceman. Yoo-hoo, Iceman.”

The iceman stopped his horse and shouted, “Yes, lady?”

“Send me up for ten cents a big piece ice, please, yes?”

He answered, “Okay, lady.”

The garbage men were already dumping stinking refuse into their trucks and throwing the empty garbage cans noisily back to the pavement.

A tenement door crashed open, and a young boy shot out. He clattered down the stoop. A woman flung open a window, her big breasts hanging loose and exposed.

She shouted after the fleeing boy. “Jake, Jake darling. Don't forget and be a good boy in school today.”

The kid didn't slacken speed as he shouted over his shoulder, “I'll be good—in dred.”

Beaten, middle-aged men, old-looking before their time, trudged off to their sweatshops. An empty sardine can came sailing out of a window narrowly missing a retreating husband off to work. His virago wife at the window shouted after him, “Lieg in dred, Yankel. A broch zu dir.”

He shouted just one word back at her, “Yenta.”

Like beautiful flowers that grow in beds of dank earth, smartly dressed girls came trooping incongruously out of the dark, damp, stinking tenements, fresh and daintily groomed for the new day's work.

Yeh, I was thinking as we walked along, these people are part of the docile element of the slums. Look at them. What a life, living cooped up together in these stinking pigsties. Now they're off to their jobs. Then back again to their ghetto. What a life. I felt sorry for them.

Look at us. We were spawned here, too, Big Max, Patsy, Cockeye and I. We're part of the East Side, too, and we're starting a new day. Heh, heh, I was laughing to myself. But how different. We're not the docile kind. We're a small hoodlum mob, a unit in a powerful combine of mobs. Yeh, a mob of rebels.

We walked casually through these dirty, busy streets on our way for coffee and knishes. Just as deliberate and almost as casual will be the grand larceny we are about to commit. I was arguing with myself and wondering, are we the consequence of these surroundings? Mobs don't hatch in the well-to-do sections of the city. Who the hell ever heard of a Fifth Avenue mob or a Park Avenue mob? Yeh, come to think of it, they had mobs, too, but they operated differently.

I laughed to myself. They were smarter than we were. They operated legally; they clipped people just as we did, but without guns, down on Wall Street. And they operated in mobs, financial mobs. They used money the way we used guns, as a weapon to rule the world. Maybe in a roundabout sort of way—and their ethics are the same as ours, the bastards—maybe we are more ethical and decent than they are. They are illegit just as we are. Yeh, everybody is illegit, the bastards.

What the hell, the world is a jungle, dog eat dog. The lucky and the fit come out on top and all that crap. We are fit. All right, our gall and excessive energies could be sublimated into different channels, but who the hell has the patience? We want to reach the top the quick way. We had our bellyfull of this poverty crap.

We don't beg God or Allah or Buddha, or what have you, “Please give us this day our daily bread.” No, the hell with that. We took what we wanted. Like Napoleon said, “Fate is a whore.” Yeh, I was thinking, the

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fortunate ones are loaded to overflowing from the world's bountiful stock of goods. For the unfit and the unfortunate? Filthy crumbs and stale broken loaves thrown into the world's garbage cans. Yeh, but not for us; by guile, by nerve and by force, we tear our share from the grasp of that treacherous bitch, Fate. I must have read that someplace.

I chuckled to myself. "Here I go again on the merry-go-round, getting my mind all set for this diamond heist by rationalizing. I guess no matter how wrong an act one does, the doer thinks himself justified."

I laughed aloud, thinking of my mixed-up philosophy on things. Boy, I really must be getting hard-boiled. I remembered that years ago, when we first started going on a heist, I used to literally shit in my pants on the way.

Maxie looked at me curiously and asked, "Something funny, Noodles? Or still a little high from the pipe?"

"I guess a little of both," I giggled happily.

Max said, "What you need is some black coffee to straighten you out."

CHAPTER 11

In Jonah Schimmel's over coffee and cheese knishes, Max gave us the full lowdown.

"I got this tip direct from one of the top guys in the insurance company. There is supposedly a hundred grand worth of rocks in the safe according to the records of the insurance company. This is the sketch of the entire building.

Maxie unfolded a paper and spread it out on the table.

Pointing with his fork, Maxie continued: "It runs from Forty-fifth Street, that's the front entrance, through to Forty-fourth Street, that's the freight entrance. The front lobby on the Forty-fifth Street side is lousy with bulls because this building is loaded. There are about fifty wholesale jewelers in the building. The biggest wholesaler is on the twelfth floor."

Max pointed it out on the sketch with his fork. "The boss of this firm is a little, fat guy, with a very large nose. He's our oyster. Now then, the gimmick in this layout is the freight entrance on the Forty-fourth Street side."

He looked at his wrist watch.

"Now it is exactly eight a.m. At eight-thirty they finish removing the rubbish from the building, using the freight elevator. That's when we take over. My information is that nobody will miss the elevator or the freight operator from eight-thirty until the freight starts coming in after nine a.m. As I said, we go into action at eight-thirty. We take over the freight elevator, go up to the twelfth floor, and wait for Big Nose. The Finger guarantees Big Nose arrives promptly at nine a.m.

and then we go into action. Okay? You guys got it straight?"

Max looked us over grimly. We kept munching our knishes. I nodded.

Maxie continued: "John, the Finger, doesn't want anybody hurt. His wife works in the place, and besides, Big Nose is a personal friend of his, so no fireworks. If it can't be helped, well...."

Here Big Max smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "I'll give you guys the sign, then you, Noodles, may have to do a little quiet cutting up."

I nodded. Patsy patted his Roscoe.

Maxie went on: "This is a full-dress affair. We wear gloves. No fingerprints left around. Here are plenty of new handkerchiefs with no laundrymarks. You know what these are for."

Maxie tossed us each a few. He turned to Cockeye Hymie.

"You, as usual, handle the wheel. I don't have to explain anything to you."

He emphasized the "you." Hymie gave a bored nod and continued eating his cheese knish.

Big Maxie is a perfectionist, a born leader. I admired the guy. Always before a special piece of business like this, he kept going over and over every detail, every eventuality. He droned on and on. He left nothing to chance.

"I'll go over it once more," he said. "We get in the freight elevator. We go up to the twelfth floor. We wait until this guy, this big-nosed boss comes out of the passenger elevator. The Finger says this guy is very punctual. We need him to escort us through the steel screen door as an excuse for John's wife to click the door open. Besides, he's the only one that knows the combination to the safe. Okay. For us this isn't too tough a job. At the same time let's not get too confident. We got to be fast. We won't have too many people to handle, only three men. The girl in the office is with us, like I told you. She's the wife of the Finger, the insurance guy who gave me the tip on the job. Now don't forget the important thing, we got to paralyze these people with fear immediately. We got to show them we're playing for keeps. It's either them or us. We got to scare the shit out of them. That way we got perfect control over them, and they'll be too scared to remember exactly how we looked. They'll be in a state of frightened stupor. Frightened people make lousy witnesses."

Maxie turned to me. "Noodles, you cut the alarm off. Right at this point."

Max showed me the diagram of the office.

"At the same time you cut the phone wires, okay?"

I nodded.

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“Now don't forget, you guys, once we're in the clear we have to move fast and unnoticed like a fart in a blizzard.”

I don't know how Maxie's repetitious briefing was affecting the rest. All I know is that it was beginning to make me damn nervous. I tried not to listen anymore. I tried to think of other things.

I thought back many years to the days when we sat huddled around Maxie just like this, at the exact same table, drinking coffee, whenever we had money, nibbling cheese knishes.

We were green kids then, fresh out of that old broken-down soup school. Before every escapade we had always adjourned to this table at Jonah Schimmel's for coffee and knishes, to plan our strategy. Big Max always assumed the leadership. He always called the signals and did all the planning—just as he was now doing.

I remembered there were five of us in those days—we four and Dominick—Dominick, may his soul rest in peace. Good old Dominick. How come I'm thinking of Dominick all of a sudden? I always do. What am I bullshitten myself for? Admit it, I had a secret superstition or belief that I was ashamed even to admit to myself, that Dominick or his spirit was watching over us, that Dommie was something like our Patron Saint.

We were inseparable then. If he could only see how we had worked our way up into the big time, how we had our fingers in every racket operating around New York, how we were a recognized name mob, an important unit in the Combination. He would have liked this new setup, this combine of every big-time mob in the country.

Maxie looked at me reproachfully. He knew I wasn't paying attention, and he didn't like it. He knew I was daydreaming. How the hell did I come to think of Dommie and the inner workings of the combination? It must be the pipe dream. Boy, that was a good dream. Every dream is a good one if I have my darling Dolores in my arms. Jesus, it was wonderful, goddamn, it was so real. I tingled when I thought of it.

Listen to Maxie, still going over the details. What the hell does he think? We're amateurs? Horseshit. Why the hell don't we get going? Yeh, I'm getting too sure of myself, a heist doesn't feaze me any more. Im getting too damn cocky. Maybe it's the opium that's giving me Dutch courage. Yeh, I feel a little high. I laughed aloud.

“Hey, Noodles, you still high from the pipe?”

Maxie nudged me. “What are you dreaming and laughing about?”

I said, “Who's dreaming and laughing?”

Max looked peeved. “You're mumbling to yourself. It will be a long time before we kick the gong around again if you let it get the best of you like that. Pay attention, will you?”

Maxie kept looking at me reproachfully as he went on talking.

“What's the matter, Noodles, you look groggy. This job has to be done fast and unnoticed.”

I cut him off. “Like a fart in a blizzard,” I said.

He smiled and patted me on the back. He called the waiter.

“Two cups of black coffee,” he ordered.

He insisted I drink them both. I did. It made me feel better, more awake. I lit a cigar and looked at Maxie for the next move.

He looked at his watch and said, “Lutkee should be here with the car any minute.”

We sat around smoking awhile longer, then we heard the brakes of a car stopping at the door. Cockeye walked to the doorway, came back and nodded.

He said, “The Caddy's outside.”

Maxie left a tip on the table, paid the check. We walked out.

Cockeye drove slowly up to Forty-fourth Street. He stopped a half block away from the freight entrance. The street was crowded with people rushing to work, typically indifferent New Yorkers. A rubbish truck was there. A big Swede was rolling the rubbish cans out on a hand truck. Maxie was sizing him up.

He murmured, “According to the description, that big guy must be the elevator runner. I'll handle him personally.”

We waited about fifteen minutes until the truck was loaded and it started pulling away. Maxie gave Cockeye the nod. Cockeye maneuvered the Caddy slowly into the space the truck had left. The big Swede was wheeling the empty cans back into the building. Like professional artists skilled in their act, hovering tensely

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in the wings, we waited in the car for the right cue.

Big Maxie got out of the car.

“Okay, let's go,” he said. He fell in step nonchalantly behind the Swede into the building.

Pat and I walked in single file behind Max.

Cockeye remained at the wheel. The Swede was loading his empties into the elevator. Between the rattling of the cans and his being engrossed in his duty, the Swede wasn't aware of our noiseless approach. Maxie walked up quietly behind him into the building. He smacked him with a powerful right hook under his ear. The Swede crumpled to the floor unconscious. Pat and I picked him up and threw him in the elevator among the empty cans.

We got into the elevator. Patsy tried the controls. Instead of going up, the elevator dropped into the basement.

Maxie calmly said, “Okay, it doesn't matter. We wait here awhile.”

We sat on the empty cans silently waiting and smoking. I was getting nervous and tense, but I tried not to show it. After awhile Maxie looked at his watch.

“Okay, let's go. It's five to nine. Put your gloves on.”

We did.

He worked the controls. After a few awkward starts, he ran the elevator to the twelfth floor. Nobody spoke. We were all business.

We looked down the hall. At the other end was the passenger elevator. Everything was correct to a “T.” So far the Finger's diagram was perfect.

At exactly nine a.m. the door of the passenger elevator opened. With the hunched-up eagerness of cats ready to spring on an unsuspecting mouse, we watched as a short, pompous, big-nosed man came strutting out.

Maxie whispered, “That's the bum. Okay, cover up.”

We slipped handkerchiefs over the lower part of our faces. I swished open my knife. The others took out Roscoes. We walked towards Big Nose. He was whistling happily. He didn't pay attention to us. I felt a little sorry for the guy, for the shock he was in for. Then I said to myself, “The hell with the guy. He's got plenty; it's either him or me.”

Big Max and I slunk ahead along the wall, stalking our prey like killer panthers. Big Nose saw us. He halted. He stopped whistling. Slowly, an expression of fear comes over his face. We pounced on him. I gestured menacingly with the knife across his throat. Maxie dug his Roscoe in Big Nose's belly, and hissed, “Keep quiet, bastard, or we kill you right here.”

His mouth fell open. His eyes got glassy. He started stuttering and mumbling to himself. Maxie pushed him into the office ahead of us. We concealed our weapons. The girl sat at the front desk. She was a good actress. She smiled and said, “Good morning” when she saw her boss. She pushed the button. The heavy steel screen door opened.

We all walked in. There was a clerk facing us. He looked at us with shocked interest as we produced our weapons. He stepped toward us. In a foolishly wondering manner he murmured, “See here, what's going on?”

Maxie smacked him on the head with a gun. He sank slowly to the floor mumbling in pain, “Oh, my head.”

A tall, thin guy came running out of the inner office, a look of fear and amazement on his face. Patsy banged him over the head with his gun. The guy lay on the floor bleeding and moaning. We tied and gagged both of them. All this time the girl was staring at us with fascinated interest. Both times, when the men were hit, she emitted an odd, drawn-out, “Ooooh, ooooh,” as if it thrilled her. She squirmed, rubbing against the corner of her desk.

Maxie pushed Big Nose toward the large safe. He hissed at him, “Okay, bastard, open up.”

Big Nose shook his head. “No, I won't.”

Maxie's open left hand traveled from the floor. It whoozed like a bullwhip through the air. It landed an awful smack across Big Nose's face. His toupee flew off his head. The side of his face grew blood red. The upper part started swelling immediately. His mouth hung open, twisted to one side grotesquely. The jaw was broken. He was crying, pleading incoherently for mercy. In dread panic he started to turn the combination on the safe.

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I had one eye on the girl. That smack Maxie gave Big Nose did it to her. She was a skinny, flat chested thing. She looked the mousy, prim, quiet type. But her quietness was deceptive. Inside she was burning. Her face was tellingly blotched and flushed a vivid red with excitement.

After the smack Maxie gave Big Nose, she lost control. She went berserk. She flew at us. I grabbed her. She slashed at me with her long nails. I ducked my head and held on to her.

I panted in her ear, "Stop it, you bitch, you don't have to put up that good an act."

She didn't answer. She was trying to bite me. I let her go and tried to get away. She just held on tighter and tried to rip my eyes out, sobbing hysterically all the while. I had to drop my shiv and hold on to her with both hands.

The wild girl knew where a man was most vulnerable. She tried to knee me. I had to hold her knee captive between mine. I couldn't help it. I experienced a terrific erection.

When it came to women, I had no conscience. Size, shape, color, creed, type, time or place, nothing mattered. I looked at women with only one thought in mind. For me they existed only for one purpose. But this bitch, at this time and place, wasn't for me.

I didn't want to hurt her.

I hissed in her ear, "Cut it out, cut it out, what the hell's the matter with you?"

She panted, "Beat me, beat me."

"Why?" I gasped. "Your act is good enough as it is. Cut it out."

"No, no," she sobbed, "beat me. I love it, I love it."

She flayed me with her arms. I was distracted. I grabbed at her arms, and let go of her knee.

The female sadist came up with her leg in my groin. Luckily I tightened up in time. All she did was knock my breath out for an instant. It made me lose my temper. I clipped a left hook on her chin.

She went sprawling. She had no girdle, no bloomers under her dress. She lay there, her legs spread wide apart.

This by-play with the girl took only a moment or so. I looked around the room. Pat was standing guard at the door. The two men on the floor were gaping up at us in fright. I could see that all their reflexes were dulled with horror. They were in a numbed state.

Big Nose was still fumbling with the combination. His hands were trembling. It took him a few moments before he opened the safe, disclosing its cavernous interior. It gave me a strange feeling of morbid lust. I guess it was a carry over from the tussle I had just had. The thought of the girl lying on the floor was bothering me. The action of opening the safe renewed the terrific erection. Or was it the thought of the girl falling and being exposed? Somehow it was all related in my mind. Anyway, the safe seemed to give me a sensual thrill. I dived in.

With an intense feeling of gratification, I grabbed little envelopes filled with diamonds from little drawers in the safe. I handed them out to Maxie. He crammed them into his pockets. The gloves I was wearing made it a bit awkward. I dropped an envelope, spilling the brilliant stones.

Maxie leaned inside and cautioned, "Take it easy, Noodles, take it easy."

He examined the inside of the safe. He pulled out each drawer to see if I had missed anything. He whispered, "This is it. We've got the whole jack pot. Okay, Noodles, cut the phone and the alarm wires."

I picked up my knife and did my job. Max and Patsy pushed or dragged the three terrified men into the inner office.

"Better tie that crazy broad, Noodles, and put her in there, too," Max said.

I looked down at her. She was conscious. She looked up at me with erotic eyes mere slits. I bent down to tie her. She was completely different from what she had been. She lay passively as I tied her up, but the erotic obscenities she whispered in my ears belied her meekness.

When I carried her into the inner office, she promised all sorts of pleasures if I would meet her some night. I shook my head.

"I don't mix business with pleasure, baby," I said.

I couldn't resist giving her a feel as I put her down. She closed her eyes and squirmed on the ground like an animal in heat.

Max and Patsy missed all my by-play with the girl. They were aware only of her general hysterical

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condition. They attributed that to the violence of the moment.

Max looked around the office.

He nodded his head in satisfaction, and snapped his fingers as a signal. We pulled off the handkerchiefs and put our rods in our holsters.

We made our exit, and got into the freight elevator. Patsy pushed the control for “down.” The Swede was coming to. He tried to get to his feet, and as he stumbled, he raised a rumpus, knocking cans down in the process.

Maxie snapped to Patsy, “Quiet that bastard, he's getting as noisy as two skeletons screwing on a tin roof.”

Patsy took his persuader out and banged the Swede a terrific whack over the head.

The big Swede lay quiet.

We reached the street level, and walked calmly, one at a time, out of the building.

Cockeye was sitting at the wheel, the motor idling. We got into the Caddy.

“Eddie's Hotel,” Maxie said.

Cockeye pulled skillfully out into the moving traffic. We reached the hotel. Smiling Eddie was standing in the lobby. He nodded to us. Maxie gave him the sign to stay “put.”

We went into Eddie's private office, and locked the door. Maxie opened the safe, took a key out of his pocket, unlocked our personal compartment. He put the envelopes in, and shut the safe. We walked out, and Eddie gave us a knowing nod.

All this time none of us spoke a word. We shot down to the rear entrance of Lutkee's Baths, walked stealthily into our rooms and undressed. Then we walked into the baths proper. It was nine-thirty a.m. At that hour, the baths are deserted. The attendants had finished their morning chores and had made the place ready for the evening trade. They had gone to their rooms where they retire, for they are on call any time of day.

Only Lutkee was there, waiting for us. He whispered, “Okay, Max, everything is set.”

He pointed to the big wall clock. It read twenty minutes after eight.

Lutkee asked, “How is it, Max, all right? I set it back an hour and twenty minutes.”

Max nodded. “How about the clock in the barber shop?”

Lutkee said, “It's fixed the same way.”

Max said, “Fine, fine. Okay. Wake up a couple of attendants and the barber. Tell them we're just getting up. Wait a minute.”

Max put his arm on Lutkee's shoulder.

“Have these guys got watches, pocket watches, maybe?”

Lutkee smiled.

“Yes, but I have them locked up in my safe with the rest of their belongings. They have to depend on me and the wall clock for the correct time. Everything is all right, I assure you, Max.”

The drowsy attendants and the barber came out of their rooms grumbling. When they recognized us, they perked up, anticipating large tips. We all had alcohol rubdowns and shaves. Every so often one of us asked the attendants or the barber for the correct time to fix it in their minds. As Maxie planned it, if we were picked up as suspects, we would have plenty of reputable witnesses to the fact that we were miles away from Forty-fourth Street between the hours of eight-twenty and nine-twenty.

When we finished our toilet, each of us threw the attendants and the barber a sawbuck apiece. They were profuse in their thanks. They went back to their rooms.

“Fat Moe's, Max?” Cockeye asked as we piled into the Caddy.

Big Max nodded.

CHAPTER 12

Max unlocked the rear door of our speakeasy. We walked in. With sighs of relief we sat around the table. Fat Moe came in with a tray of double hookers. He beamed over us. He set our drinks down at our elbows. "I heard you guys come in," he said.

Max picked up his drink, swallowed his four ounces of rye in one gulp, sighed with contentment and asked, "Any messages, Moe? Anybody been around?"

Moe looked us over with an understanding eye. He shook his head. "Not a one," and went back to his trade at the front bar.

Max took a handful of Coronas out of the box in the drawer of the table. He tossed us each one. We lit up. We sipped our doubles slowly and smoked our cigars.

We felt in an expansive mood. We had just pulled off a profitable piece of business with just enough excitement in it to leave us quietly elated.

Since Cockeye had not been upstairs during the heist, he was curious about it. Maxie gave him a brief review.

Patsy grinned at me across the table.

"Why don't you tell Cockeye about the tomato you were rassling with? That excited filly had some pair of shafts, hey, Noodles?"

I smiled sheepishly.

Pat continued. "Cockeye, you should have seen the guy's face after Maxie got through with it. Even his wife couldn't look at it except maybe on payday."

With each drink Moe brought in the tension slowly flowed out of us. Each remark seemed clever and hilariously funny.

Yes, we felt exhilarated, like any group of ordinary men after completing a business venture successfully.

"And what a nose on the guy," Maxie said laughing. "It was so long, if it was full of nickels, he could retire." After the laughter subsided, he continued. "You know, this heist was done with real craftsmanship. The Professor would have been proud of us.

"Remember his four points to a successful heist?"

Max enumerated them. "First, the Finger must be reliable. Second, the transportation must be fast and safe. Third, and most important, the action must be quick, hard and brutal. You know," Max reached for another drink, "I almost forgot the fourth point. You must plan in advance a perfect alibi."

He looked around with a satisfied smile. He was looking for approbation.

I winked and said, "Yeh, the Professor taught us a lot. How about chow? Ain't nobody hungry?"

Max said, "Yep, it's a good idea. I forgot all about food."

He sent Cockeye out to Katz's. At the door Cockeye turned and asked, "What kind?"

Patsy called out, "Four hot pastramis for me."

Maxie smiled.

"I'm not very hungry; just two hot pastramis and two hot corned beefs for me."

Cockeye said, "Me for a half dozen hot dogs. How about you, Noodles?"

My mouth watered as I replied, "Two tongues and two hot corned beefs for me."

Waiting for Cockeye to come back with the sandwiches we lapsed into a satisfied silence, smoking and drinking. My thoughts drifted back to the Finger's wife. Maybe I should have dated her? Nah, she's too much for any man, even me. The hell with her kind. I laughed inwardly. Three or four different normal women a week is enough for me. I have plenty of excitement. I stretched out in my chair, satisfied with myself and everything around me. I began daydreaming. I tried to eradicate John's wife from my mind; to make myself relish the thought of the profit on the diamond heist instead. It was no use. My mind snapped back to her passionate antics and her obscene promises. It started me off into a short spasm of quiet giggling.

My companions looked at me curiously.

Maxie said, "What, again? Looks like Noodles is going off his noodle."

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It was a good thing Cockeye came back from Katz's with the sandwiches just then. I felt a real laughing jag coming on. We made a grab for the sandwiches with the same air of anxious, happy excitement as when we were kids. The only difference was that nowadays we had enough do-re-mi to buy all the hot meat sandwiches we could eat. It was a comfortable feeling.

We kept Fat Moe busy bringing in tray after tray of cold beer to wash down the sandwiches. Cockeye wolfed his six hot dogs, took his harmonica out of his pocket, tilted his chair against the wall, tapped the harmonica vigorously as usual, and in a slow tempo softly played "Goodbye, My Coney Island Baby."

Maxie gulped his last bite hurriedly, took a swig of beer and caught Cockeye on the second stanza. His mediocre baritone harmonized perfectly with Cockeye's playing. Everything Cockeye did, he did well. He was a virtuoso with the harmonica. To us, it sounded like a symphony orchestra. Cockeye and Maxie swung into "The Sheik of Araby," then "Dardanella." They stopped singing after awhile. Cockeye continued playing one old ballad after another, bringing on a feeling of nostalgia, for the old days when we were penniless kids, harmonizing together in the Jackson Street park.

Our chairs were tilted comfortably against the wall. Our cigars smelled sweet and aromatic. Our beer tasted just fine. Our bellies were full. Our world was secure and right. Over Big Maxie's face came such a look of contentment and satisfaction as I have seen before on only one face: on the face of a young, passionate widow, whose late elderly husband had been effete for many years, after I had been the first to completely satisfy her.

There was a general air of solid peace and tranquility in the back room of Fat Moe's. One by one we dozed off. The only sound in the room was Cockeye's wheezy snoring. Then like a keen axe in the hands of a lumberjack, the sharp ringing of the phone cut into our peace and left us coldly businesslike and alert.

Max picked up the receiver and snapped, "Yep—yep—yep."

For about two minutes he listened, then he continued with his "Yep —yep." A final "yep" and he hung up.

We looked at him, curious. Max took his time, lit his cigar, blew out a mouthful of heavy smoke, threw the match on the floor and commented casually. "That goddamn kid, Vincent Coll from the Dutchman's mob up in the Bronx, the kid they call the Mad Mick, is on the rampage."

I said sarcastically. "So was that so important? Who the hell is he?"

Maxie said, "That isn't all. The office told me the kid persuaded thirty of the Dutchman's mob into joining him."

Maxie took a puff on his cigar and continued: "The kid swore he would knock off the Dutchman and anyone of the Combination men who got in the way. The Dutchman offered fifty grand to knock the kid off."

I whistled.

Patsy said, "Jesus Christ."

Cockeye jumped up, excited. "Shall I get the Caddy, Max? Do we go into action?" he demanded.

Maxie shook his head.

"Nah. Every mob in town will be competing for that jackpot. That stupid kid has as much chance bucking the Combination as a cow has stopping a forty-car freight train." Maxie chuckled. "And that ain't all."

Patsy asked, "What else? What's the joke, Max?"

"The kid's got a sense of humor. He snatched Big Frenchie and clipped one ear off and sent it down with a note asking eighty grand."

Maxie laughed and continued: "And tomorrow he promised, if he didn't get the dough, he'd send Frenchie's pecker down in a hot dog roll."

I asked, "With or without mustard?"

Max ignored my crack.

He continued: "The office told me just to be on the alert. I guess we sit this one out, unless we get other instructions."

Moe came in with a tray of double hookers. We played Greek rummy with two decks of cards. Cockeye was ahead five hundred bucks after a couple of hours.

I began feeling tired. I pushed my chair back and said, "I'm pooped. Guess I'll hit the hay."

"That's a good idea. Let's all of us pack in and pound the pillow early for a change," Max nodded approvingly.

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"Noodles is going home early to pound a blonde," Cockeye said waggishly.

"No, not tonight," I assured Cockeye as I walked to the door.

"Hey, Noodles," Cockeye called after me.

"Yes?"

"I don't like to get personal, and pry into your private sex life—but—is that true what they say about you?"

I looked at Cockeye, and wasn't sure whether I should feel offended or not. But I was curious to know what they were saying about me. I walked back to the table and sat down.

"Well, Cockeye," I began casually, as I lit a cigar, "you are getting personal, but let's hear it. What do you want to know about my private sex life?"

He acted embarrassed.

"Well they say—" he faltered.

"Go ahead, since when did you become bashful?" I said.

I smiled patronizingly at him.

He started off again. "They say you get yourself a different broad in your place every night in the week."

"A different one every night in the week?" I questioned. "It's gross exaggeration; no, I'm not that good."

I smiled reflectively.

"Maybe a different one every other night might be true."

"Yeh, Noodles, they say you're quite a Casanova," Maxie arched his eyebrows roguishly, "a Broadway Casanova."

"So, what do they call me now? Noodles the Shiv and Broadway Casanova?" I said drily, "That's an awkward title, ain't it?"

We all laughed.

Patsy said, "Even a different broad every other night is pretty good."

He thought awhile.

"Three a week for ten years is—" He looked up at the ceiling to do his mental arithmetic.

He whistled.

"Jesus, it adds up to about 1500 different women."

Maxie commented with a droll inflection. "Noodles is a better man than Solomon was."

"Yeh, I got a bigger flock to pick from," I said drily. There's a million women loose around Broadway every night."

The silly conversation began to pall on me. I got up to go. "But tonight the only thing I will pick up and take to bed with me will be a good book."

"With what book?" Cockeye chaffed, "Horatio Alger's *From Rags to Riches* or *Diamond Dick*?"

I smiled. "That's for you, Cockeye. The Professor graduated me out of that class years ago."

I took a cab to my rooms at the Fortune Hotel. On the way I stopped at a newsstand and picked up all the late papers. I looked through them to see if there was anything in about the heist. There was nothing. Not even a line. I was disappointed. Vaguely I wondered about it. There should have been a story about it.

I was tired. I took a shower and lay in bed thinking about John's wife. An unbelievable character if there ever was one. I wondered what made her that way? Why was she so abnormal sexually? Particularly under such circumstances. Boy oh boy, Peggy was a nymphomaniac, but this one—Jesus—she makes Peggy look like a cloistered nun. I wonder if it's something mental or something physical? Evidently, she gets into that state only when she sees somebody getting beaten, or when she herself gets smacked around. The normal person's reaction to an incident like that would be fear or pain. She registers a terrific sex desire. Yeh, I'll bet it's a short circuit, wires crossed somewhere in her nerve reaction set-up.

I remembered I had a few books somewhere on sex. I looked through the closet where I had all sorts of books stacked away. After awhile I found them, four volumes, written by H. Ellis, and entitled *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. I turned the pages of one volume. I couldn't concentrate too well on what I was reading. As clearly as I could make it out, she was a combination of two perversions: a Sadist, one who gets gratification by committing cruelty to her sex partner, and a Masochist, one who has satisfaction only when she is beaten. According to the book she was both of them. She was a sadomasochist. I had learned something new.

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Books—goddamn, they are marvelous—you can get any kind of knowledge out of a book on any subject, right at your finger tips. No matter what kind you read, even those purely for entertainment, you are bound to learn something. A book has been written on every subject, every phase of life. Yeh, I wonder if anybody will ever write an authentic book about this gangster era, this fabulous period? Something that actually happened, like an army general or a private who writes a first-hand story of the battles he fought in. Wouldn't it be something if a guy like the boss, Frank, kept his memoirs like some generals or big shots in other fields? If his exploits could be published, they would be so fantastic and sensational, they would be unbelievable. Or for that matter I wondered how the things we do would sound in print? Boy, am I lying here thinking like a shmuck, yeh a shmuck with ear laps yet. How can a guy write about the heist we did today without winding up in jail? Or who would believe it happened like that? Then again, people read about such things every day in their newspapers. They know such things take place. But how would it sound actually written by a participant? Yeh, maybe a guy like me, Noodles, creating a literary sensation. Yeh, why not? Plenty of romantic stories have been written about the old time men of violence, men like Jesse James, the Younger brothers, Quantrell and his guerrillas, yeh, and the buccaneers, Captain Kidd, Drake, Hawkins, Morgan and the others. Stories have been written about all of them, stories mellowed by time into swashbuckling, heroic adventures. Instead of the true stories of rape, of torture, of plunder, and of the skinning of victims alive, our exploits should appear as harmless peccadilloes by comparison. Besides, those old time stories were secondhand whereas I could give a first-hand account of what happened. Why not be mob historian? Why not?

I laughed to myself. The idea seemed too ridiculous. How could I write about our illegal doings without implicating Max, Pat, Cockeye and everybody else in the Combination? Just the same, the idea intrigued me. I lay back thinking.

Maybe when the whole story finally comes out in the papers, after a good many years have elapsed, twenty, thirty. I'd better forget it, it's too silly an idea. I'd have to jot things down as they took place. Wouldn't it be something if the cops or somebody got hold of them? Maybe if I put them down in a way that could be understood only by me? Maybe. But if I wrote it as we really acted, thought and spoke, it would be pretty shocking and vulgar to the ordinary guy. What the hell. I could tone it down so that it wouldn't grate the fastidious. But how could I? It wouldn't be and it wouldn't sound authentic. How would some of the gags and the pungent East Side gutter expressions we use sound? Pretty vulgar, I guess. But what the hell, after awhile millions of socialites use the same expressions in their every day speech. We originate them on the East Side, then they use them. I think I'll try it. After all, it would be fun anyway, me, Noodles the shiv from Delancey Street, writing a scholarly, lucid, literary piece. Let's see, what shall I call it? How about *Boswell's Life of Noodles*? Or like Pepys, I'll name it *Noodles' Diary*. Everybody writes books, why shouldn't I? Let's see, how shall I treat it? As a factual, biographical piece? Nah, no good. The actual facts would land me and everybody else in jail. I'll treat it as escapist stuff, omitting time and slightly camouflaging the place. That's it. I'll sort of blend factual happenings into fiction. After I write it, I guess I'd better keep it for twenty years or so. By that time probably the alert newspapers will finally get wind of this fantastic Combine, and I won't really be spilling the beans. After that many years would the statute of limitations apply? Or does it only pertain to civil matters? I'll get myself a law book at Brentano's and look it up.

I lay back in bed thinking of the incidents that would be interesting enough to write about.

Let's see, that incident with Capone and his Chi organization would be something to mention. They thought they were sufficiently powerful, and they stepped out of line. They had foolish ideas that they didn't have to take orders, but they learned differently fast enough. We taught them. Yeh, Capone discovered the only way he could save himself from being knocked off was to get himself arrested on a gun-carrying charge. Luckily for him his emissaries squared things with the Combination in time; even jail was not a safe sanctuary for that big scar-faced blubberhead. Then I could go into how we handled the booze racket. Prohibition? Some horseshit. Booze flowed in from all sides. The Combine chartered ships that were kept anchored outside the three-mile limit, and special speedboats were bought to run the booze in from the ships. Ocean-going liners were docked in isolated Long Island spots, and I could show how the Combine always works smoothly and in cahoots with local police departments all along the line. And about these old East Side docks, how the booze came down from Canada in the hollows of big rolls of paper used in the newspaper industry, and how

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the trucks rolled right on to the piers and loaded whiskey with the United States Custom Inspectors and New York police on guard. I guess nobody would believe how the trucks came across the border from Canada—brazen as hell—and dropped off their cargo at the distributing centers in Detroit and Plattsburg. From those points it was shipped to all parts of the country. I could go into detail on how we went along these truck routes, greasing the palms of the Feds and the Sheriffs, and I could tell about the hi-jacking by local, small-time hoodlums who were ignorant of whom they were bucking. We were sent on educational tours to teach these ignorant yokels lessons in department.

I couldn't fall asleep. I kept on thinking of one incident after another to put into the book. I got off the bed, grabbed a pencil, and began jotting them down.

First I'd tell about the early days of the Combination: how we kept busy picking up loose ends here and there in different parts of the country; how we traveled to independent mobs who operated their own rackets throughout the country. And what we did to them. If they grew big and their income was very large, we stepped in and declared them outlaws. They were made to toe the mark by kicking in most of their revenues, or we took them over completely. On rare occasions the independents, or outlaws, as we called them, defied the Combine, and we put them out of action in the usual way.

I jotted down notes on the slot machine racket. How the machines were wide open in "speaks," night-clubs, drug stores, candy stores. I put down that the number of machines operating in the New York area ran well over five thousand. "Horse-book" was organized and put under a central head.

I mentioned the luxurious gambling houses that were opened all over the country, and how we muscled in on the dog tracks.

I made notes on how the Combination was acquiring immense riches and power, and how it controlled local governments by bribery of officials, through political clubs and stolen elections.

I pictured all the romantic excitement of this era and how we were looked upon with ridiculous admiration, respect and fear. We were not like the old-time illiterates, the "dese, dose and dem guys," the Monk Eastmans, Kid Twists, Kid Droppers, Spanish, Lefty Lou, Gyp the Blood, type of hood.

I wrote about the speakeasies we took over and kept for ourselves, particularly the place we hang out in, the place we call "Fat Moe's." How we brazenly flaunted all authority in its operation by keeping the front door always open to anybody who was anybody and could afford our steep prices. And how we had the best imported and domestic liquors in town.

I pictured the people who patronized the front bar: business men, police officials, politicians, prohibition agents, all the creme de la creme of the East Side. I mentioned how the front bar was out of bounds for the petty thieves, wise guys and all women, regardless of their morals. I explained how our connection and our terrific pay-offs in whiskey and money made the place a real sanctuary. I described the sparseness of furnishings: how the large room was set up with a big heavy table and an accumulation of old comfortable leather armchairs. Its general appearance was of cold, businesslike grimness. I wrote how the back room led into a dark side alley, hemmed in by tenement buildings. In the hot summertime it kept the sun away, and made it dark and dampish cool. We consumed gallons of good cold beer to help us through the hot season. Against the freezing wintertime we had the pounding, hissing steam radiators and our double hookers of good whiskey to keep us comfortable.

We used this back room as a combination office, castle and amusement center. I mentioned the heavy steel doors and the steel shuttered windows, and the three secret exits which we never had occasion to use. I wrote how we used the room as a gymnasium. At times we would strip to our shorts, take the padded mat out of the closet, spread it out on the floor and put gloves on as in the old days in the soup school gym. We would spar or wrestle, especially with holds and blows that were foul in the professional arena. I mentioned the heavy punching bag filled with sand, hanging in one corner which all of us pounded. Max seemed to enjoy practising with a contraption that he always had up his sleeve: a thin, twenty-two calibre revolver that he had attached to a long steel spring. It was tied to the upper part of his arm. He would remove the bullets, and, for hours, from all sorts of positions and angles, he would practise snapping his arm out. He would pull the trigger at the same time that the small gat would spring into the palm of his hand. He had the trick down pat, and was lightning fast. Cockeye, Patsy and I would all stand around him with our Roscoes in our holsters, bullets removed. He would shout, "Go." Before we could put our hands to our guns for the draw, he had his twenty-two aimed at

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us, clicked three times, and he would laugh, "You're all dead."

I reminisced about the day I fooled him as he was practising with the three of us. I had my hands in my pants pocket. He said, "Go." My hand whizzed out of my pocket with the closed knife. I held it to his body and said, "You're dead meat. You got ten inches of steel in your belly, Max." A look of incredulity and respect came over his face. He slapped me on the back and said, "That's a good gimmick, Noodles. Keep practising it. You're getting fast as hell with the shiv."

I told about the days when we just lounged around while Cockeye softly played the harmonica and the rest of us dozed off on a couple of chairs. Other days we drank double hookers and played all sorts of card games.

As the notes grew, it became obvious that we were contented together, attuned to each others' personalities from long years of association. Rarely was there any conflict among us.

I put down on paper in chronological order how we took "Fat Moe's" away from a character called Benny the Bum. The trouble with Benny was that he was a bum without character. He cheated, and bought his whiskey and beer from illegitimate sources. I remember we warned him time and again to get his supplies from our dealers, but he persisted in buying from dealers of ill-repute. I remember how plenty of his dipsomania clientele went blind from his lousy wood alcohol, how here and there some dropped dead in the East Side gutters. And there was his wife, Fanny, the little fat Fanny who lived on the same floor as I did years ago. I laughed when I remembered the toilet incidents with her. And I described her wedding to Benny the Bum. I showed how she was too good for him. He broke her nose finally and deserted her for an eighteen-year-old chippy. We lost our patience with Benny and permanently "ostracized" him from society. Yeh, we sure ostracized him: we took him for a trip into the wilds of the "Borscht Country."

I gave a detailed description of the ride back from that hundred mile spot on Route 17. Patsy was driving, and Cockeye felt musical. He tapped his harmonica with the familiar gesture on his palm, and with a dreamy slowness began an unfamiliar tune. Maxie looked curiously at him for a moment and asked, "What are you playing, Cockeye?"

Cockeye shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. Just playing the way I feel. I guess it's some tune that's running through my mind."

Patsy said sarcastically, "A second Irving Berlin, maybe?"

Cockeye ignored the remark and kept on playing. He made it sound like an organ playing a Bach Cantata. It sounded religious. He played on and on, mile after mile, and the sorrowful dirge seeped into us.

I remembered what flashed through my mind. I looked at Maxie. I could sense that the same idea had entered our minds simultaneously.

"Cockeye is putting the ride of Benny the Bum into music. That's something, hey, Max?" I said.

Maxie bent over, half kidding, and whispered to me, "You're pretty good with the words, Noodles. See what you can do with it."

I took out a pencil and my little black account book. I felt saturated with the melancholy tune. Little by little I started putting down words I thought suited the melody. By the time I had finished, I could actually taste the music, it was that familiar. I handed the notebook to Maxie and kidded him by saying, "Try out my scholarly lyrics."

In a low voice, Maxie sang the words I had written to the tune of Cockeye's playing.

"Oncet there was a bum named Benny,
Scruples he did not have much of any,
One beautiful fourth of July weekend,
We decided justice we would him rend.
In the car, we took him for an airing,
Through the land of borscht and herring.
'Stop. This is the spot.' 'What for?' asked Benny.
'To pick flowers,' we answered, 'for here, there are many.'
We did what we did, then homeward bound.
We looked and looked; Benny the bum was nowheres around.
'Does anybody know the fate that befell my poor Benny?'

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Asked his happy and laughing widow, Fenny.”

I don't know why but the recollection of the song and the whole macabre episode started me off into spasms of giggling. I stopped writing and went to bed. I was tired but not sleepy.

I tossed around in bed trying to forget the book. I began to think of John's wife. Thoughts of her kept me awake, aroused my excitement. What the hell is the matter with me? To keep thinking of that flat-chested piece? Boy, am I getting hot just thinking of her. Lately I get excited at the slightest stimulus. What the hell? Am I going to lie here and do six times six?

I picked up the phone, and told the hotel operator I wanted to talk to Sweeny.

“Yell, Sweeny, the house dick,” I repeated.

He got on the wire.

I said, “I am in the mood, Sweeny. You got something nice sitting around the lobby, something softie, not flat-chested?”

He chuckled. “Yeh, plenty floating around. How many you want? Blonde or brunette?”

I laughed. “I'll leave it to you. Anything that's clean and pretty suits me.

Two minutes later she came in. I lay in bed watching her get undressed.

She was a pretty little thing. Her undergarments were fresh and clean. She crept under the covers.

She wriggled close to me and whispered in my ear, “I need my room rent.” She had a nice apologetic smile when she said it.

“You a chorus girl out of work?” I asked.

“Yes, how did you know, have you seen me in a show?” she asked.

“No, but somehow I guessed it by your general appearance.”

She smiled and sighed, “Gee, you're a smart man. It's tough to get a job these days.”

I said, “Relax, honey, you'll get more than a month's rent. Besides being a smart feller I am the patron saint of all pretty, unemployed chorus girls.”

“You're a cute one,” she said with a grin.

“For that remark you get an extra five,” I said.

She wriggled closer and whispered, “I love you, you great, big, handsome, cute, smart, wonderful patron saint of unemployed chorus girls.”

We both laughed hilariously. We were like old friends. I put the light out. She was round, soft, full chested and hot.

CHAPTER 13

Next day there didn't seem to be anything on the agenda, so we started right in on our Greek rummy. We played for two hours.

Moe came in and said, "Moishe the contractor is outside. Wants to see you guys. He seems to be in trouble. Boy, it looks like he got some going over."

"Moishe?" Max asked doubtfully. "Is he the guy that has a small shop on Thirtieth Street?"

"Yeh, that's the guy," I answered. I remembered him because he lived next house to ours on Delancey Street.

Moishe came in. He certainly looked like he had gotten bounced around all right. He had a bandage around his head and a purple mouse hung on his right eye. His lips were so puffed, he could hardly talk.

Patsy asked maliciously, "What's the matter, Moishe? Wife lump you up?"

I shoved a chair towards him and said, "Sit down, Moishe. Have a drink and tell us your troubles."

He bowed gratefully with the drink in his hand. He said, "Ah," in appreciation after he drank up. Then he sat down with a groan and mumbled through his swollen lips, "Wife trouble? No," shaking his head to Patsy.

Cockeye asked laughingly, "So who decorated you so fancy, your mother-in-law?"

Moishe turned and looked at Cockeye. He shook his head sadly. "Veh is mir," he said. "My mother-in-law I can handle. It's business troubles. I got into an imglick." He rocked back and forth in woe. "It's awful. I borrowed five hundred dollars from Nutchy to meet a payroll. I am so mixed up with interest. I already gave back to Nutchy eight hundred dollars, and he still says I owe him six hundred more. All I complained to him was, 'Enough is enough, Nutch,' and this is what he answered me." He tapped his head and his eye. "Six hundred more, he said, or he would break both my hands and feet. What can I do?"

He looked helplessly at us as he continued rocking back and forth in misery. "I ask you for protection. I don't want to go to the police. I'm afraid to go."

"How did you happen to come to us?" I questioned.

"I told my troubles to the leader from the Tammany Club, he said maybe you boys would help me."

He looked at our faces trying to read sympathy in them. He tried a pathetic pleading and flattery.

"Everybody says you're such fine fellows, maybe you boys can help me? Please? Talk to Mr. Nutchy to stop hitting me, maybe?"

Cockeye doubled up with laughter.

"Good old Nutch. That's Nutchy, the Shylock from Thirty-First Street, all right. He has no heart."

The old man stared at Cockeye. He was confused and hurt at his laughter.

Maxie reassured him. "You did right by coming to us, Moishe. Never go to the police. Nutchy buys them off with a charlotte russe. They won't help you."

Patsy said, "I thought Frank sent word around town for them Shy-locks to pipe down."

I said, "Yeh, so I heard. But this Nutch is greedy. He don't take orders, it seems."

"They stink on ice," Patsy said, "all them Shylocks."

"Yep, it's a lousy racket," Max agreed. "It gives every other racket a bad name. Why the hell don't they cut it out?"

"For the big dough that's in it," I said.

"Yep, I guess so," Max said. "What do them bastards charge for a loan, about a thousand percent interest, ain't it?"

"Yeh, even more than that. How they compute their interest, nobody knows," I said. "They charge interest on top of interest. At the end of a year it could total ten thousand percent."

"Them bums want more than their pound of flesh," Patsy said. "They're worse than that guy, the original Shylock from Venice."

I looked at Patsy. I was surprised at the way he put it. I wondered what he implied. I said, "Just for the record, Patsy old lad, this Nutch is an Italian."

Patsy laughed at me, "I knew he was a wop. I'm surprised at you, Noodles. A bastard is a bastard no matter

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what he is.”

Maxie said, “Yep, we're all bastards. You're getting too sensitive, Noodles.”

“Yeh, I guess so,” I said.

I smiled over at Patsy. He gave me a wink.

“How come you businessmen up in the garment center borrow from Shylocks?” Max asked. “Aren't there enough banks to borrow from?”

The old man looked at Maxie in embarrassment. He seemed ashamed of the reasons that led to his present predicament.

“No collateral, hey, Moishe?” I asked.

“Yes, I got no rating, no nothing,” he mumbled.

“What kind of business are you in?” I asked.

“I'm a zipper contractor; you know, an assembler.”

“Any dough in it?” Max asked.

The old man shrugged his shoulders. “How can I make money, fighting for business against a feller with fifty million dollars like Mr. Talon? He has better machines. He makes a better product. He buys cheaper. He sells cheaper. He gives thirty and sixty days credit to his customers. My customers want the same credit, so I sell the bills receivable to factors. They take away the little profit I make. Then I'm desperate. I need money. I mortgage the little machinery I have to another factor. I'm all right for a week. Then I'm desperate again. The telephone company is going to stop my telephone. The landlord wants his rent. I need goods to work on. I got to pay Ruby and Itzik, my workers. And I got to bring home a piece of bread to my wife and children, too, no? Oy, ziz bitter, bitter.”

He swayed back and forth, holding his head. “Now it's this imglick with Nutch. What can I do? Jump off the roof?”

“The age-old plight of the small businessman,” I murmured. “Equal opportunities for the Moishes and Talons of the world.”

Max whispered to me, “This Nutch don't take orders. Then maybe we got to give him a working over? That way it's not too good either, if we can avoid it.”

He pursed his lips in thought for a moment. “Maybe we'll handle him another way. Tell me, Moishe,” Max asked, “has this Nutch got plenty of kupper?”

“Yeah. I think so, Mr. Max. They say he has heavy kupper. He lends out thousands and thousands every day.”

“Okay,” Maxie said. He made a quick decision. “Seein' he don't take orders, I'll give it to the bastard where it hurts him the most—in the pocketbook. How much does he say is coming to him, Moishe?”

“Six hundred dollars,” he answered.

Maxie leaned over, whispered to Cockeye and handed him a key. I wondered what Max was up to. Cockeye looked at Maxie in disapproval and shrugged his shoulders. He took the key and went out.

Max leaned over and whispered to Pat and me. “I'm going to give Nutch a friggin. I'll have Jake and Pipy work a diamond switch on him.”

He looked at me for approval.

I chuckled. “Do you think he'll fall for it?”

Max shrugged. “We'll try, what have we got to lose?”

Pat and I nodded assent.

He turned to our guest. “Have a drink, Moishe. When Cockeye comes back, I'll straighten you out.”

Maxie patted him on the back quietly.

Moishe said, “Thank you, Mr. Max.” He sipped his drink slowly. He looked at us from his troubled eyes. We went back to our game with Moishe sitting nervously by, watching.

Half-hour later Cockeye came back, handed Maxie the key and a small crumpled piece of tissue. Max unwrapped it. A large glittering stone fell on the table. One of our stones from the diamond heist. Maxie handed it to Moishe.

“Here, take this stone, Moishe. It's worth at least two grand. Give it to Nutch. Tell him your good friend Jake gave it to you. Jake has no cash but lots of diamonds. Besides being payment for what you owe him,

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make Nutch give you at least a few hundred dollars in cash. You understand what I'm saying?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, yes, I understand."

"You keep the cash he gives you, that's for yourself."

Moishe looked his gratitude. "Someday I pay it back."

"Forget about it," Max said. "I guarantee his eyes will pop out when he sees the stone."

Maxie smiled at the thought. "Now pay attention, Moishe. This is important. He will ask you where you got it. Now remember the name. You tell him you got it from Jake the Goniff from Broome Street. He probably knows him well. Tell him that Jake's got more to sell. He's looking for a buyer, to sell cheap. Do you understand?"

Poor old Moishe. He sat there nodding his head, trying to hold the tears of gratitude out of his eyes.

He finally blubbered, "How can I thank you, Mr. Max? You're so good to everybody. God bless you."

Maxie said gruffly, "Never mind the thanks. Just remember to tell Nutch, Jake the Goniff gave you the stone, and he's got plenty more he wants to sell cheap. That's the important thing."

Moishe nodded his head humbly.

"Yeah. I won't forget. I'll tell him that I got it from Jake the Goniff from Broome Street, Mr. Max."

Maxie patted him on the back and walked him to the door.

He turned to Cockeye. "Dig up Jake and Pipy and tell them I want to see them right away."

Cockeye went out on his errand. We continued our card game.

About an hour later, Cockeye walked in followed by Jake the Goniff, Pipy and Goo-Goo. Maxie smiled.

"I see you got your whole mob with you, Jake."

"Do you mind, Max?" Jake asked.

"Do I mind? Since when did you get so polite? Sit down and have a hooker."

At the invitation Jake and his friends broke into smiles. They drank up.

Patsy ribbed, "Hey, Jake, you mean to say you come around here without a poem or a riddle?"

Jake broke into a grin. "Yeah, Pat, I was just going to tell one."

"What kind of poem, from Broome or Delancey Street?" Cockeye asked.

"My own poem. I made it up myself."

Jake's pride was hurt. "It's a combination poem and riddle."

"Okay, let's get it over with," Max said.

Jake did not need any further invitation. He recited with gestures.

"The postman came the first of May.

The fireman came the following day.

Nine months later there was hell to pay.

Who fired the first shot, the blue or the grey?"

Jake anxiously awaited my criticism.

"Not bad if you made it up yourself."

"Honest I did," Jake said seriously.

"Okay, Jake, you know that everything you've got you stole from somebody else, including your poems."

Maxie took his roll out, peeled off three C notes and tossed them one apiece. "Here's a retainer, boys," he said. They took the dough eagerly.

Jake beaming from ear to ear said, "Thanks, Maxie, this sure comes in handy. I'm as flat as a titless broad. What's up? What's percolating, Max?"

"You guys know Nutchy the Shylock?"

"Yeh, we know the bastard. He's no good," Jake replied. "He's the kind of guy who talks through both sides of his mouth and whistles 'I frig you truly.' I tried to hit him up some time ago. 'No dice,' he said. He don't do business with no goniffs, only honest people. He's tighter than the rear of a fat woman in slacks."

"Yeh," Pipy cut in, "he stinks on ice. We know him. He'd sell his grandmother for a Hershey bar."

"With or without almonds?" Cockeye asked.

"He goes in for hair pie," Goo-Goo added.

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“Okay, Okay, cut it,” Maxie said. “You guys can give a guy a pretty good recommendation. Okay. Pay attention. Nutchy is going to get in touch with you boys. Does he know where you hang out, Jake?”

“Everybody knows Jake the Goniff hangs out on Broome Street,” he proudly replied. “What’s the setup?”

Maxie explained, “You guys are supposed to have given Moishe, the dress contractor, a diamond worth two G’s because he was in trouble and he is a friend of yours. Now get this. You fellows were supposed to have been on a heist. You clipped a hundred grand worth of sparklers, and you’re looking to unload the stuff. Get it?”

The Goniff seemed puzzled. “Yeh, but where’s the gimmick?”

“The gimmick is this,” Maxie leaned over the table tensely. “Pipy pulls a switcheroo on Nutchy, get it? I’ll supply the setups!”

Jake the Goniff chuckled delightedly as he slapped Pipy on the back. “Fast Fingers Pipy is a natural to take that Nutchy with a switcheroo. How much shall we ask Nutch for the rocks?”

“Twenty grand,” Maxie replied.

“I’m dying to see that Nutchy’s face when he finds out he got clipped for twenty grand,” Pipy laughed.

“After Nutchy contacts you, come right over here, and I’ll have everything ready for you guys,” Maxie instructed.

After a few more hookers they left, feeling pretty good.

We went over to Luigi’s and had a good Italian dinner.

While we were eating, a kid came in with the late editions. Max bought a paper. It carried the entire story. We wondered why the story was held over one day. “DARING DAYLIGHT DIAMOND ROBBERY.” The story said that one hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of diamonds had been stolen and that seven masked men had been involved in the stickup, each one carrying a machine gun, making their getaway in two big cars.

I said smiling, “A typical eyewitness version. They had some mob in on that heist. They must have tripped over each other.”

Patsy laughed. “I wonder if it was anyone we know.”

“Not likely,” Max said mockingly. “How would we know any cheap heist men?”

Next morning, as Moe was fixing ham steaks and eggs for our breakfast to go with hot bagels from Ratners’, Jake the Goniff, Pipy and Goo–Goo walked in elated.

“Okay,” Jake said. “Nutchy got in touch with us. After that goddamn story in the papers, he fell for it, balls and all.”

“Yeh, especially when he kept looking at the sparkler Moishe gave him, and I said we got a bagful, and we’d give him the load for twenty grand,” Pip chuckled. “He wants to make the deal up on some flat at West Fifty–first Street at eight o’clock tonight. Is that okay, Max?”

“Yep, it’s okay,” Max said, his mouth full of ham and eggs. “You boys want something to eat?”

“Yeh, yeh. Kosher ham, that’s my favorite breakfast fruit,” Jake said.

They sat down with us. Moe cut up some more ham and tossed it on the griddle.

We washed our breakfast down with double hookers. Maxie tossed us each a Corona Corona.

As we lit up he said, “Cockeye, you go over to Sammy the jeweler on Grand Street and tell him I want fifty nice–size zircons, and tell him to give you two absolutely the same little cotton bags with draw strings. Now remember, they positively must be two. And, some tissue papers. Okay? You got it?”

“Yeh, yeh, I got it,” Cockeye grumbled. He went out puffing his cigar. Maxie turned to Patsy and handed him a key.

“You know what I want you to get in Eddie’s safe?”

Patsy nodded and said, “Okay, I get it,” and left.

“You know, Maxie, that flat we got the date with Nutchy up on West Fifty–first Street belongs to a guy named Oscar,” Jake said.

“Yeh, Max,” Pipy cut in. “I think that’s Oscar, the fence.”

“Well, it adds up,” I said. “Nutchy probably is going to sell it to this fence.”

“Yeh, I’ll bet,” Jake said. “Boy, he’s sure a sharp operator, that Nutch.”

“He’s sharp, all right, sharp as a matzo and twice as crumby,” Maxie said drily.

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Moe continued bringing in double hookers and the party got a little congenial. Time went quickly. Before we knew it, Cockeye came in from Sammy's with the zircons and the two little bags. Max spilled them on the table.

"Jesus! They sparkle like the real McCoy," Jake commented.

"Yeh. They're pretty good imitations," I said.

Patsy came in shortly and took envelopes out of his pockets. Maxie tore open the little envelopes and put the diamonds in a little pile on the table. Pipy leaned over closer.

Maxie turned to Pipy and said, "No demonstrations of your art, Pipy boy. Don't let your fast fingers play tricks, or I break them off one by one. Okay?" Maxie gave me a wink. He began wrapping each stone individually in tissue paper. Pipy looked hurt.

"After all these years," he said. "You know, Max, I wouldn't clip you."

Maxie continued wrapping the stones and putting them in the little cotton bags.

"I just wanted to remind you, that's all."

I helped Maxie get the bag with the genuine stones ready. We fixed up the zircons in the same way. I put both bags on the table.

I said, "Hey, Pip. Let's see how good you are, give us a demonstration."

Pipy picked up the bag of imitations and left the real bag of diamonds on the table. He walked around nonchalantly, then walked slowly back to the table. He picked up a glass and put it down close to the bag of genuine diamonds. He sat down and smiled.

"Well? What the hell you waiting for?" Max asked, puzzled.

We all looked at Pipy. We, too, were puzzled.

"Okay," Pipy replied, "they're switched."

Incredulous, I examined the bag on the table.

"Goddamn," I said admiringly. "How'd you do it?"

I looked again to make certain it was no mistake. Pipy had switched the phonies for the genuine. I repeated, "How did you do it?"

"Like this." Pipy pushed an ashtray near the bag, flipped his cigar ashes in. There was an almost imperceptible flash of a hand and Pipy turned around and smiled. "Simple."

Doubtfully Maxie walked over and looked in the bag. A look of respect came over his face. "You have developed into a real artist, Pipy boy."

Pipy said proudly, "What did you think? Don't forget, I'm a soup school graduate."

"Yeh," Jake said sarcastically. "A graduate of Sing Sing, too."

"And a post-graduate, too," Goo-Goo cut in. "He's been up the river so many times, we call him showboat."

Pipy snorted, "That's an old Joe Miller gag."

We went back to our game. Pipy kept practising the switcheroo.

I was paying more attention to Pipy than to the card game. His long, deft fingers fascinated me. I have seen pickpockets and switch artists in action, but this Pip was a master. I was watching a superior craftsman in action.

They hung around until it was time for them to go to their appointment with Nutch at Oscar's flat on Fifty-first Street.

As they were leaving, Max said, "If you guys run into any trouble, call up. Well be waiting here until you get back. Make it a snappy deal."

"There won't be no trouble. We can handle this Nutchy," Jake spoke with confidence. They swaggered out.

Time passed. We were beginning to get slightly anxious. I took the whetstone out of the table drawer, spit on it, and began drawing my knife slowly back and forth across it. I had acquired the sure movements of a barber sharpening his razor. Cockeye took out his harmonica and played "We took Bennie for a ride in the country." Patsy took out his rod. He had a ridiculous habit of wiping each bullet carefully with his fresh handkerchief. Maxie paced up and down, puffing on a cigar.

Patsy looked up from what he was doing and growled, "Maybe we should have gone along with them."

"Jake, Pip and Goo-Goo can take care of themselves," I said.

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“We'll wait another twenty minutes, then we'll take a look–see,” Max said.

Thirty minutes passed. I was just about to say to Max, “How about it,” when they walked jauntily in, wreathed in smiles. You didn't have to be a mind reader to realize that everything had gone according to plan.

Jake sang out, “It was a pip for Pipy. Even we didn't see when he did it.”

“It was nothing at all,” Pipy waved his hand airily. “It was as easy as giving five bucks to a two–buck whore. I took the McCoy out,” Pipy continued. “Nutchy looked at them, whistled and said, 'Some sparklers.' Then he took them in the rear bedroom. I guess Oscar, the fence, was in there. We heard some whispering. Then Nutchy comes out without the bag and says, 'Okay. I give you guys fifteen grand!' I make out like I'm sore. I say, 'Give me the rocks back, bastard, we agreed on twenty grand.' Nutchy says, 'Don't get sore, Pip, I was only trying. You know business is business.' Then Jake grabbed Nutchy by the throat and says, 'That's shit for the birds. They go for it, not me. You bring the rocks back. Then we talk.' So Nutchy runs in the bedroom, scared as hell, gets the rocks, and puts the bag on the table. I bend over to look in the bag. That's when I did the switcheroo. He finally shells out the twenty grand, and we take a powder.”

Pipy tossed the bag and the twenty grand on the table. Maxie picked up the bag to examine the contents. He nodded his head with satisfaction. He counted the money. He smiled.

“Twenty grand is correct. I knew you guys had the character for a job like this.”

He peeled off six grand and handed them two grand apiece.

He asked, “How's this, okay?” Jake, Pipy and Goo–Goo acted overcome with delight.

“That's sure swell, Max,” Pipy said.

“One thing, Max. I laid out a buck and a half for a hack to get down here,” Jake said it with an embarrassed smile.

“Okay, Jakie boy, with you I see business is business.” Max chuckled and tossed Jake an extra C note. He said, “Buy your kids some charlotte russes.”

Jake pocketed the money with a happy grin.

We had a few rounds of doubles. Then they said “So long” and left. We began a game of Greek rummy. Nobody had his mind on it. We played listlessly.

I yawned and said, “How about a little relaxation for us tired businessmen?”

“Okay by me,” Max said. “What will it be?”

“How about Eddie's Hotel with hot and cold running blond maid service?” Cockeye asked eagerly. “You know, a little party to celebrate.”

“I could depend on you to ask for that,” Max smiled. He called out to Fat Moe. “If anything important comes up, contact us at Eddie's Place.”

We threw our cards on the table and drove to Eddie's Hotel. First Max put the diamonds back in our compartment in the hotel safe. Then we went upstairs to make ourselves comfortable while Eddie and Max made arrangements for the party.

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Next day when we walked into the back room, Moe called out, “I got about ten calls last night one right after the other from the same party. He wouldn't leave his name, only his phone number. He said it was very important. You better call him right up.”

Maxie looked doubtfully at the number and said, “I wonder who the bum is? Who the hell could have given him our phone number? Call him, Cockeye.”

Cockeye went over to the phone.

Max said, “Why didn't you contact us at Eddie's last night?”

“The guy wouldn't state his business so I didn't want to bother you guys,” Fat Moe replied.

Cockeye came back to the table shrugging his shoulders. “The guy I just spoke to said he called the boss at Hot Springs and got our number. He's got a 'guest' he has to get rid of and he wants to get rid of him, bad. He said to call the boss if we wanted to verify.”

“Did he give his name?” Max asked.

“No. Only his address on West Fifty-first Street, apartment 4D. He said to please come right away, the guest is beginning to smell a little ripe already.”

Max and I exchanged startled glances.

Max said, “Did you ask the guy if he has a rug on the floor?”

“Yeah. He said he has a wall-to-wall.”

Maxie said, “Okay, Cockeye. You go over to Klemy, the rug cleaner, and tell him I want to borrow his truck for awhile. And don't forget to get a couple of uniforms from him. Then meet us with the truck. We'll be at this guy's apartment. You got the address okay?”

Cockeye nodded and grumbled, “Always the errand boy.”

We shot up to the address on West Fifty-first Street, went up in the elevator to the fourth floor and rang the bell of apartment 4D.

Behind the door a slow, grating, insultingly polite voice called, “Who's there?”

Maxie gave his name. The door opened slowly. Maxie edged in cautiously with his Roscoe ready. I was behind him, my hand on my shiv. Pat was at my back, his rod out. There was a fat middle-aged guy standing behind the door, a big smile on his face.

“Come in, gentlemen,” he said coolly. “Why all the display of hardware?”

Maxie looked around and asked, “Hardware bother you? Where's the guest?”

The guy motioned to the back room.

“The stiff is in there.” He smiled. “No, nothing bothers me.”

I said, “You called Hot Springs?”

The fat guy replied, “Yeh. I first tried New Orleans.” He smiled knowingly. “P.C. gave me the Hot Springs number. That's how I got in touch with you fellows. I heard a lot about you.” Maxie raised his eyebrow questioningly. Fat Stuff continued in his grating, too sweet voice, “Oh, don't misunderstand me. I heard nothing but good about you boys—very capable and all that sort of stuff. It's a pleasure to finally meet you.” He stuck his hand out. “My name is Oscar Antwerp. You boys heard of me?”

He said it as if he would be deeply disappointed if we had not.

“Yeh, we heard of you. You're Oscar, the fence,” I said.

Oscar beamed proudly. “Yes. That's me, Fat Oscar, the biggest fence in New York. I buy anything that's valuable, anything but this crap.”

He pointed to our little cotton bag disdainfully.

I said innocently, “What's in there?”

Fat Oscar opened the bag and poured the zircons on the table. “Some beautiful sparklers,” Patsy commented.

Oscar shook his head. “Nice imitations worth about fifty bucks. The stiff is Nutchy, the Shylock. Ever hear of him?”

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Maxie shook his head and asked innocently, “No, who is he?”

“Never heard of that bum,” Patsy added.

“Well, anyway,” Oscar continued, “this Nutchy comes up to my apartment and tells me he contacted the guys who did that heist on Forty–fifth Street the other day, that hundred and fifty thousand dollar heist that was in all the papers. This Nutch told me he made arrangements to buy the swag from these guys. I told him I didn't care what he paid for it, I would give him as high as twenty percent of the value of the stones. This is what happened.

“I'm in the bedroom looking through the keyhole. Three guys come in, show a bag of diamonds to Nutchy. Nutchy comes in to me; I look them over through my glass. They are fine, clear stones, but they are not worth a hundred and fifty grand. I tell Nutch they are worth ninety grand legit, and I would pay him eighteen because they're pretty hot. He says he'd lose money on eighteen; he promised these guys twenty. Finally I said, “Okay, I'll give you twenty–two.” He says it's a deal. He went back to these guys, and I heard them arguing. He was trying to chisel them down to fifteen thousand. It didn't work. He comes running in to me for the stones and brings the bag of them out to these guys. I see through the keyhole he pays them the twenty grand, and they leave.

“Then I walk out to Nutch. He's not too happy over his two grand profit. I count out my twenty–two thousand, but I'm careful on a deal like this. It's easy for a guy to clip a few stones, you know, so I thought I would count them. I look in the bag. Immediately, I see they are phonies. I say to Nutchy, 'What are you trying to do? Pull my pudding? These are phonies.' Nutchy almost dropped dead.

“He made a grab for my dough. I warned him to take his hands off the dough. That lousy bastard accused me of working a switcheroo. Me! With my reputation of honest dealing!

“I said, 'Nutchy, either you are trying to rook me or these three guys gave you a friggin. You better take the phonies and clear out.' Then he made a grab for my twenty–two grand again. This is ironic, boys.” Fat Stuff chuckled, his belly bouncing. “Instead of twenty–two Nutchy got forty–five, meaning this.” The fat guy opened his jacket and showed us his gun under his armpit. It was the same make we carried.

We walked into the bedroom. There lay Nutch with a big hole in his head, all covered with blood. The fat guy laughed again.

“What will it cost me to get rid of this stiff?”

He kept on chuckling as if the episode was some kind of a joke. I couldn't make the guy out.

“Five grand,” Maxie replied.

He stopped laughing, a sad unhappy expression spread on his face.

“That's pretty steep,” Oscar said. “I understand Combination members pay only three grand for the same services.”

“Okay, okay,” Maxie said, “if it will make you any happier.”

“Yes, it will make me a great deal happier.”

He began his weird chuckle again.

The Fat guy peeled three grand off a roll large enough to gag Joe E. Brown.

He said, “I wonder if I can deduct this from my income tax?”

“Yeh,” I said drily. “You can enter this item under operating losses.”

Fat Belly emitted a hearty guffaw. “You fellows certainly tickle a guy—”

Maxie looked at the prostrate figure. “That Nutchy was so crooked, we will have to put him in the ground with a corkscrew,” he said.

The fat guy went into hysterics. He recovered in a few minutes.

“How are you boys going to remove this stiff?” Oscar asked.

“You'll see. I guarantee my clients complete satisfaction,” Maxie said.

Again Fat Belly guffawed as if Maxie's remark was the most brilliant witticism he ever heard.

Sarcastically I said, “You're a jolly one, aren't you?”

The minute I had said it, I regretted it. He chuckled for a full five minutes. To stop his hilarity I asked him if he had any liquor around.

Fat took out a bottle of Scotch and a bottle of soda. He drank only the soda. We drank most of the Scotch.

He was looking at us in admiration. “You boys can certainly put that stuff away fast.”

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I said, "We were brought up on the stuff. We were weaned with five gallon tins of two hundred proof bootleg alky."

Again Fat Oscar burst into hilarious laughter. He began to annoy me to death.

I murmured to Max, "If this Fat bastard keeps this up, we'll have two stiffs to bury."

The doorbell rang. Cockeye came in dressed in a truckman's outfit. He carried an extra uniform for Patsy. On the shirt was the lettering, "Rug Cleaners." In a mock businesslike tone, Cockeye asked, "How many rugs, Madame?"

"Quit the clowning," Max said sharply. "We got work to do."

With professional dispatch we moved the furniture, rolled up the rug with Nutchy in the middle, and tied both ends. Patsy put on the extra uniform. He and Cockeye carried the rug, with Nutch inside, downstairs into the truck. Max and I finished the bottle of Scotch.

As we were about to leave, Fat Oscar asked, "Do I get the rug back? It's an expensive Chinese import."

"Yep. Cleaned like new," Maxie replied. "Legitimate rug cleaners will deliver it back in ten days, don't worry."

He started his odd chuckling again. I hurried out before I lost my temper and did something unnecessary.

We went downtown to the funeral parlors. Pat and Cockeye were already there. They were fixing Nutch for burial. They had him in the cheapest pine box we carried. Max sent Cockeye over to Pete, the printer, on Thompson Street for the necessary papers. Maxie called the cemetery to get the hole ready. I called up for a few of our professional mourners. In thirty minutes flat Nutch was on his way.

"He got a fast brush-off," Max said.

"He got a better funeral than he ever deserved," Pat said.

I asked Cockeye, "What name was on the burial certificate? Just for our own records."

"I couldn't pronounce it," Cockeye answered. "Pete said it was his brother-in-law's name, and he kept saying as he filled it out, 'I hope, I hope.'"

"Then the hell with it," I said. "That one is entirely off the record."

The minute we entered our "office," Fat Moe came in with a full tray of drinks and the message that the main office had called.

"They want you to call right back. They said it was important."

Maxie picked up the phone. On our end, as usual, all we could hear was Maxie's noncommittal, "Yep. Yep." Finally he hung up. He walked slowly over to the table, sat down with a preoccupied air, three pairs of questioning eyes on him. Max picked up his double hooker, shook it and swallowed it down in one gulp.

"It was nothing important," he said. "There's nothing stirrin' around town, at least as far as we're concerned. The only thing percolatin' is that goddamn kid, Vincent Coll. He got his fifty grand from the Combination and they got Frenchie back in one piece."

"Minus one ear," I said.

Maxie smiled. "Stop splitting hairs, Noodles. Well, anyway, the office said the Mad Mick is on the warpath again looking for more big shots to snatch."

Max smiled again. "I guess the Kid figures he has got himself a good racket, snatching big shots. So far, he's ahead of the game. His score is one fifty thousand dollar snatch and five small-fry killings."

"Don't we get in this game, Max," I asked, "to get this kid Vincent?"

Maxie replied, "No. The office has five hundred torpedoes out gunning for him already. They don't need us. Besides, they contacted Shorty, Vincent's right-hand man. Shorty sent word to ask if he's eligible for the Dutchman's reward. The office said it's open season for everybody. Anybody can enter the contest, so it's just a matter of a day or two. Shorty is the closest to the prize. I guess he'll knock it off."

Patsy seemed disappointed. "So, no action for us?"

Maxie shook his head. "Our instructions are to sit tight. It's a good thing anyway. I expect that guy John today."

"What's he coming for? To buy the stones back for the insurance company?" I asked.

"Yep," Maxie answered. "That reminds me."

He turned to Cockeye. "Get the stones out of Eddie's safe."

He tossed him the keys. Cockeye walked out grumbling. He came back about forty minutes later, and

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tossed the small bag of diamonds to Max. Max put them in his pocket without comment. Then he tilted his chair back, put his feet on the table, pushed his hat over his eyes and went to sleep. Like a vaudeville team, Patsy and Cockeye followed his example.

The taste of the Scotch I had had at the Fat guy's place lingered on my tongue. We rarely drank Scotch; rye was our drink. I went to the bar and picked up a sealed bottle of King's Ransom. I took it back to the table. I opened it and poured a glass full. Slowly I emptied the glass. I relished the flavor. I poured another and drank it down. I decided it was good Scotch whiskey. I poured another. I sat drinking and watching my companions.

In boredom I took the whetstone out of the table drawer, and began to sharpen my knife. The motion of the knife relaxed me. It was quiet in Moe's back room; the only sounds were Cockeye's rasping snore and the rasping noise of my knife on the whetstone.

I don't know how long they slept. I do know I drank glass after glass of Scotch whiskey, and drew my knife back and forth tirelessly on the stone.

When Moe finally came in to the back room, he interrupted my drinking, my knife sharpening and their siesta. He stood looking down at me in a peculiar way. He picked up the bottle, whistled, and put the bottle down. Then I saw it was almost empty.

He looked at me again and said, "Sorry to wake you guys up, but there's a gent outside who says his name is John. He said you were expecting him. I asked him for his last name, he said it was 'Doe.' What is he, kidding? Okay to let him in?"

Maxie stretched his arms and yawned. "Yep, it's okay. Let him in."

I watched with interest as a tall, thin, middle-aged man walked briskly in. He was carrying a brief case. I felt an immediate antipathy for him though I'd never seen him before. And it wasn't because he was the husband of that pervert, Betty, either. He reminded me of someone I had disliked years back. Yeh, that was it: he reminded me of that goddamn landlord of the tenement we had lived in on Delancey Street. He had the same shifty eyes, similar features, and the same neat military mustache. Even his clothes reminded me of the landlord: a Homburg tilted at a rakish angle, a white boutonniere in the lapel of his dark, form-fitting coat. He looked us over with the same supercilious air, as if he owned the whole world. It was the white boutonniere in his lapel that got me.

Maxie introduced him as Mr. John Doe.

He had a haughty, mechanical smile. Even the way he stuck his hand out was insulting. I was wondering who this bastard thought he was. Obviously Maxie knew him well.

Max said, "Have a drink, John."

I never heard anybody answer "No" in such a disdainful manner. I couldn't help thinking, the sonofabitch acts as if we're not good enough to drink with. I looked at Max. For the moment, he, too, appeared perturbed at our visitor's manner, but he was able to keep control of himself. I was beginning to lose my temper fast.

To appear friendly, Max asked, "How's the insurance business, John?"

"Let's dispense with unnecessary conversation and get down to business," was the curt reply.

Boy, that remark got me all steamed up. I felt like walking over and smacking him right in his insolent puss. I looked at my companions. They were staring coldly at him. Strange, they weren't as angry as I was. So this was the insurance executive from whom we had been receiving tips for lucrative heists? This was the Judas who betrayed his friends and business associates for the proverbial thirty pieces of silver? He and his prize-package of a wife. It's ironic, I thought. I'll bet, besides everything else, he looks down on us on account of our East Side background, and I'll bet he looks on himself as a legit and honest businessman, an honorable member of society. The sanctimonious bastard!

Boy, how many crumbs do we come in contact with who have this same holier-than-thou attitude. Whores, all of them. You can buy them all with a charlotte russe. Employers and union leaders who exploit and sell out labor. Lice in public office who take graft and betray their trust. Men in the courts who practice law and betray their clients. Profiteering big businessmen who mulct the poor ignorant masses with legal chicanery.

A furious indignation burned inside of me. I knew for a guy like me my thoughts were preposterous. But I couldn't control myself. I kept on thinking in the same vein.

Suddenly I remembered our furniture piled up in the street, my mother crying in shame and despair and

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how I went over to one of the men who was carrying our furniture. All I did was tap him on the arm and say, "Please, mister, please."

He snarled at me, "Beat it, you stinkin' little Jew."

And this sanctimonious bastard of an executive in a big insurance company was the image of that bastard landlord. Insurance companies, what the hell are they? Just gigantic legal bookies. They make book that you won't die until a certain age, or that you won't have a fire. They'll make book on anything.

I was working myself into a rage. I had my right hand in my pants pocket, one finger feeling for the button on my knife. I was thinking, if I pulled the knife, pressed the button and dug the six-inch switchblade deep into his windpipe with one fast upsweep, boy would that sonofabitch lose that contemptuous look on his face fast! Look at that sonofabitch. He's staring at me. I bet he feels all the hate I have for him. Would he make a distinguished looking corpse with that flower in his lapel. Yeh, this consort of a masochist would look good laid out nice and cozy in a coffin.

I took a step closer to him. My blood pressure was mounting. I could feel the blood pounding in my head. I was in an angry, drunken fog. The cold steel of the switch-blade felt anxious to rip into him. The bastard was staring with panic in his eyes. I felt I had him. He was paralyzed with fear. I stepped in closer. I pressed the button. The blade shot open. The click and flash of the blade hypnotized him. I had it almost at his throat.

"No surgery on this patient, Noodles." Maxie grabbed my arm. What the hell is eating you all of a sudden?" he asked.

I was in a sweat. I sat down. Yeh, what the hell was the matter with me? Max tossed me a Corona. I caught it, bit off the end, fumbled for a match, with the bum staring at me all the time. Dammit, I felt frustrated. I got the shakes all over. I better get my mind off him. I must be cracking up. The hell with him. What's the matter with me? I'm getting to be a sadistic bully or something.

Patsy leaned over with a light for my cigar. He whispered, "What's eating you, Noodles?"

How could I go into a long explanation about how this guy symbolized—what?—one of my pet hates? Maybe this guy Freud could explain it. I couldn't. Then something whispered in me, "You're drunk, you bastard, you're drunk."

I just answered, "He rubs me the wrong way."

Patsy replied, "Me, too."

The insurance guy sat down. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead with a quivering hand. Maxie pushed a double hooker towards him. He picked it up, murmuring a low and respectful, "Thanks, Max." His unsteady hand spilled half the liquor before the glass reached his lips.

Max said complacently, "O.K., John. 'Tauchess offen tish.'"

Evidently he understood he was to put it on the table. He opened his briefcase and took out a thick manila envelope.

Max opened it, spread out on the table thirty bundles of money which were individually wrapped with a narrow strip of bank paper, bearing the stamp "One Thousand Dollars." He took the bag of diamonds out of his pocket and tossed it toward the insurance man.

"One stone short. It got lost in the shuffle. Okay, John?"

I was waiting for him to complain or make a crack. But he didn't. He meekly nodded his head. His entire attitude had changed. His pose of the upper class visiting the riffraff was gone. Maxie pushed three bundles of bills toward him.

"Here's your ten percent, John."

"Thanks very much, Max."

His smile and bow included all of us, like an obsequious waiter receiving a large tip.

Then, after another drink, he regained some of his composure. He put his three thousand into his briefcase and closed the zipper.

"May I say you boys did a thorough job? It was perfect. Only one thing—mind, I'm not criticising, but was all that violence necessary?" He gave a sycophantic, sickening laugh. "Three men were removed to the hospital and my wife is home, a nervous wreck from shock."

Shock, hell, frustrated passion. I'll bet he can never satisfy that bitch, I thought to myself.

Maxie blew a cloud of smoke out of his mouth.

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“Well, I’ll tell you, John. When we go out on a heist, we aren’t playing tiddly-winks, you know. We play for keeps.”

“Oh yes, yes, I know you boys did a fine job and you’re the best in the business. You were highly recommended by that party years ago.”

He was exuding good-will, fawning all over the place.

Max cut him short with a curt, “Okay, John. When you get one lined up, contact me in the usual way.”

He took the hint. “Yes. Yes.” He picked up his briefcase and stood up. “I’m getting a juicier one than this last lined up. It’ll be ripe to pluck in a month or so, one of my real big clients.”

Max took him by the arm and walked him to the door. “Fine. We’ll be at your service then, John.”

The pusillanimous bastard smirked. “It will be a pleasure to get together again, boys,” he said.

He caught my scornful look. He turned and went out with a barely audible, “Goodbye.”

Max said, “So long.” The rest of us stared coldly after him.

Max sat down at the table. He turned to me and smiled.

“Itching to slit the throat of the goose that lays the golden eggs, Noodles?”

“He’s a rat. We can’t trust him,” I said tersely. “He’s the only one that can tie us in with this job. He’s our Achilles’ heel.”

Maxie gathered the money lying on the table in a heap and said thoughtfully, “Yep, you’re right, Noodles. He’s a rat, all right. I guess some day we may have to exterminate him.”

Maxie took money out of his pocket and added it to the pile. “Twenty-seven left from John’s dough, fourteen grand left after paying Jake and his boys for the Nutchy switcheroo and three grand for burying the bum. Let’s see now...” he said.

He fumbled for a pencil in his pocket, picked up a hundred dollar bill and started scratching figures on it.

“Hmmm—total comes to forty-four grand. Split four ways... well, my arithmetic makes it eleven thousand apiece. Look at the figures, Noodles. They correct?”

I glanced at them perfunctorily. I was too groggy to figure. I said, “Okay.”

As Maxie gave us each his share, he remarked in a cynical tone, Crime doesn’t pay. I guess we ought to get jobs as shipping clerks in Macy’s or something.”

Patsy said, “Boy, that joint would make a beautiful heist. I hear the day before Christmas there’s about a million bucks lying around in the controller’s office.”

“A million bucks,” Cockeye said with a wistful air. “Yeh, Max, it’s a good idea. We ought to step into Macy’s and heist the joint.”

“Macy’s? Nope, not Macy’s. I’m lining up something bigger and better.”

Maxie rocked back and forth in his chair. With a faraway look on his face, he sent clouds of smoke floating to the ceiling from his Corona cigar.

I wondered. A bigger heist than a million bucks? What the hell, is Maxie still dreaming about that Federal Reserve job? Does he still have it in mind after all these years?

Sarcastically I asked, “Max, you got the Federal Reserve job still on your mind?”

Max looked at me for a minute, with supreme confidence. He replied, “Yes I have. I’m having the joint cased, and when I get all the info, we’re going to heist it.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or reason with him. I just looked at him for awhile. In fact we were all staring at Maxie. We all had a hell of a lot of faith in his good judgment, but heist the Federal Reserve Bank? It appeared impossible. The joint was an impenetrable fortress. It was right in the heart of the financial district and everybody knew that if a recognized criminal went within smelling distance of that neighborhood, he got pinched on sight. The entire underworld knew that the financial district was out of bounds. But who the hell knows? With Maxie anything is possible.

Aloud I said, “You got somebody giving the joint the elzoo?”

“Yep, I got somebody.”

“Any dope on it?” Patsy asked.

“Can it be cracked?” I asked.

“Well, yes and no. I’m trying to figure it out. The vaults downstairs may be tough to take, but I think I got a plan to grab the daily small total the armored cars bring in every day for deposit from their member banks,

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grab it at the platform, as they're unloading.”

“How much is the small total?” I asked sarcastically.

“Oh, about ten million in cash or better.” Maxie smiled coolly at me. He looked at our faces to see if we were properly impressed. Jesus, I thought, am I drunk or is Maxie crazy drunk?

CHAPTER 15

It was Wednesday morning. Callers were few and uninteresting. Out front Fat Moe and his bartenders were busy with their normally good business. We were indulging in our usual Greek rummy game when Fat Moe came in to announce, "Peggy's outside. She wants to see you guys."

We were in the midst of a play, and we didn't really pay attention to what he said.

Maxie raised his eyes from his cards for an instant.

"Peggy? What Peggy?" he asked.

Moe put both hands on his hips, walked across the room swaying his large buttocks from side to side.

Maxie dropped his cards. In eager excitement he shouted, "Peggy the Bumehke? Why the hell didn't you say so? Let her in."

We had heard she'd been operating professionally for many years, and I'd expected to see the usual worn-out, dried-up, drugged and dissipated, sad-looking whore. I was already terribly sorry for her.

A warm feeling of gladness surged through me at the thought, "She's here for a touch. Boy, will she be delighted at the generous amount we can afford and will give her."

I visualized myself saying as I handed her the dough, "Here you are, Peg, just enough to buy yourself a charlotte russe."

Was I surprised when she came in. We all stood up chivalrously and bowed as blonde Peggy came in making a grand entrance, like Mae West in her play, "Diamond Lil." She looked as young and as sexy as ever. She was covered with furs and blazing diamonds. She gave each of us a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Cockeye ran all around her, sniffing. "Ah, what perfume, what are you using, Peggy? Fulton Fish Market Number 5? You look like a classy bitch in all that fitch."

The remark got a short laugh.

Peggy said, "And you look like you're suffering from that rare Hawaiian disease."

"What disease?" Cockeye was concerned.

Peggy looked at Cockeye, smiling at him from head to toe. "Lack, a nooky. Chump. You're pretty frisky, clowning and skipping around like that. What you need is a good trip around the world from a cute little Frenchie I got up in my joint."

Maxie laughed. "Soliciting new business, eh, Peg?"

She laughed. "But not for money. For you guys my joint is for free. Like in the old days. Just bring me a charlotte russe." She laughed gaily. "Everything is on the house when you boys pay me a visit. Remember, Noodles, you cutie pie?" She threw me a kiss.

I returned it.

"Okay, Peg. I was only kidding."

"What's douchin'?" Maxie asked. "You didn't come down to Delancey Street just to look over your old neighborhood, did you?"

"Many times I thought of coming down to see you guys." Peggy sat down. She slipped her furs off her shoulders and reached for a drink.

"The truth is, Maxie, I have a job that only you boys can do."

Max raised his eyebrows. She misunderstood. She lifted her hand reassuringly.

"Don't worry. I'm willing to pay you well for your trouble."

"Peggy," I cut in with a smile, "you have given your services gratis and generously in the old days to all of us, and I think we should reciprocate. We'll help you without pay."

Maxie puffed on his cigar, flicked his ashes on the floor, made a courteous bow and said, "Yep, Noodles is right. Our professional talents are always at your service, Peg."

I was watching Maxie's courtly and respectful attitude. It was a lesson we had learned from our old friend, the Professor. I well remembered his oft-repeated aphorism, "Treat a whore like a lady and a lady like a whore."

Max acted and spoke like a gallant. "But as far as taking money from a lady, you know, Peg, we don't

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work that way. That we leave for the pimps.”

Peggy opened her purse and flashed a thick roll of five hundred dollar bills. “Come on, Maxie. I'm doing okay. I don't want something for nothing. You know I'm no free loader. I like to pay for services rendered.”

Maxie puffed on his cigar meditatively, took his roll of bills out of his pocket and peeled off ten one hundred dollar bills and put them on the table.

“As long as you're anxious for it to cost you something, I'll tell you what, Peg—as long as you insist, mind you, only because you insist— cover this grand and we'll send it over to the Settlement House for their summer camp, and I guarantee to solve your problem, whatever it is, okay?”

Peggy's face brightened. “That's a swell idea,” she said. She smiled and matched Maxie's thousand dollars saying, “It's cheap at double the price.”

Maxie turned to Cockeye. “Okay, boy. You're elected the good Samaritan.”

Cockeye picked up the money.

As he opened the door to leave, Maxie called after him, “Bring a receipt back or a letter of acknowledgment.”

Cockeye stopped, looked at Maxie with resentment and asked, “What's the matter, after all these years you don't trust me?”

“Don't be so goddamn sensitive,” Maxie replied. “I want the receipt for my income tax.”

I wondered what prompted Max to suggest a donation to the Settlement House. How come? What sudden queer twist of mind gave him that thought? None of us had ever frequented the place. We considered it a place for sissies. The streets were our recreation center. Was it some realization of what we had missed in our youth? It was something for a psychiatrist to probe into—Maxie's generous Robin Hood gestures. No doubt about it. Like those psychoanalysts claim, everything has a cause.

Peggy reached for another drink, lit a cigarette and blew smoke out of her thin nostrils and sighed. “Do you know, Max, I'm operating a high-class joint uptown?”

“Yep. So you tell me. So-o-o. Let's get down to 'tachlas.' What's your problem, Peg—cops or shake-down artists?”

“Neither.”

Peggy frowned and shook her head. “You know cops are the least of my trouble. Whitey is the police captain in my precinct, and you know he has always been my sweetie pie.”

She gave a coquettish tilt to her head.

Maxie, Peg and I laughed. The three of us remembered.

Patsy asked drily, “That old bastard got anything left yet?”

Peggy pinched Patsy on the cheek. “Baby, you would be surprised.”

Cockeye asked, “Enough to keep you satisfied, Peg?”

Peggy wriggled her hips. “You know I never get enough to be satisfied.”

“Cops are okay, so what else could be bothering you, Peg?” I asked.

“What's bothering me?” she repeated.

Her eyes flashed angrily and her face flushed through her rouge. She tapped the table with her forefinger, indignantly emphasizing each word.

For the past month, every week on my busiest day, Friday, some sonofabitch mysteriously appears, God knows from where, lines up all my girls and clients against the wall and heists them. It's getting goddamn annoying.”

We laughed at her angry complaint. “What the hell, Peg. The guy's got to eat,” I said. “Live and let live.”

“It's all right for you guys to laugh, but to me, it ain't so funny. All right if it only happened once. But it's getting queer, three weeks in a row. Besides, it's getting monotonous. The same thing every goddamn Friday night. Besides ruining my business, it scares my clients away. My girls get so nervous they can't keep their minds on what they're doing.”

“That's beside the point,” I said drily.

“Besides, I see what you mean,” Maxie said, smiling.

Peggy made a hopeless gesture with both hands. “All right, you guys, laugh. Here it is. It's all yours. You'll handle this guy for me, will you, Max? Will you, Noodles?”

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“Yeah, I guess so, Peg, we'll handle the situation. Don't worry,” I said.

“The sonofabitch knows I can't report him to the cops, and I don't want to involve Whitey, so he takes advantage of a lady, the lousy bastard,” Peggy said plaintively.

“Don't worry, Peg,” Patsy was smoothing her blond hair. “After we get through with him, he'll think it healthier and safer to heist a bank than clip your joint.”

Peggy put her arm around Patsy's waist, and smiled seductively up at him. “You can imagine, Pat, how my clients feel. In the middle of a little tete-a-tete with a pretty chippy, being interrupted by, 'Hold it. This is a heist.' Embarrassing, ain't it? How would you feel, Patsy?”

“If the tete-a-tete was with you, I would ignore him completely,” Patsy laughed. “I would go about my business.”

Peggy pressed Patsy closer, she smiled amorously in his face. “That's for me, a real conscientious worker.”

Maxie was serious. He asked, “What does this shmuck look like, Peg?”

Peggy stood up, absentmindedly pulled her girdle down, and gave a tantalizing wriggle to her hips.

“I don't know. He's a pretty tall guy, I guess. About Patsy's build.”

She gave Patsy a come-on smile. Patsy ate it up. I was thinking Patsy was going to be elected Peggy's swain for tonight.

Maxie took out his fountain pen. “Give me the address of your place.”

She gave it to him, an address on the Upper East Side near Park Avenue. Maxie kept tapping his pen on the table. He was puzzled.

“Tell me, Peg,” he asked, “how does this crumb-bum get into your joint? You keep the door locked unless you recognize your clients, don't you?”

“That's the mystery, Max. Sure, I got the goddamn door locked, and just when my clients are in the midst of their festivities, this bastard comes in from nowhere.”

Maxie scratched his head. “Well, what the hell. Don't worry, Peg, we'll have to spend a little time in your joint.”

Patsy's face lit up in anticipation.

“We'll unriddle this riddle for you, Peg,” I said.

Cockeye walked in, handed Maxie an envelope. Maxie took a sheet of paper out of it and read aloud. It was a letter of thanks from the Settlement House.

Maxie said, “I feel like a Boy Scout after a good deed; for this,” Maxie waved the letter, “I will guarantee complete satisfaction.”

“That's my slogan,” Peggy said. “Well, I have things to attend to.”

She had one more drink. She kept looking suggestively at Patsy. “Well, I guess I'll run along. Do you mind driving me uptown, Pat?”

I knew Peggy had chosen him for the evening. But the invitation caught Patsy by surprise.

Over Patsy's face came such an expression of delight as he had when we were kids after breaking into our first candy store when we had all the trays of candy and charlotte russes before us.

“I'll ride you uptown, downtown and sideways all day long, Peg.” He drew her closer. “Complete satisfaction is my slogan, too.”

She acted shy, like a schoolgirl. “Fresh boy,” she murmured.

“We'll be over early Friday morning,” Maxie called to them as they walked out together holding hands.

Patsy came back the next afternoon. Maxie looked at him and smiled.

“You look limp like a herring.”

Without comment he threw himself into a chair. Patsy waved his hand for a drink. He finished it in one gulp and whispered hoarsely, The Madame is better than any chippy in her own joint.”

I wondered how he came to that conclusion. I was sure he couldn't have had a chance to compare, for Peggy was all any normal man could handle in one evening.

He retired to a corner, stretched out on two chairs and in a few minutes was fast asleep. We laughed at the state he was in.

We started a game of stud poker, and played all day long. Maxie sent Cockeye out for a pot of kreplach

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from Rappaport's. It was cozy and quiet that Thursday afternoon.

That evening, we had a chore to do for the Combination: we escorted a moving van full of whiskey from the unloading point in Long Island to a drop-off in New Jersey.

Early Friday morning we went up to Peggy's place. She had a better layout than the average whore house. It was a brownstone private house with about twelve rooms, on two floors. Ten of the rooms were well-furnished bedrooms. When we arrived Peggy was the only occupant of the house; it was too early for the girls and the trade.

Peggy informed us she had ten girls working for her. From what she intimated, they were kept pretty busy. She ran a ten dollar joint. And for the call trade, she charged thirty bucks. She split fees with the girls at the usual fifty-fifty arrangement. She was more generous than the ordinary Madame, for she permitted the girls to keep their tips.

Maxie figured out, "With the booze profits and rolling a lush here and there, Peggy's take must come close to five grand per week. Not bad for the little business woman, especially for a former Delancey Street piece of charity ass."

"A lot more money than the President of the United States makes," I observed.

"That's free enterprise," Maxie replied. "Everybody has equal opportunities. Maybe Hoover and the country would be better off if he ran a whore house instead of the country."

"You got something there, Max," I agreed. "Then instead of his slogan 'a chicken in every pot' he can supply a chicken in every bed."

"Which would the people prefer, I wonder?" Maxie chuckled.

After Maxie got a picture of the layout of the place, he said to Peggy, "We'll stay in this room. This seems to be the central room of the house. Nobody is to know we're here. Nobody, you understand? Not even the girls."

"As you say, Max; can I offer you boys a bottle of Mt. Vernon?"

Maxie nodded. "That's okay, Peg."

Peggy came back shortly with a bottle and glasses. As she put it on the dresser, she said, "When and if you grab this guy, fellas, can you do it as quietly as possible? No fireworks, please?"

Max shrugged. "We'll try not to make much noise, but this bum carries a rod, doesn't he?"

Peggy nodded. "But try not to make too much of a disturbance, the neighbors think I run a private dancing school."

"The only difference is they do it with their clothes on and standing up in some private dancing school, and you supply beds. Hey, Peg?" I said.

She gave me a knowing wink and left.

Maxie sent Cockeye out to Katz's. "Get twenty-five assorted sandwiches, mostly hot pastramis. And this is important, Cockeye," Max said. "On the way back, stop at a hardware store and buy a large brace and bit."

"Brace and bit?" Cockeye asked.

I looked at Maxie, wondering what the hell was he going to do with a brace and bit. Then it dawned on me. I broke into a broad grin. "We're going to have a peep show." I marveled at Maxie. He thought of everything.

When Cockeye got back, Maxie stood up on a chair and drilled holes clear through the walls into the next bedrooms. Our room was more or less centrally located, facing the entrance door right off the foyer. The foyer was luxuriously furnished with fancy chairs and little tables, on which were scattered pornographic pictures and booklets containing French treatises on sex enjoyment.

Since we were on the upper floor, Maxie sent Cockeye down to see what kind of a room was under us.

Cockeye reported, "A cozy little bedroom."

Maxie bored a hole through the floor, then another in the door, which gave us four observation peepholes. Peggy came in. She saw Maxie at work. At first she was peeved at the damage to the walls. Then she laughed it off.

"You've given me an idea. I can rent these holes out for ten bucks a night," she said.

"For a two-fold purpose, hey, Peg?" Max laughed.

The phone rang. Calls came in quite often. Peggy was busy on the telephone taking orders from the call trade for evening appointments. She motioned for me to sit down beside her. She wanted me to listen in on

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her conversation. She was proud of the well-known names calling in for girls.

Some of them surprised and even impressed a guy like me. Quite a few were in the limelight. There was a judge, a literary critic on the *Evening World*, a big industrialist and a banker who wanted ten girls for a private party he was throwing for some of his business associates, a lesbian woman athlete, acclaimed in the sports world, and a few lonely citizens in the everyday walks of life. I got bored listening in after awhile and joined the stud poker game the boys were playing in the room with the peepholes.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon the outside doorbell rang. I went over to the door peephole. I saw Peggy admit a couple of girls. They were nice looking, quietly dressed, not at all like streetwalkers. They were what the trade called, "high-class stuff." They took then-coats off. Peggy gave them large bath towels. She patted them on their plump buttocks and shoved them into the bathroom together. You could hear the shower going; one of them was in pretty good voice. After awhile they came out wrapped in bath towels. I described what I saw. Everybody jumped up from the game. We took turns at the door peephole.

Maxie laughed; he put his fingers to his lips and whispered, "Take it easy. Don't get yourselves excited."

Cockeye and Patsy grabbed chairs and went to the peepholes on each side of the room. The girls went into the bedrooms on the opposite sides of the foyer, out of peepholes' range. Maxie and I chuckled quietly at Patsy's and Cockeye's disappointed exclamations. We went back to our cards but our minds weren't on the game. A few moments later, the bell rang again. Girls started coming in, singly and in pairs, laughing and talking. In their street clothes, one would judge them to be salesgirls from some very fashionable shop. They were fresh and pretty, and shapely enough to be in the front line chorus of a Broadway musical.

They all went through the same routine. Peggy gave each a large towel, and they retreated to the bathroom to their showers. When they came out, Peggy assigned them to separate rooms.

Max and I discussed them.

"Stupid broads," he said.

"Yeh," I answered. "If they could only see themselves a couple of years from now."

One appeared very young. She could not have been over eighteen.

"Fresh from a Pennsylvania farm," Max commented.

"Yeh, a couple of years of this life, and this kid'll look and feel like fifty. Very few have Peggy's stamina. Funny how they all take to junk or whiskey after awhile."

"How else can they take on men one after another? The life is too rigorous. They become physical and mental wrecks."

"Hey, Noodles," Maxie said, "if I see any more like that, I'll become a physical and mental wreck just from watching her."

"From frustration, hey, Max?"

We both laughed quietly.

Cockeye and Patsy were glued to their peepholes. Maxie lay down on the floor to look through the hole to the downstairs bedroom. I had the most uninteresting vantage point of all—the foyer.

From the way the boys were glued to their peepholes and the exclamations and comparisons whispered back and forth, it must have been very exciting. Cockeye got too noisy for comfort. Maxie tied a handkerchief around his mouth to quiet him. He threatened to remove him from the peephole. Cockeye promised he would keep still. We had to take our shoes off to lessen the noise of our movements.

There was nothing visible from my peephole, so I went over to Cockeye's. I pushed him aside and looked. I was amazed. I looked at Cockeye. He whispered something that was unintelligible through his gag. I looked again. Yeh. There she sat on a chair, fully dressed, manicuring her nails. I went over to Patsy, nudged him aside.

"What the hell," I whispered. "There's nothing to see. She's all dressed and reading a magazine."

Patsy whispered, "You should have seen her before she got dressed. Some pair of boobies on that baby."

I knelt down by Maxie. That one was also dressed. Maxie whispered, "You should have seen her a minute ago. She isn't as pretty as a picture, but what a frame!" And he threw a kiss to the room below.

"Yeh," I said, "Peggy understands male psychology. She knows the chumps get a thrill out of watching a woman slowly strip."

Maxie said, "That's what made Gypsy Rose popular."

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About four o'clock, the first client came in. He looked like a salesman taking in a matinee between customers. He handed Peggy his sample briefcase. Peggy patted his cheek. She showed him an album of full length nude pictures of the girls she had in stock. He went through the book slowly, like a connoisseur. Peggy pointed out the fine points of their various anatomies like a clever saleswoman proud of her fine stock. Carefully he picked one out.

Peggy escorted him to the girl of his choice. She had the bedroom across the foyer, out of our view.

Peggy tapped at our door, stuck her head in and whispered, "Much too early for the bum to arrive. He usually comes at the peak of the rush, when the house is full. Would you boys care to be entertained by a couple of nice girls meanwhile?"

Regretfully Max refused. "We are here strictly on business. Some other time, Peg."

To hell with business," Cockeye mumbled in disgust.

At about six p.m. the customers began arriving in earnest. They were of all types and ages: embarrassed college boys, shipping clerks, and middle-aged businessmen looking foolish and acting guilty. Others, assured and confident executives, were brusque and to the point. All the bedrooms were filled. Peggy was doing a capacity business. Men were sitting around the foyer, nonchalantly reading, smoking, and talking baseball as if they were in a barber shop, waiting for their turn.

I kept looking through the peephole appraising the men, watching their actions, trying to figure out the reasons that prompted them to come to Peggy's.

This was something I could never understand, the cold, businesslike state of mind of a man who goes to a public place for an assignation. Then I laughed to myself. How about me and that chorine the other night? I wondered what the marital status of these men was. The majority looked married. What were their reasons? Wives away? Sick wives? Wives drained of all sex desire? Or just looking for a change, for an exotic sex adventure? Something they're ashamed of? Something their wives won't permit? To me they looked like ordinary men with ordinary desires. What the hell, I thought, this was the hidden part of the life of the New York male. Men are only animals. Yes, come to think of it, a male animal naturally requires more sex excitement than a female of the same species. A bull requires a large herd of cows to keep him satisfied. A rooster needs a whole coop full of hens to be gratified. A male animal needs a harem to keep sexually contented. Yeh, I chuckled quietly, don't I go chasing along Broadway almost every night for a different piece? Ain't I got my private harem? To pick from the million women from all over the world along Broadway every night?

Was it Mr. Ellis's book? Freud or Kraft-Ebing? What the hell is the difference anyway, some authority on the subject said he found out that men who have no moral or aesthetic objections to intercourse with prostitutes figure less often in the divorce courts. Yeh, that's pretty logical. I guess that way they avoid emotional entanglement with one particular woman.

Emotionally they're monogamous. Physically they're promiscuous. Just like me, I'm tied emotionally to a broad I never even had a date with, one I only see from a distance. What the hell has Dolores got that attracts me so? Or am I queer? Every other broad I lay and leave. The hell with all of them. I'll turn continent. I laughed at myself.

I turned to see what my companions were doing.

Patsy and Cockeye were standing on their chairs. Their entertainment had begun. They were hysterical with suppressed laughter. Even Maxie, usually self-composed, was rolling on the floor holding a pillow over his face.

I bent down and watched with Maxie. The client finally started getting dressed. He had given up in disgust. When his back was turned, the girl in the room quietly opened the window and beckoned to someone outside. I could feel Maxie, stretched out alongside me, getting tense. He nudged me.

We saw a foot come through the window, then the rest of the body. He was a big guy with a gun in his hand.

He walked up behind the man who was getting dressed and struck him on the head with the butt end of the gun. The man with the gun went through the pockets of the unconscious man. The girl hurriedly started getting dressed.

CHAPTER 16

Maxie snapped his fingers softly.

“This is it.”

He ran out of the room. I followed as Cockeye and Patsy jumped off their chairs. We burst into the foyer in our stockinged feet, pulling our Roscoes out of our holsters.

The waiting customers looked at us in startled amazement. We reached the room downstairs. The guy was still inside. The door was closed.

Maxie motioned us to get on both sides of the door. He ripped a drapery off the window and held it in his hands. In a few seconds, the door slowly came ajar, inch by inch. The big guy stepped into view. Maxie swooped down on him, covering his head and arms with the drapery. Cockeye went for his knees, Patsy and I on top of him. Maxie whacked him over the head through the drapery. The guy dropped his gun to the floor. We tied him with the drapery and the drapery cord. He lay on the floor motionless. We rolled him in a rug.

Peggy went around calming the girls and her clients, apologizing for the disturbance and shooing them back to their diversions. Maxie went in to talk to the girl who was in cahoots with the guy. She was crying and pleading with Max.

“I'm sorry. Please don't tell Peggy. He had me bulldozed,” she sobbed. “I barely knew the guy. He made me give him all my money besides.”

“Okay, kid. Forget it,” Max said. “He's a lousy pimp, too, eh?”

She nodded.

Cockeye said, “I lost all my respect for that bastard. I thought he was an honest heist man.”

Patsy and I picked the guy up and carried him out into the deserted street. Peggy whispered after us, “Thank you, boys. Don't be strangers.”

We threw him in the back of the Caddy.

Cockeye asked, “Where are we going, Max?”

“Let's take him to the funeral parlors. I want to scare the shit out of him before we give him a good talking to.”

We went in through the back way, into the store room where the coffins were kept. Maxie told Izzy the nightman, “Take a powder.” He knew enough not to ask questions after Maxie's curt order.

We untied the guy. We took the rug and blanket off him. He was still out cold. In his unconscious state, he had an awful expression of fear on his face. Maxie kept looking at him.

“He's a big bastard, isn't he? The lousy pimp, he looks scared to death. Wait. I'll really scare him.”

He motioned to me. I took his feet, Max took his arms and we threw him into a cheap pine coffin. We fastened the cover down.

Max laughed. “First, let him come to in that box.”

Max took his coat off, pulled a large, expensive, plush-padded coffin out. “Yep, I may as well relax a bit until the bum comes around.” He eased himself into it.

Cockeye said, “You look nice, Maxie.”

“Thanks,” Maxie said. “Help yourselves.”

He waved to the coffins scattered around the room. “Let's scare the bastard good.”

We each lay down in a coffin in a semi-circle around the pine coffin in which the guy was lying. The lights were dim and restful. It seemed to take a long time. I thought I heard Cockeye snore. I began thinking of the show we had at Peggy's. It was real solid entertainment, better than a Broadway show. I was thinking of one of the redheads in Peggy's joint, the one with the wondrous Elgin movement. I imagined she came floating closer and closer to me. I was beginning to feel drowsy in a sort of half sleep like when we kicked the gong around at the Chinaman's.

Then I heard a muffled sound. I sat up. We all sat up in our coffins. Sounds were coming out of the covered coffin in the center of the room. We sat in the dim light, watching and listening to the sobs and moaning noises. He tried to push the cover off the coffin. We could hear him straining and pushing.

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Finally, the cover shot open with a bang. His head appeared. I have seen frightened people in my day, but he wasn't frightened, he was terrified. His eyes were almost out of their sockets in dread. He turned slowly, and looked at us sitting in our coffins. We stared back at him, deadpan.

He whispered in fear, "Who are you? Where am I? Dead?"

We just stared at him. He started to tremble. He stared a good five minutes at Maxie.

He stuttered, "I recognize you—I heard about you," and pointed at Max. "You're Big Maxie, the undertaker, who, they say, buries people alive."

His hand dropped limp, his mouth stayed open, but no sounds came out. He stared in horror. Boy, was he a crumb bum, I thought. Where the hell did he get that story?

Maxie stood up slowly, walked closer, and in a menacing, slow, staccato said, "I bury people alive is right."

He stared into the guy's eyes. "I will nail down your coffin, then I will lower it down in the grave."

Maxie stopped. A heavy stillness took hold of the funeral parlor like a cemetery at midnight. It reminded me of some kind of a seance. I felt psychic. I swear I could sense the guy's thoughts and his extreme terror.

Maxie continued in a spectral tone. "I will lower your coffin slowly. The box will reach bottom. We will shovel the dirt back in the hole with you at the bottom."

The guy was staring at Max in a trance.

"Then you will be all covered. The worms will start creeping in. You will find it hard to breathe. You will suffocate," Maxie hissed dramatically.

I was just about to get out of my box and compliment Max on his dramatic ability when I saw the guy tremble violently. His head jerked. A rattling, gurgling sound came chokingly out of his mouth. You could see death in his staring eyes. His eyeballs turned up the way they do in a fit. A chalky pallor stole slowly over his face. He dropped back into the coffin with a thud.

Maxie chuckled, "Hey, I'm some actor, ain't I? Okay. When the pimp comes to, give him a sawbuck and throw him out. He learned his lesson, I hope."

We waited a few minutes. Cockeye went over to the guy and shook turn. "Yup for your maht, you yellow bastard. Get up."

Cockeye turned around to us and remarked, "The bum looks like he's got thrombosis of the blowhole."

Maxie gestured to the fire pail. Cockeye dumped it on his face. Patsy leaned over and shook him.

"Come on, get up," he snarled.

Cockeye kept shaking him. Maxie walked over to the coffin, felt his left side and said, "I think the bastard's dead. Look at him, will you, Noodles?"

I bent down, raised his eyelids; I felt his pulse. I said, "The guy is dead."

"Goddamn," Maxie said angrily.

He was annoyed at the guy for dying on us.

"Now we got to go to the trouble of burying him."

Cockeye said, "Hey, Max, you don't have to pack a rod any more. You can go around scaring people to death."

Maxie looked a little peeved at Cockeye's ribbing. "If I had that talent, maybe I'd try it on you some day. Go through the guy's pockets and see who he is. Just for the hell of it."

Cockeye went through the dead man's pockets. He found some keys, a pen knife, and a wallet. In the wallet there was about fifty bucks in small bills, a chauffeur's license with his picture on it. The name on the license was Andrew Moore. In the side pocket was a picture of a bride and groom, and the bride was the whore who had let him into Peggy's place.

Maxie looked at the picture. "Not a bad looking guy. They were a queer married couple all right."

He took some papers out of an inner compartment of the wallet. A folded newspaper clipping fell to the floor. He let it lie there and began to scrutinize a small union book that had also been in the wallet.

"What do you know? This guy was a sandhog. A union man, paid up in his dues. Too bad. I wonder how they fell into this kinda life together and what made this guy heist Peggy's so often?"

Patsy replied, "They must have liked the whore house atmosphere."

Cockeye giggled.

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Maxie stooped and picked up the newspaper clipping. He read it. "Hey, Noodles, this explains why the guy scared so easy."

He read it aloud to us. It was about a tunnel cave—in six months before. One man was trapped for two days. He was given up for dead. The second day they finally dug him up, more dead than alive. The victim's name was Andrew Moore.

Maxie addressed the dead guy in the coffin.

"Too bad, kid, you got a tough break."

Maxie turned to me. "He must have developed a case of—what do you call it—?"

He stopped in mid-sentence. He snapped his fingers, impatient at himself.

"What do you mean, Max, a sickness of some kind?" I asked.

"No, not a sickness like in the body, a sickness in the head. You know, like when you're scared of a closed room or something."

"Oh," I said, "yeh, I know what you mean. It's a phobia—a claustrophobia. With this guy the fear was more than just mental. The real dread of being closed in killed the guy."

Maxie rubbed his chin and paced up and down.

"Maybe the guy's got parents, brothers and sisters besides his whorehouse wife."

"So what of it?" Patsy asked.

"It would be a lousy thing if we give him a funeral and bury him under somebody else's name, and his parents or somebody spend the rest of their lives looking for him."

"What else can we do, Max? We can't let him lie around here. People will be around in the morning. There's a couple of funerals scheduled," I said.

Max scratched his head. "Yep, you're right, Noodles. Well, I guess we plant him somewhere and let somebody find him, so's he can get buried under his own name."

"Where are you going to drop Mr. Moore off, Max?"

We looked at each other for a moment. Max shrugged.

I continued, "It won't really make much difference, especially to Mr. Moore. We can drop him off in a doorway some place."

"How about if somebody sees us dropping the guy off?" Cockeye asked.

"Well, as far as the law is concerned—I dunno—I think, yeh, there must be a law about leaving dead bodies around."

"First degree manslaughter," Cockeye grunted.

"Not according to Mr. Moore. He'll testify that he died from natural causes."

Maxie smiled, "Yep, you're right, Noodles, even if we are seen dropping Mr. Moore off, an autopsy will show he died naturally."

Maxie put the wallet back in Mr. Moore's pocket.

"Okay, Cockeye, back the Caddy to the door."

Cockeye went outside. We took the body out of the coffin and wrapped the drapery around it.

Cockeye stuck his head in the door. He motioned with his head. "The car's outside."

Max, without visible effort, slung the body over his left shoulder.

I asked, "Don't you want a hand?"

"Hah, what does he weigh? A lousy two hundred pounds? See if the coast is clear."

Cockeye looked out into the street. He held his hand up to wait. Maxie stood in the middle of the room. He was beginning to sweat.

"What the hell's the matter? This guy's getting heavier by the minute."

"A couple of love birds were walking by. Okay, Max, now."

Cockeye waved for Max to come along.

Max walked out fast, puffing and grunting. Mr. Moore almost slipped off his shoulder. I heard him grumble under his breath, "You lousy bastard."

We barely rounded the corner when a heavy downpour of rain hit the street. It came down as if somebody was shooting a gigantic hose over the city.

Whimsically Maxie said, "What the hell, we can't leave Mr. Moore out in this weather. Yep, we may as

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well park him at Fat Moe's for the present.”

We pulled around to the back door and carried Mr. Moore in.

Max said, “Put him in the closet. Maybe later, I'll think of a good place, maybe where we could do him the most good.”

Gently we put Mr. Moore in the closet and covered him with the mat.

Cockeye went to the door leading to the front bar, stuck his head out and shouted to Moe, “We're here.”

We sat down to a game of klabiash. Moe came in with a tray of doubles.

Maxie asked Moe, “What's stirrin? Anything?”

“Yeh. The main office called. They want you to call back, and the Himmelfarb brothers are outside. They been pestering me to let them in to see you again. They been waiting for hours. They say they got money to invest.”

“Them cheap buttonhole manufacturers. Still looking to get into some kind of racket to make easy money,” Maxie said distastefully. “The hell with them, give them a mickey and chase them. No. Hold it, Moe. Maybe I'll teach them a lesson. Tell them to wait.”

He went to the phone, called the office. Cockeye mimicked Maxie's “yep—yep—yep.”

Maxie waved to Cockeye to cut it out, and continued his “yep—yep—yep.” A final “yep” and he hung up. He came back to the game, picked up his cards. We looked at him curiously.

“You'll get all the details in the late papers,” Maxie said indifferently.

“What's up?” Cockeye asked. “What will we get in the late papers?”

Maxie smiled. “The kid, Vincent Coll, got the business.”

“Who collected the Dutchman's fifty thousand dollar jackpot?” I asked.

“Shorty.”

Patsy said, “He won't live to enjoy it.”

“A vicious circle, ain't it? How did Vincie get it, Max?” I asked.

“Up on Twenty-third Street in a telephone booth.”

“What did Shorty use for the job?” Patsy asked with professional interest.

Maxie gave a short laugh. “You know Shorty. He wouldn't take a chance with that kid, Coll. He had it all set up. He just walked in with the lead sprayer and almost cut the kid in half. Shorty will be as popular as a cockroach in a plate of chop suey from now on.”

“And he will be just as dead,” I commented.

Cockeye said, “That Shorty is supposed to be pretty good with the Tommy, ain't he?”

Maxie answered carelessly, “Yep, I guess anybody could be good. All you got to do is hold tight and press the trigger.”

We kept playing klabiash. Moe came in every so often with a tray of hookers and a reminder, “The Himmelfarb brothers are still waiting.”

Maxie gave Moe the same answer. “Let them wait. We're busy.”

He turned to me. “I'm trying to think of something, something somehow to take them over. I'd like to teach them greedy chumps a good lesson.”

“How about we sell them the Brooklyn Bridge,” Cockeye said.

“We can give them a better investment than that,” I said.

“What?” Max asked.

“One of the Professor's money machines,” I said.

“Yep, you got something there, Noodles,” Max said.

After awhile Max threw the cards down on the table. “The hell with klabiash. Cockeye, play us a rune. Play We took Benny for a ride in the country.”

Cockeye tapped his harmonica in the palm of his hand and swung into the doleful strain. Max tilted his chair back and puffed on his big cigar. He had a faraway look in his eye. I thought, why the hell does Max bother? Why don't he just get rid of those goddamn Himmelfarb brothers? He can tell Moe he don't want them around. He can tell them sweatshop owners to scram. I remember the first time they came around to see us about a year ago. They had just come over from Germany with plenty of money. Immediately they went into all sorts of ventures. Luckily, their investments seemed to turn out all right. At present they operated a factory

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on lower Grand Street. They were always in the midst of labor troubles. They thought the American workmen were too independent, not like in Germany. I remembered their abrupt statement when the three of them were ushered in by Moe. Like a comedy team they seemed.

“We got plenty money; we like to be in racket. Even in Germany we heard to make a lot of money in America you got to be a racketeer.”

Since then they had been pestering us on the average of once a week. We were getting pretty annoyed. Why the hell don't Max bar them from the place? Well, I guess he knows what he's doing.

Cockeye kept playing our morbid Benny number. Even Patsy started to fidget. He gestured to me toward the closet. I shrugged my shoulders.

Finally Patsy said, “Hey, Max. How about Mr. Moore? Maybe it stopped raining.”

Cockeye went outside to observe the state of the weather.

“It's pissen down worse than before,” he reported.

We waited for the rain to stop. The Himmelfarb brothers waited out at the bar to see us. We waited, and they waited. The rain didn't stop. And the Himmelfarbs didn't go home.

Finally Max called Moe in. “Tell them three brothers I got a proposition for them, to see me tomorrow at ten-thirty in the morning.”

We left Mr. Moore peacefully at rest in the closet, and left for our separate abodes.

I took a cab to my hotel. Walking through the lobby towards the elevators I met Sweeney, the house dick.

He said, “How was the piece last night?”

“She was nice, a very nice kid.”

I slipped Sweeney a double sawbuck.

He said, “Thanks, kid, anytime you're in the mood for one of them little dears, let me know.”

“Usually I do my own dear hunting. The thrill of the chase, you know.”

He chuckled. The elevator door opened. I rode up to my suite.

I jotted down some notes and conversations for the book. From the closet I dug out an old copy of Stephen Crane's *Men, Women and Boats*, and went to bed.

CHAPTER 17

I arrived at Fat Moe's the next morning a little late. A stud game was in progress. I opened the door to the closet. Mr. Moore was still there.

“What did you think—he took a walk for himself?” Maxie asked smiling.

“Nah, Noodles just wanted to say 'Good morning, Mr. Moore.'” Patsy said.

I sat down. Cockeye dealt me in.

After awhile Moe came in and said, “Them Himmelfarbs are here again. They said they got an appointment. Should I give them Mickeys and throw them out?”

“Nope, let them wait awhile. I'll tell you when to send them in.”

We looked at Max curiously as he took his roll out and peeled off two thousand-dollar bills.

He turned to Cockeye and said, “Run over to the Public National Bank and get me brand new crisp ten dollar bills for this. Now make sure they're crisp and brand new.”

I knew Maxie so well I more or less could figure out his reasons for doing things. But this request to Cockeye had me puzzled. Then it struck me. Yeh, Max is going to promote the Professor's money machine as I suggested yesterday.

Aloud I said, “You going to bait the trap for the Himmelfarbs with some green cheese?”

Max nodded. Cockeye took the money with a raise of the eyebrows and walked out.

Twenty minutes later, he came back with packages of crisp ten dollar bills.

Maxie was chuckling to himself. He nonchalantly tore the wrappers from the packages and put them in his pocket. He spread the bills on the table until it was completely covered. Then he sprinkled bills on and under the table, and on the chairs, until the place looked lousy with new ten-dollar bills. Maxie chuckled, he was enjoying himself as he set the stage.

“Noodles,” he said. “I will give you the first cue and you guys carry on from there. Okay?”

We nodded.

He said to Cockeye, “Tell Moe to send the Himmelfarb brothers in.”

Moe ushered in the three brothers. They were all short, fat and ugly. They stepped in timidly, trying to avoid stepping on the money, bewilderment and respect in their manner.

Maxie brusquely said, “Come in. Come in. The place is a little cluttered. We had a very busy day. What's on your mind?”

The older one of the brothers opened his mouth to speak. Maxie put his hand up.

“Just a minute, Himmelfarb.”

Max picked a bill up and scrutinized it carefully as if he had just discovered it.

He turned to me and said, “You know—this last batch from the Professor's machine ain't bad at all.”

He handed it to me for inspection.

“What do you think, Noodles?”

I snapped it between my thumb and forefinger, looked it over and threw it on the floor, carelessly, saying, “Yeh, Maxie. It looks as good as if the government just manufactured it.”

He smiled. “Yep. Let's ask the Himmelfarbs. They're manufacturers, too. They recognize a good product when they see it.”

He handed a bill to the elder Himmelfarb.

Himmelfarb took his glasses out and examined it thoroughly. He cleared his throat noisily. “This is fine money, Mr. Max. This is real, no?”

Max asked, “What do you think?”

Himmelfarb replied, “Good. Good. Fine money,” and he passed it to his brothers. They all agreed it was good money.

Maxie picked up a bill and put a match to it, lit his cigar and let the bill burn to ashes. The act made the brothers uncomfortable.

Maxie asked, looking at the Himmelfarbs, “Well. What's on your mind, gentlemen? Sorry we had to keep

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you waiting. We're busy, as you can see.”

The minute the eldest one, who seemed to be the spokesman, opened his mouth, Maxie put his hand up.

“Just a minute, Himmelfarb.”

He turned to me and said, “Okay, then, we buy this money machine from the Professor tomorrow. What do you think?”

“Yes, definitely,” I said, smearing it on thick. “It's the best manufacturing business we can get into. No labor costs, no overhead. A very good investment.”

Patsy and Cockeye echoed, “A fine investment.”

Maxie said, “Just a minute, boys. One thing we didn't consider. We have no manufacturing loft. We need a place to work the machine in. This place is no good for the purpose.”

Maxie waved his hand around the room.

The Himmelfarbs were whispering among themselves. They handled and examined the money surreptitiously. We ignored them completely. We continued to discuss the details of purchasing the money-making machine, the cost of paper, ink, and other necessities.

Finally Maxie said, “Well, let's tend to the Himmelfarbs first. They got their own problems. They're not interested in our business.”

The spokesman for the Himmelfarbs said, “We don't mind waiting. Go ahead with your business first, Mr. Max. It's very interesting. A very nice business you're discussing.”

He turned to me. “Go ahead with your discussion, Mr. Noodles.”

I smiled politely. “No, no. We've kept you waiting long enough. What's your problem?”

“It's like this,” Himmelfarb began. “Our business is very, very slow.” Himmelfarb cleared his throat. “And our profits are no profits, so knowing you boyus got plenty of ways of making lots of money, we would like for you to get us a new business, maybe? Something with a good profit? A nice proposition that you boyus are too busy to handle. We got money to invest in a good, nice proposition, ain't we?”

He turned to his brothers. They nodded eagerly. They smiled ingratiatingly. I was beginning to feel sorry for them. They were too gullible.

Max puffed away on his cigar and kept rubbing his chin. “I'll tell you, Himmelfarb. Give me a day or so to think it over. I'll see what I can do. Come back tomorrow, okay?”

Maxie, like a good fisherman, was playing it easy. He had them hooked; he was letting the line out gently.

The Himmelfarbs nodded in agreement. They huddled together, whispering and gesticulating in animated discussion. We paid no attention to them. We continued to talk about the possible weekly profits we could make from operating the money-making machine. We talked in astronomical figures. At each of our quotations they got more excited and impressed. Finally they could contain themselves no longer.

One of the Himmelfarbs said, “Excuse me, Mr. Max. Can we have some of these ten-dollar papers laying on the floor, maybe?”

Maxie, with a grandiose wave of the hand said, “Sure. Help yourself. They only cost twenty-five cents apiece to manufacture.”

“That's all?” Himmelfarb asked. “Gott in Himmel, what profit.”

“Sure,” I cut in. “It only costs the United States government one cent apiece when they manufacture ten-dollar bills. That's because they got a big machine and a larger production. You can understand that, can't you? You're businessmen yourselves. Larger production, less cost is the business rule, ain't it?”

The three nodded sagely. “Yah,” the old one murmured.

I said, “Besides, Max, I understand the Professor uses better type paper than the Government. That's why it costs the Professor more to manufacture.”

I was wondering if I was overdoing it. I looked at them. No, I decided they had already swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker.

The youngest Himmelfarb stepped out boldly. “We heard you talking about a loft. We got a very nice loft for money manufacturing purposes, Mr. Max.”

“Well, I don't know.” Maxie appeared doubtful. “We're not looking for partners. Then again, on the other hand, we're pretty busy with other things.”

He turned to us questioningly.

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I volunteered, "There's plenty of profits for everybody. They look pretty honest to me, Max."

The oldest Himmelfarb nodded eagerly. "Yes, we can give plenty of references."

Maxie said, "Well, I don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no."

He rubbed his chin as if he were giving it serious consideration.

"Okay, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll let you boys in on the deal for a half interest. The machine cost thirty-five thousand dollars. I'll put in twenty thousand and you boys put in only fifteen thousand because we're going to use your loft. Okay?"

Maxie knew he had them securely hooked. Without any more ado, with a swift firm hand he began reeling his fish in. He took his roll out and counted out twenty thousand dollars before their bulging eyes.

Carelessly he tossed it to the eldest Himmelfarb. "You hold all the money," he said. "You be the treasurer, okay? Let's have a drink on the new partnership."

Maxie was giving them the rush act. He had the fish in the basket, and was closing the cover.

Cockeye went to the bar and ordered. Moe came in with a tray of doubles. We drank to a chorus of "Mazel."

The youngest Himmelfarb scurried over the floor, picking up ten spots, apologetically saying, "They're only samples, no?"

I could see Maxie was getting slightly perturbed. He took the youngest one under the arm, herded the rest of the Himmelfarbs together toward the door and said, "I tell you what. Go out to the stores, even to the Public National Bank and try these samples out. Don't forget it's Saturday, and the bank is only open a half day. Come back in about an hour. Meanwhile I will make arrangements with the Professor to bring the money machine over to your loft. Okay, partners?"

At the word "partners" their faces lit up. I could imagine their pride, partners with the fabulous Big Maxie, the man everybody feared and respected: politicians, police, union officials, gunmen, the whole world. Big Maxie, the millionaire bootlegger and slot machine operator, the man who has money like dirt and treats it as such. Partners! Their faces were glowing with pride. Now, they probably thought, they would have protection from everybody. They could tell everybody to drop dead. They were partners with Big Maxie. I could see they felt a new dignity. They tried to control their mounting excitement.

The eldest Himmelfarb stuck his hand out. "It's a big pleasure to be friends and partners with you, Mr.—"

Maxie cut him off. He said modestly, "Just call me Maxie."

Himmelfarb hesitated and laughed, then said, "Yes, my friend Maxie. We will be back in an hour. Goodbye, Mr. Noodles, goodbye, partners."

Maxie patted them on the back and shooed them out at the same time.

"Okay, partners, okay. We'll see you boys in an hour."

They were laughing and waving as they went out.

As soon as they went out the door, Maxie snapped his fingers at Cockeye.

"Quick, keep an eye on them. They got my twenty grand, the stupid bastards."

Cockeye went out to tail them.

Maxie went over to the phone and called the Professor at his shop to come right over. Fortunately, he was in. Max explained he had a deal for him. The Professor promised he would be there in twenty minutes.

Maxie tossed Pat and me Coronas. We lit up and we sat puffing away.

Maxie said, "What do you think?"

I said, "It looks okay. They're typical businessmen. Anything to make an honest dollar."

Patsy added, "Them clucks will go for it, balls and all."

Moe came in with a tray of doubles, saying, "Refreshments?"

Maxie said, "You're a mind reader."

We sipped our drinks slowly, each deep in his own thoughts.

The Professor was prompt. Twenty minutes on the dot, he arrived. We all shook hands ceremoniously. He was that type. He had changed much through the years, for the better. He had acquired a polish. He was the same short, stocky, assured middle-aged Italian with the familiar large flowing mustachio. He exuded prosperity, confidence and well-being. He was a real cosmopolitan. We heard he had traveled extensively, selling his money machines and confidence games to the gullible and avaricious all over the world. We had

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heard that he worked in cahoots with every distinguished order and fraternity in the international underworld, such as the Mafia, Unione Siciliana, the Limehouse Clique in London, the Parisian outfit in France and with some of the most eminent members of the United States Criminal Combination.

Maxie asked, "Have a drink, Professor?"

The Professor replied with a gracious wave of the hand, "A little vin ordinaire." He was putting on airs; he forgot we knew him from the old days.

Max looked at Patsy, puzzled. Pat shrugged his shoulders and said, "You mean ordinary red wine, Professor?" When he smiled, he showed his dazzling white teeth.

Maxie said, "We still call it Guinea red."

He chuckled, "I'm getting reacquainted with your American colloquial expressions. Guinea red, that one was unique. I don't care much for intoxicating liquors as a rule and when I do indulge, my tastes run to the plebian side, for I am of stout peasant stock, but," he struck a righteous dramatic pose, "I derive my greatest pleasure from mulcting the aristocracy whenever possible."

"In that respect, we are 'gens de meme famille,'" I shot at him. I finally had my opportunity to get that phrase out of my system.

"Yes, yes," he nodded and smiled. "We are all birds of the same feather."

"Okay, you guys, cut the horseshit. You don't have to put on the act yet," Max said. "When we have the stage all set, then you guys will go into your star act."

Maxie brought the Professor up to date on all the details of our pending transaction with the Himmelfarb brothers.

The Professor was amused at the way the hook had been baited to catch the Himmelfarbs. He interrupted the tale here and there with hilarious laughter and remarks of "Clever. Indeed, very clever."

When Maxie came to the part where the brothers were investing fifteen thousand dollars on the machine, he turned serious. He put his hand up for attention. He shed all his affectations; he acted tense. He spoke our language. He used Jewish locutions.

"Let's have an understanding between us. Tauchess offen tish, boyus. What's my cut?"

Maxie raised his eyebrows. "What do you expect?"

"You ask, what do I expect? What do you think? I want five thousand bucks."

"Five thousand bucks? You're not entitled to such a large slice, but, okay, we'll chalk it up as part payment for the tuition you gave us in the old days." Maxie yawned, "Okay, your cut on the deal is five grand. Don't get your balls in an uproar."

The Professor smiled and rubbed his hands together.

"Fine, Max, fine, when and where is it to take place?"

He became completely relaxed. I smiled at the by-play.

Maxie answered, "Meet us here at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon with the machine."

"Agreed," he replied.

We shook hands. At the door he was the cosmopolite again. He waved, "A rivederci."

I waved in reply. "Au revoir until tomorrow."

We sat down. Maxie tossed me a fresh Corona. We lit up. Max was smiling.

"Quite a character, that Professor. He's an actor. Hey, Noodles, you and him would make a team."

I answered facetiously, "I can't help it if I'm a smart feller."

Maxie laughed.

I asked Patsy, "Judging from his speech what part of Italy does the Professor come from?"

"You got me, I'm a mountain guinea. Goola tay is the kind of Italian I use," he answered.

We laughed together.

Moe came in with a tray of doubles. We sat around smoking and slowly relishing our drinks.

Suddenly Patsy exclaimed, "What about Mr. Moore in the closet?"

"Jesus, I forgot all about him," Maxie said. We all had to laugh at Maxie's unhappy expression.

"It's a lousy thing to laugh about," Max said. "But what the hell. We'll do right by him yet."

Moe came in and said, "The Himmelfarbs are out front again. Let them in?"

Just then Cockeye came in through the back door all out of breath. "Them Himmelfarb shmucks led me a

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goddamn chase.”

Maxie said to Moe, “Let them Himmelfarbs wait awhile.”

He snapped to Cockeye, “What happened?”

“They were ten-dollar bill slap-happy. They went into every store in the neighborhood trying out your samples.”

“So—they were pretty good samples if I have to say so myself,” Maxie chuckled to himself.

Cockeye continued: “They even tried the samples in the Public National Bank.”

We all laughed.

Cockeye said, “But this is going to put a crimp in your laughter, Maxie. I saw them deposit your twenty grand at the receiving teller's window.”

As he finished the sentence, Cockeye burst out laughing. We all laughed at Maxie's sudden expression of woe. He sat there in a state of flux for the moment, scratching his head, muttering, “Hmmm, hmmm.”

After awhile he said, “What the hell. Let's see what they're up to. Tell Moe to send them in.”

The three brothers came hurrying in, very much excited, tripping over each other in their haste. The eldest had one hand on his heaving chest. He was gasping for breath. His thick lips were wet. Spittle showered the air with each word.

“It was wonderful, marvelous. All the stores, everybody, liked the samples. I even tried to change it in the bank, knowing they're experts. For a minute I was scared, terrible. The teller looked at me and said, 'Nice new bill, Mr. Himmelfarb. Make it yourself?' So, I was afraid. I said, 'No. I got a friend who makes them.' So what do you think, the schlemihl, he says to me? 'Himmelfarb, you go into business with your friend. You'll be a millionaire.' Then he was laughing, the meshuggener.”

Each brother added his excited comment about passing the machine-made ten-dollar bills. They were so overzealous, we didn't have a chance to stick a word in edgewise. Their enthusiasm for buying the machine from the Professor today and starting to print money right away, made one of them stutter, “Time is...”

“Time is paramount,” I prompted.

“What? Yes, yes, that's it, Mr. Noodles.”

“Take it easy, partners.”

Maxie was tapping the table for attention. He repeated, “Take it easy.”

He was smiling at their eagerness. Presently, Max had their attention.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “I can see you're real businessmen. You're smart. You recognize a good thing immediately, but we can't start business until tomorrow. I have made arrangements with the Professor who invented this wonderful machine to be at your loft tomorrow at four p.m., and we will complete the transaction there. Okay, partners?”

They nodded their heads in approval. The eldest one kept gushing with a fine spray of spit. “It's wonderful. Fine, fine.”

Maxie leaned over to get a light for his cigar. He muttered in a low voice, “I need an umbrella for this bastard.”

I whispered back, “How about your twenty grand?”

Maxie nodded. He spoke with apparent lightness. “Himmelfarb, old boy, have you got the twenty thousand in a safe place?”

“Oh sure,” Himmelfarb replied. “I'm a businessman, ain't I? I made a deposit in the Public National, and tomorrow, I make out a check for the full total complete amount to the Professor's name. Yes?”

Patsy and I exchanged glances. I was wondering how Maxie would handle this unforeseen problem, but it was simple for Max. He gave it the direct approach.

“No checks, no bookkeeping. Strictly on a cash basis, or I buy the machine for myself.” Maxie's manner was bold and audacious. “You have the thirty-five thousand cash ready tomorrow positively at four p.m. at your loft. The Professor will be there with the machine. Don't forget, cash, or I go into it myself.”

“Sure, sure. It's nothing. Anything you say, partner. I'll have the cash ready.” Himmelfarb had an ingratiating smile on his face. “Only one thing. Will the Professor give us a demonstration?” He lifted his eyebrows questioningly. “And maybe a guarantee for a year?”

He smiled and looked at his brothers for approbation. They smiled back their admiration at his foresight.

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Maxie replied placidly, "You'll get everything: a very good demonstration, and maybe, because I'm your partner, the Professor will give a two-year guarantee." Maxie stood up. "Okay, gentlemen. That about covers everything. I'm a busy man. Until tomorrow then?"

Maxie walked them to the door in the manner of a busy executive politely shoos visitors out.

We all said, "Goodbye. See you tomorrow."

"Whew," Maxie said with a sigh of relief. "Them bastards are a real three-piece set."

"What three-piece set?" Cockeye asked.

We laughed.

Cockeye took his harmonica out and started playing "Dardanella."

Patsy shook his head. "Hey, Cockeye, have a little respect," he gestured with his thumb towards the closet, "for our friend, Mr. Moore."

Cockeye stopped, tapped his harmonica on his palm. "How's this?" and softly played, "Melancholy Baby."

Patsy smiled and nodded. "Yep, something sad for the occasion."

We sat around smoking, drinking and making desultory conversation. Patsy said, "I hear the same Wop plainclothesman is still at it. He's still making pinches on the machines up in Harlem. What's the matter? Can't Frank reach him?"

Maxie shrugged. "Who the hell knows? He's probably looking to make a record of slot-machine arrests."

Patsy said, "He'll wind up, with his record and all, transferred to the ass end of Staten Island, the shmuck. Oh, well, let the shise in the legal department break his balls with it. That shise is a smart boy, eh, Max?"

"Yep," Maxie puffed languidly on his cigar. "He's one of Jimmie's bright young men. He'll go places. Borough President, D. A., Mayor, maybe."

"Talking about places..." Cockeye stopped playing, stood up and yawned. "Let's go someplace, eh, Max?"

"Okay by me," Max replied with an air of genial unconcern. "I give you three picks—a party at Eddie's Hotel with blonde maid service, we kick the gong around at Joey's place, or we have a nice quiet night at the baths."

"Eddie's Hotel," Patsy and Cockeye voted.

"Baths," I said.

"Okay," Maxie smiled with a twinkle in his eye. "The majority rules. We go to the baths."

He laughed at Cockeye's crestfallen expression. "The trouble with you, Cockeye, you want to burn the candle at both ends all the time."

"Not at both ends, Max," Cockeye said reproachfully.

Walking out, I said, "Mr. Moore will get lonesome all by himself."

"Shall we ask him if he wants to join us at the baths?" Maxie replied drily.

I ignored the question.

As we piled into the Caddy, Cockeye asked, "Lutkee's Baths?"

"No. Pennsylvania Hotel Baths. It's clean, quiet, no hoodlums, and no pansies," I said.

Maxie concurred.

Patsy twisted his head around. "I resent hoodlums being mentioned in the same breath with pansies."

I said, "Why, Pat? You consider yourself a hoodlum? You're mistaken. We're all kinds of businessmen—diamond merchants and ten-dollar bill manufacturers, that's us." Cockeye gave me the Bronx cheer.

CHAPTER 18

We felt good the next morning, clean, refreshed and hungry. I asked Moe to fry ham steaks for us with about a dozen fried eggs on top. Cockeye went over to Ratner's for a couple of dozen hot bagels. After we finished our coffee and cigars, Maxie called the main office. He shrugged when he hung up.

"Nothin' with nothin'. All quiet on the western front."

So, we played klabiash most of the morning. Moe ushered in a few people now and then with their insignificant problems.

Then the rabbi from the shul around the corner came in. In Yiddish he told us a pathetic story about an unexpected death in a very poor family. "No burial plot and no money for a funeral."

Maxie called the cemetery and told them to charge the plot to us. He gave the rabbi permission to use our funeral parlor and to help himself to a pine box from our storeroom. The rabbi's story reminded me of the like predicament my family was in years ago. I included the hearse and two funeral cars.

The rabbi said, "God bless you gentlemen. I'll say a prayer for you."

I should have left well enough alone, but in Yiddish I answered, "It really isn't necessary, Rabbi. We're agnostics."

The rabbi with a philosophical smile replied in the same language, "The more reason for me to pray for you, as once I prayed for your father. Yes, at one time your father spoke like you, and did things like you."

"He did what things? What do you mean?"

"This may surprise you, my boy," he smiled indulgently, "but your father was a notorious man in his day, in Odessa."

"What?" I ejaculated.

"Yes, your father also had a colorful nickname, like you have."

"No," I said in disbelief.

"Yes," the rabbi snapped tersely. "In the ghettos of Odessa your father was called, 'Srulick the Shtarker.' He was a well-known horse thief and smuggler." He chuckled at my expression of utter bewilderment.

"My father was called 'Israel the strong and tough one' in Odessa?" There was surprise and admiration in my voice.

"Yes," the rabbi said. "The only reason I'm telling you this is because it seems that that is the only quality you respect in people."

"How come he changed from one extreme to the other, Rabbi?"

"When we happened to come together to this, our new country, I helped him to change his ways; then, after he had reformed and accepted God, he made an effort to atone for his past sins." The rabbi walked to the door, he continued talking. "The Bible says, the sins of the fathers—" He stopped and smiled benignly. "Well, the American expression is, like father, like son. Some day I'm going to change you into conducting yourself like a good Jew. Thank you for everything and sholem aleichem, boys."

"Come around for a visit, Rabbi, and a little conversation," I called after him.

"I'll come around for a schnapps and financial aid for a needy case, better," he chuckled.

"You're always welcome," I said.

After the rabbi had gone I sat still for quite a while, nursing my drink.

Maxie nudged me. "Shake out of it, Noodles, what are you thinking about?"

"What?" I was deep in thought.

"What's on your mind?"

"Oh—I—was thinking of my father. He was quite a man, what do you know? He was called Srulick the Shtarker. Hey, Max, you know a good place wholesale where I can buy a new large stone for my father's grave?"

"Yep, I know a place. When we have a chance, I'll go with you."

Jake, the Goniff, Goo-Goo and Pipy came in for a short visit.

Maxie said, "Just the guys I want to see. What are you guys—mind readers?"

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Jake shook his head. “No, we just came in for a few drinks and a few bucks. We're as flat as a—”
“Titleless broad?” Max finished drily. “How about a little poem first. You got any new ones made up?”
“Max, don't encourage him,” Patsy called out.
“Go ahead, Jake, recite the new one you made up this afternoon.” Goo–Goo nudged him encouragingly.
“All right, all right,” Jake said sheepishly, “here goes:

Mary had a little sheep
She took it to bed one night, to sleep.
The sheep turned out to be a ram Mary had a little lamb.”

We sat there waiting for Jake to continue. He looked at us and shrugged. He was finished.

I groaned, “Oh, no.”

Max said, “Jesus.”

Cockeye laughed, “Don't listen to them, Jake. It was good. You're a poetic genius.”

Max ribbed him. “As you were saying when you first came in, you got plenty of money?”

“Have I got money,” Jake said forlornly, “I got enough to last me the rest of my life, providing I drop dead tonight.”

Max tossed them each a C note, saying “That's on account. I got a little job for you lads. Be back here about ten tonight.”

Jake said, “What about?”

“I'll let you know tonight.”

They had a few more drinks, then they left.

I was wondering what the hell Max needed them for. What did he have up his sleeve now?

At three thirty, Moe announced, “The Professor is outside.”

Max said, “Let him in.”

He came in briskly like a high–powered sales manager, his eyes sparkling, his teeth flashing in a friendly smile. He shook hands warmly as if he meant it. He was really glad to see us again.

He asked, “You boys want a preliminary demonstration?”

“Yep, if you don't mind,” Max replied.

He smiled. “Not at all, not at all. It's a pleasure. One of you lads assist me with my contraption?”

Cockeye volunteered.

They brought it in. It was quite bulky, over six feet long and two feet deep. It was a sturdy chest. They laid it carefully on the table.

The Professor went into his spiel. He was convincing. Watching him demonstrate the machine, I could understand the suckers' gullibility. Right there, before our very eyes, he was turning a crank, feeding blank paper the size of a bill at one end, and out the other end, fresh, crisp ten dollar bills came sliding through a little slot. It was really something. The machine actually seemed to be manufacturing ten–dollar bills. We could hear the complicated machinery working. It seemed to have a familiar sound, but I couldn't place it for the moment.

Maxie said facetiously, “This is too good a thing for the Himmelfarbs. Let's keep it for ourselves.”

“At times, I really believe in it myself,” the Professor said smiling. “Wait until you see the inside.”

He opened the cover. It was a mass of wheels, gears and springs.

“Well, I'll be goddamned,” Maxie exclaimed. “Is it true, Professor?”

The Professor smiled. “It's true, all right, Maxie. The insides are two of the Combination's old slot machines without the fruit decals on the wheels.”

The professor lifted the slot–machine works out and showed us a secretly enclosed compartment where the new ten–dollar bills were stacked. When we turned the crank handle, the mechanism grabbed a blank paper as it was fed into the machine from one end, and pushed it into another secret compartment directly under the compartment of real money.

Then the mechanism pushed a genuine ten–dollar bill into the slot and the bill slid out as if it were just printed. It worked like a mechanical sleight–of–hand operation. The slot–machine mechanism was purely

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window dressing to make the entire thing look complicated and sound noisy. We agreed it was clever. The Professor was pleased at our complimentary remarks.

“Just one more thing,” Maxie was addressing the Professor. “I would like a duplicate chest without the insides.”

The Professor raised his eyebrows. “Pardon?” he said.

Maxie repeated the request and added smilingly, “Don't worry, Professor. I don't want to go into competition with you. I would like an empty chest, minus the machinery. Do you have one handy? I can't explain why, but it's important.”

“Certainly, Maxie, certainly,” the Professor said effusively. “If I had only known, I would have brought an empty with me.”

Maxie said, “After we're through with the Himmelfarbs, I will send Cockeye over to your shop to pick one up. Okay?”

“As many empty boxes as you wish,” the Professor replied.

“One is enough.”

I was trying to figure out the reason why Max wanted the empty chest. Then it dawned on me. I didn't like his idea too much. Maxie and his unnecessary chances, I thought.

The Professor set the machine in working order. He loaded it up with forty new ten-dollar bills, counted out forty blank sheets, wrapped them, and put them in his pocket. We carried the contraption into the Professor's station wagon. We led the way in the Caddy to the Himmelfarb's factory.

When we arrived, the Himmelfarbs shooed everyone off the premises. They gave the watchman the rest of the day off with pay. The pay idea was at Maxie's insistence.

The Professor was letter perfect in his performance. They watched bug-eyed as the ten-dollar bills came sliding out of the machine. Then the Professor picked up the cover and showed them the complicated machinery. They were properly impressed. The eldest Himmelfarb showered everybody with his spittle in his excitement. His comments were all superlatives. “Wunderbar! Marvelous! Colossal!”

When it came to producing the thirty-five thousand, there was a slight hitch. Himmelfarb wanted a written guarantee for a year's perfect performance.

Finally the Professor convinced him. “I will bring a genuine, legal, printed guarantee tomorrow.” The Professor was a terrific salesman.

Maxie whispered, “That guy can talk the ears off a pitcher.”

Himmelfarb handed the Professor the thirty-five thousand with trembling hands. “That's a lot of money,” he said.

The Professor patted him on the back. “Don't worry. Tomorrow I'll get my shipment of blank paper and to you I'll rush the first delivery. I will guarantee you will turn out more than thirty-five thousand dollars profit every week.”

I marveled at the Professor's glibness and at the way they ate it up.

We left the Himmelfarbs calculating their profits. They assured us they would work overtime with the machine as soon as they received the necessary paper. I could see if we didn't get out of there fast, Cockeye would explode. He was choking with suppressed laughter.

We drove directly to the Professor's shop. It was the same dingy cellar-room, but more fully equipped with all sorts of modern wood and metal-working machinery. The Professor counted out thirty thousand dollars and handed it to Maxie.

“You know any more chumps like them Himmelfarbs?” he asked.

Maxie smiled as he said, “Nothing personal, Professor, every man to his racket, but as a rule, we don't go in for this kind of swindle. These Himmelfarbs have been pestering us for a long time. They were itchin' to be taken.”

“It's quite a lucrative racket, I assure you,” the Professor replied. “I get rid of at least one machine a month. My 'take' runs anywhere from three thousand up. The highest fee I ever received was fifty thousand dollars from an Italian Count. I measure my fees according to the financial status of my prospective investors, or should I say, suckers?” He chuckled. He continued in a more serious vein: “Of course, I don't have to caution you. These suckers run to the authorities for redress occasionally.”

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Maxie laughed it off. “We can handle them. Besides, I’ll tell you what, Professor. They won’t have any evidence. You are going to get your machine back, barely used, tonight. This is what I want you to do, if possible. You got a roll of toilet paper?”

I understood why Max wanted an extra box, but why the hell did he need a roll of toilet paper?

With a look of bewilderment, the Professor repeated, “Toilet paper? Why yes, toilet paper is in the toilet.”

He went into the back of the shop, into the washroom, and came back with an open roll of paper. He still looked puzzled as he handed it to Maxie.

Maxie walked over to an empty money-making box and put the roll in and said, “Can you make the paper unravel and tissues come out of the slot as you turn the handle?”

“Yes. Yes, I see what you mean. It will take me about fifteen minutes.”

The Professor was laughing heartily as he went to work.

“A new twist, hey Max?”

I remonstrated with Max. I said, “Why go to all that bother?”

Max gave me an eager smile. “You get the idea, Noodles? Some gag, hey?”

I smiled at Maxie’s boyish eagerness.

It took the Professor a good twenty minutes to set the roll of toilet paper in the box and to make the machine operate smoothly at the turn of the crank. Maxie was as delighted as a kid with a new mechanical toy.

We carried it up the street into the Caddy. Maxie asked, “Will you be in your shop about eleven o’clock tonight? I’ll have the machine we sold Himmelfarb delivered back to you.”

The Professor said, “I’ll wait all night if necessary. I’ll be happy to receive it. The return of the machine will save me a week’s work.”

We took the empty box to the back room at Fat Moe’s. We set it on the floor. I smiled at Maxie. He would go to any extreme for a laugh.

I said, “Shall we help Mr. Moore into the box, Maxie boy?”

I burst out laughing at Maxie’s impulsive response. He jumped up.

“Okay. Yep, let’s go.”

We went to the closet and picked Mr. Moore up.

“But how did you know, Noodles?” he asked.

“Elementary, my dear Watson. Remember, I use my noodle? I’d bet it was even obvious to Cockeye.”

Cockeye mumbled, “Kish mir in tauches, Noodles.”

“Boy, is he beginning to smell kind of ripe,” Max said. We laid Mr. Moore neatly out in the box.

“Chanel number 5—pew!” Max muttered.

“Stronger than number 5,” I grinned. “He smells at least like a number 7.”

Maxie inquired gravely, “Are you placing him in okay on your end, so Mr. Moore won’t interfere with the toilet paper operation?”

“It’s okay, Max. I secured his feet on both sides, out of the way.” We fastened the cover down tightly.

Maxie turned the handle; a stream of toilet tissue came sliding out of the slot. Maxie mimicked the eldest Himmelfarb, spittle and all, “Marvelous—colossal!”

Cockeye said, “Boy, would I like to be there when they turn the crank and this crap paper comes flowing out.”

“And when they open the cover to look inside,” Patsy laughed, “there will be Mr. Moore staring right up at them.”

“I’ll bet they’ll drop dead, like Mr. Moore,” Cockeye said.

We left the box lying on the floor.

Maxie said, “After this piece of work I guess refreshments are in order.”

Cockeye stuck his head out to the bar and shouted, “Refreshments.”

Moe came in with a tray of doubles. Patsy whiled away a little time punching the big bag. Max practiced drawing the .22 attached to his sleeve gimmick. Cockeye played soft music on his harmonica. I practiced with my knife, slashing away at the thin air.

Jake, the Goniff, Pipy and Goo-Goo came in promptly at ten o’clock. As always, they walked in the same

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order, single file. First Jake with his exaggerated swagger, Pipy like a smiling ferret, his eyes darting all over, and Goo-Goo, lurching from side to side, continually glancing behind as if expecting a blow from that direction.

Maxie said, "Have a shot?"

The question was wholly superfluous, for I never knew them to refuse.

Cockeye stuck his head out to the bar. "Keep them coming, Moe."

Moe kept coming in with trays.

Jake and his cohorts kept eyeing the box. Finally, Jake asked, "What the hell you got in the box, Max?"

Max airily said, "Come here. I'll show you the newest thing on the market."

Maxie picked up a newspaper, tore it into long strips about four inches wide. He stuck it into the slot at the end made to receive the blank paper. He turned the handle and in a serious tone said, as toilet tissue came flowing out, "This is the newest invention of the age—a crap-paper manufacturing machine."

I said, "Yeh. This is the biggest thing ever invented. Every family in the world will want to buy one."

Jake, the Goniff, nodded his head and said sagely, "Boy, can you imagine the money people will save, especially large families, making crap paper out of their old newspapers?"

I said, "The biggest thing since Edison discovered the electric bulb."

Maxie said gravely, "This is Marconi's invention. You guys ever hear of Marconi, the guy who invented the wireless?"

Goo-Goo said, "Yeh, we heard of him—smart Italian."

Maxie said, "Now listen closely, Jake. This is what I want you to do, and don't start asking me a lot of silly questions why."

Jake looked hurt. He asked reproachfully, "Since when did I ever ask you questions, Max?"

Maxie said, "Okay, okay, don't be so goddamn sensitive. You know the Himmelfarb brothers' factory?"

Jake nodded.

Goo-Goo interrupted, "Yeh, Max, I got a cousin who works there."

Maxie continued: "That's good. I want you to bring this box up there tonight and pick up another box that's lying there just like this one. An even exchange, get it?"

Jake said questioningly, "Tonight? They close their plant at seven. It's after ten already."

Maxie said impatiently, "If I wanted it delivered when they were there, I would hire a legitimate truckman, not you, you goniff."

Jake's face broke into a happy smile. "Oh—I get it. You want us to break into the joint?"

Maxie smiled. "You're getting smarter by the minute. Can you get a little truck?"

Jake replied, "Yeh, we can borrow Klemy's, the rug cleaner's."

Maxie chuckled, "Klemy loans everybody his truck, doesn't he? Someday he'll get his ass in a sling."

"We did him plenty of favors," Pipy said.

Goo-Goo asked hopefully, "Can we clip the joint while we're there?"

"I don't know." Maxie seemed doubtful. "I'll tell you what. Don't touch any material or finished goods, but if you find any dough, it's yours."

Jake said, "Thanks, Max."

I looked at the goniff to see if he was sarcastic. He wasn't; he meant it.

Max said, "Okay, get started."

Jake turned to Goo-Goo and said, "Go up to Klemy's house and tell him we want the truck."

Goo-Goo snatched a hurried drink and went on his way.

While we waited for Goo-Goo to come back with the truck, Pipy and Jake exchanged hurried and excited whispers. Pipy insisted, "Ask him. Ask him. Go ahead, you ask."

I finally said, "What's on your mind, Jakie boy? Talk up; don't be bashful."

"I'm not bashful, Noodles."

Jake cleared his throat and hesitated a moment; then in an apologetic tone, blurted out, "Pip and I were talking."

He hesitated again.

Max prompted, "About what?"

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He took the plunge, "We would like to go into that business," pointing to the box.

Max was puzzled. "What business?"

"Crap-paper manufacturing business," Pipy cut in eagerly.

"Jesus Christ!" Maxie said in disbelief. "Is it possible?"

I was thinking—boy oh boy! Here we have a couple of real East Side hard-boiled knock-around guys, guys that know every swindle and conniving racket that was ever pulled, and they're falling for one of Maxie's unpremeditated gags. Barnum was right.

Maxie asked incredulously, "You guys want to invest money in that thing?"

Jake and Pip nodded.

Jake said, "Sure, Maxie. We got a little dough," he added with slight hesitancy, "the dough you gave us, and we thought we could borrow the rest of the dough from you."

Maxie, with an effort, suppressed his hilarity. "I tell you what," Maxie said musingly. "This crap-paper manufacturing business is no good for you guys. It's a legitimate business. You guys ain't cut out for a legit business. Besides, there's a depression on—every business is lousy."

"Even the subways are in a hole," Patsy cut in.

"Yeh," Cockeye added, "even the Palisades are on the rocks."

Maxie said, "Them gags are so old they stink out loud."

"He's jealous, Pat," Cockeye said, "because he didn't think of them."

"I'll tell you what I'll do."

Maxie walked around, his head bent, his lips puckered in thought. He stopped and looked at Jake and Pipy. His face lit up with a broad affectionate smile. He consulted with me. I nodded agreeably. "Sure it's okay with me," I said.

He turned to Jake and Pipy. "I'll give you something down your alley, something you guys can depend on to make a buck."

With the grandiose air of a baron granting largesse to old and faithful servitors, he said, "Starting from now, the 'speak' on Broome Street belongs to Jake, Pip and Goo-Goo. Tell Izzy the manager to give you the keys and if there are any questions, tell him to call me. I didn't think you guys cared to go into business. How about it. Okay?"

Maxie asked if it was okay. It was as okay as for a struggling young tyro to be given the lead at the Met. A speakeasy to them was the pinnacle of success.

Jake's voice choked with emotion.

"Thanks, Maxie, Noodles. Thanks a lot, fellers," he said.

Little Pipy hurriedly wiped his nose with his sleeve. He seemed overcome.

"Goddamn! Wait until Goo-Goo hears about this. Thanks very much, fellers." He looked at us, affection in his eyes.

"I'll hear about what, Pip?"

It was Goo-Goo. He came shuffling in. He looked around curiously. "I got Klemy's truck outside."

Pipy put his arm around Goo-Goo's shoulders. "Goo-Goo, we're in business. Maxie, Noodles and the boys just gave us the 'speak' on Broome Street."

Goo-Goo's eyes grew dangerously larger as if they were going to pop. He swallowed hard and started coughing violently. Jake patted him on the back.

He said, "Take it easy. Take it easy."

Finally Goo-Goo managed to stammer a "Thank you, fellas."

Max turned to me and asked, "What's the score on that Broome Street 'speak', Noodles?"

I took my little book out and turned to the page marked, "Speaks." I went down the line where I had the Broome Street data and said, "It does approximately twenty-eight hundred dollars on beer and whiskey per week, approximately four hundred gross on the slot machines. After all expenses for help, fix, rent, and miscellaneous, there's about twelve hundred dollars a week net profit."

"O.K., boys," said Max, "it's all yours. Keep the same help; keep the joint clean and respectable." He looked at Jake sternly. "And no rolling luses." He glared at Goo-Goo and Pipy; waving his finger under their noses, he admonished, "No whores in the joint."

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Jake said, "I promise you we keep the joint clean, Max."

"One more thing," Max continued, waving his finger sternly. "You got yourselves a racket that should earn you about four hundred bucks a week apiece. Salt some of it away for a rainy day. Prohibition won't last forever. Remember, don't go pissing it away. Okay, then, get started with that thing." He gestured with his thumb to the box. "Now be careful with it. The machinery inside is delicate," he warned as Pip and Goo-Goo handled the box roughly. "You got your stuff to open the factory door?"

Jake looked at Max chidingly. "What do you think we are—amateurs?"

He took out a ring of master keys and dangled them in the air. There seemed to be about twenty-five, all shapes and sizes. "And Pipy's got another set. I'll bet we can open any door in New York in ten minutes, without a jimmy, and if we got to jimmy the joint, Goo-Goo's got the best jimmy in the trade."

"Okay," Max said, "okay. I just wanted to be sure you had your equipment with you. Now don't forget. Get that other box at Himmelfarb's and bring it here. It's very important."

Jake said with an impatient wave of the hand, "Okay, I won't forget," and they walked to the door. Jake turned around and remarked, "It looks like we're carrying a coffin."

I said somberly, "Goodbye, Mr. Moore."

Jake turned. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

They went out the door.

The job took longer than we expected, but they were bright and cheerful when they came back carrying a box between them.

"How did it go?" Max said. "Any trouble getting into the factory?"

Jake said, "As much trouble as getting into Peggy's. Anything else we can do, Max? Otherwise we'd like to run over to our 'speak'."

Jake said it with a shy, proud smile.

Maxie smiled back. "Okay, Jakie," he said. "Have Izzy call me, and I'll give him the okay if he questions you."

The three of them said, "Thanks, fellas."

They must have flown to Broome Street. Izzy was on the wire a few minutes later asking if it was okay.

Maxie said, "Yep—yep. The joint is theirs, and tell Jake I said to give you a twenty-five dollar raise."

Max hung up, and turned to Cockeye and Patsy. Pointing to them both he said, "You and you are volunteering to bring the box to the Professor, okay?"

I said to Max when we were alone, "What do you think? There may be a comeback from the Himmelfarbs. They aren't the type to keep quiet on a fifteen-grand loss."

Max answered with a grin on his face.

"What the hell can they prove? As far as anybody is concerned, we got rooked for twenty grand on the deal ourselves," he said. "The Himmelfarbs may guess we were in cahoots with the Professor, but they got no proof. They haven't even got the money machine as evidence. Besides, they got a new problem that will keep them busy— what to do with Mr. Moore."

Maxie puffed away on his cigar, his chair tilted back, his eyes closed, a peaceful expression on his face. I thought he was falling asleep.

He stirred slightly and murmured lazily, "You know, Noodles, worse comes to worse, them Himmelfarbs can go into the toilet paper manufacturing business."

CHAPTER 19

“Call the club right away,” was Moe's greeting as we came in the next morning.

Max raised his eyebrows significantly to me. “I thought so,” he said. “Did he say what for?” He turned to Moe.

“Nope,” Fat Moe shook his head. “He didn't say, all he said, it was very important. He called twice this morning.”

Maxie gulped his hooker and called the district Tammany leader at the club. After a moment's conversation he hung the receiver back on the hook, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Let's shoot over, it's urgent.”

We walked right into the leader's inner office without knocking. He was sitting behind his desk, a worried expression on his face. He waved us to chairs scattered around the room. We brought them close around the desk.

Max said, “What's up?”

“Well, I got two calls this morning. One from Center Street—”

He looked at us to see if we were impressed.

Max said, “So?”

“And I got one from police headquarters. The other one came right from the D.A.'s office.”

Max said, “So? What else?”

“I just want you guys to know I'm on the job.”

Max said, “Okay, we know you're on the job. So, what else is new?”

“All right, Max, I'll tell it to you as I got it from both places. It's a queer, mixed up story about these Himmelfarbs you asked me to keep a lookout for. For a friend of yours, you said, Max.”

Max and I exchanged glances.

I said, “Well what happened with them crumb buns?”

He looked at me intently.

“Well, when the Himmelfarb brothers arrived at their factory this morning, they walked over to a box they claim had a special piece of printing machinery in it. The machine did not work. They opened the lid to look inside. There was no machine in the box.”

He paused for dramatic effect. “What do you guys think was in the box?”

“What was in the box?” I asked with simulated interest.

“A body was in the box.”

“A dead body?” Max asked without cracking a smile. “So what else is new?”

“Yes, a dead body,” the district leader said sarcastically, looking sharply at Max. He continued in the same tone. “Of course, you lads know nothing about it, especially as the corpse died a natural death,” he chuckled, “natural deaths being out of your line.”

“Yep, so what else is new?” Max asked drily, “where do we come into the story, or do we? Did they say what this machine was supposed to print?”

“You guys are in the story all right. Don't worry. No, they didn't say what the machine was supposed to print. Well, anyway the elder Himmelfarb is in the hospital, shock or heart failure or something; the other two told the cops a queer disconnected story involving you lads.” “How are we involved in this ridiculous thing?” I asked.

“They claim they bought the box through you fellows.”

“We get blamed for every queer thing that happens on the East Side,” I said plaintively.

“Yes, Noodles, how true,” the leader eyed me keenly. “Well, fortunately the corpse died a natural death, so there won't be much trouble on that score, and the Himmelfarb's are very evasive in explaining what type of printing machine it was—so, I guess it won't take much to squash any interest the D. A. or the cops may have in this case.”

“How much?” Max asked taking a roll of bills out.

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“A couple of those Cleveland portraits will do it.”

Max peeled off two one-thousand-dollar bills and tossed them on the desk.

“Not that we know anything about this silly Himmelfarb story. This dough is just for general good will,” he said.

The leader chuckled. “Yes, for good will, but not the good will of the Himmelfarb brothers.”

Max stood up. “Well, what else is new?” he asked.

The leader smiled and shrugged. He walked out to the street with us. As we drove away he shouted after us, “Well, what else is new?”

“Now he's needling me with that, 'well, what else is new?'" Max said ruefully. “Yep, he feels okay; he's two grand to the good!”

“He splits part of it with the cops and D. A. He don't keep all of it,” I said.

“Yep, I guess part of it he turns over to them, but I guarantee you, it's a small part,” Max said drily.

“Yeh, I guess so,” I agreed. “It goes to show you the power of a buck.”

“Yep, you're right, Noodles, it goes to prove you can buy anybody with a charlotte russe.”

“Yeh,” I said.

“Yep,” he said.

At last I got a lucky break. It happened I was the first to arrive in the back room that morning. I was alone when the phone rang. It was Dolores calling her brother, Fat Moe. When I realized it was her lyric, voice coming over the wire, the unexpectedness of it left me tingling and speechless for the moment.

Then all the pent-up hunger for Dolores burst its dam. I asked, I pleaded, I reasoned, I cajoled until she graciously surrendered and granted me a date for the same afternoon.

“All right, all right, Noodles,” she laughed at my insistence, “your eagerness bewilders me. All right, then, today, but I have a matinee, and I won't be able to make it until five-thirty. Is that all right?” Then, with a touch of coquetry, she continued, “Did you see me in my show yet?”

Did I see her dance in the show? If she only knew how many times I had sat there in the dark orchestra, sick with longing for her.

“No, but I would like to,” I lied.

“All right, Noodles, the treat will be on me. I'll leave a ticket for you at the box office and meet you at the stage door twenty minutes after the show. All right?”

“Impatience will be my middle name until then,” I said.

Her pleasant laugh came over the phone. “I doubt it, but you have learned to say nice things. Now, please, put Moe on before I forget what I intended to ask him.”

I called out, “Hey, Moe, your sister Dolores is on the phone.”

“Who? Dolores? Oh—okay.”

I watched fat, clumsy Moe at the telephone and compared him to the lithe, dazzling, graceful beauty of Dolores. They're as alike as an orchid and a stinkweed. I waited for Moe to finish the conversation. I couldn't help overhearing. She wanted to make an appointment with her brother to visit the graves of their mother and father before she left town for somewhere. I tried to catch her destination, but I couldn't. She wanted to make the appointment for Sunday.

I heard Moe say, “I'm not sure I can make it. Maxie isn't here.”

I called out. “It's okay. You can take Sunday off.” As an afterthought I added, “And I'll supply a car and a chauffeur for the day.”

Moe turned around with a pleased smile after he hung up.

He said, “Dolores said to thank you very much for the chauffeur and the car you promised, Noodles.”

I said, “It's okay.” And as casually as I could I asked, “Where's she going, on a trip?”

“Yeh, didn't you hear? The kid got herself a Hollywood offer. She got a bit dancing part in a musical picture.”

My heart sank.

I said, “No, I didn't hear.”

I hurried out to avoid Maxie. On second thought I went back and left word with Moe, “I'll be gone for the

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rest of the day on some personal business. I'll call Max and explain later.”

I felt like a schoolboy going on his first date. I grabbed a cab to my hotel, and began frantic preparations. I took all my suits out of the closet and laid them on the bed. I picked out a dark blue with a very thin pencil stripe. It was practically new, conservative but dressy.

I rummaged hurriedly through my shirt drawer and picked out the starchiest and whitest one in the lot. I examined my collection of shoes. None of them suited me. I decided to run over to Fifth Avenue later to buy a new pair. While I was there I'd get a new smart tie at Sulka's. Might as well get a new hat, too. Maybe a derby. A derby? No good; I dismissed the idea. Not with my face—too red and beefy. I laughed to myself, beefy? I wasn't beefy. I looked at myself in the long mirror on the closet door. There was no beef there, neither in the face nor body. It was all bone and muscle. I was in tip-top shape. I didn't need any padding in my shoulders like some guys. Well, maybe just a little, so the jacket would hang right. I'd better take the harness off. The roscoe would spoil the fit. Yeh, the shiv I'd keep. I'd feel naked without it. Not a bad-looking guy, hey, Noodles, old boy? Almost six feet, well, all right, almost 5'n". That's almost six feet in anybody's arithmetic.

Damn, after all these years a date with Dolores. That's what I needed, a date to shatter this illusion, this phobia. Jesus, I was beginning to worship her. Why? I didn't really know her. I had spoken to her maybe five times in about ten or twelve years.

Boy, she sure had something that attracted. So she finally condescended to give me a date? Who in the hell did she think she was? She was only a broad from the East Side, a piece of lay, for all I knew. I probably had a better one than her hundreds of times. Aw, what the hell was the matter with me, always thinking and acting like a hoodlum.

There's only one Dolores: a sweet kid, pure and clean, from the day she was born. She's culture—a Hunter College graduate, beautiful, and, I'd bet, loyal and tender, too. A girl you could trust. Some woman, my Dolores baby! When she danced in those flimsy veils with the lights on her and you got a glimpse of her body, just like some goddess—I don't know how I controlled myself. Some day I'd crack up just thinking about her.

I took a cold shower, went downstairs to the barber shop and had the works: shave, haircut, shampoo, massage and manicure. I told Angelo to go easy on the hair tonic, I didn't want to smell like a pansy. Then, I called up Carey's for a limousine and chauffeur. The girl over there asked for my name.

I kidded her and said, “I'm surprised you don't recognize my voice. This is Mr. Dupont.”

She apologized.

“I'm a new girl here.”

I gave her the address and assured her I was engaging the car and chauffeur for the day.

When the chauffeur arrived he had Mr. Dupont paged. I stepped out. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. Then, with his hat off, he explained, “They didn't have you on the books. I'm extremely sorry, sir, but my orders are to collect in advance.”

I took out a C note, tore it in half, and said, “Okay, pal, at the end of the day you get the other half as a tip. Will that cover everything?”

A smile spread over his face. He clicked his heels, gave me a snappy salute and said, “Yes, sir.”

“Cut the 'yes, sir' crap. With me it's horseshit. I'm a boy from the boyus.” He understood the East Side colloquialism. He laughed and said, “Yeh, you look too regular to be a society guy.”

I smiled as I got in next to him. “I guess you meant that as a compliment?” I asked.

“Yep, them kind act as if their shit don't stink.”

I told him to drive over to Fifth Avenue. He helped me do the shopping I planned. I bought him a five-buck tie. We stopped at a Riker's and had a couple of hamburgers without onions, coffee and doughnuts. I went into the florist on Fifty-Seventh Street for a corsage, and got orchids, something special.

We drove to the theater. My orchestra ticket was waiting for me at the box office. All I could get for Jimmy was a seat in the rear balcony.

Jimmy said, “It's okay. I got good eyesight.”

Dolores' dance was bewitching. Her part was over far too soon, and I was too fidgety to watch the rest of the show, so I walked out to the car, parked outside the stage-door entrance. I stood leaning nervously against it.

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Finally, the show broke. Jimmy came running out.

“Boy, that was some show,” he said. “I sure could go for that cute babe in that dance number, the one with the veils. I sure developed a yen for her. Where to, now?”

He was all out of breath.

I said drily, “We wait here until that cute babe you developed a yen for hangs up her veils and comes out.”

Jimmy said, “Oh,” sort of embarrassed. I stood there puffing on a cigar, waiting. When she came walking towards me, I actually felt confused, yeh, me, Noodles, flustered and nervous.

Her greeting was so different from my awkward and mawkish one. She had a proud, sure manner, warm and friendly. She gave me her soft, thrilling hand and smiled her breathless smile.

“How are you, Noodles? I really am glad to see you after all these years.”

I hadn't realized she was so tall. Almost my size in high heels. I was about to open the door, but Jimmy, his eyes shining his admiration and approval, beat me to it. He closed the door and in an exaggerated, respectful tone said, “Where to, sir?”

I heard myself saying curtly, “To Ben Reilly's Arrowhead Inn, James.” Then, lamely, to make amends, I added, “Hey, Jim, do you know where it is?”

He turned around with an understanding smile and snapped a pleasant “Yes, sir.”

“Will we have time to drive all that distance? Don't forget I have to be back at the theater by eight or so,” she said.

“I promise to get you back in time.”

I took her willing hand and held it. I gave it a gentle squeeze. She smiled and returned the squeeze. A thrill seemed to shoot from her fingers to mine and, like a hot, sharp electric current, through every part of me. I was tingling and breathless. I leaned back in the far corner of the limousine, and gazed at her. An exquisite perfume enveloped her, a scent that left me giddy with desire. I took a deep breath and made believe I was faint. She looked at me, amused.

“Oh, Noodles, come now, surely I don't affect you that much?”

I sat there actually overcome by emotion. How could I assure her she did affect me that deeply?

In the tone of a Delilah she said, “Oh, Noodles, you *are* a character.”

She made all the conversation. Everything and anything she said was fresh, scintillating, delightful. I just sat dumbly fondling her little hand, watching the movement of her lips, her silky lashes, her shining green eyes.

I admired her simple, chic, expensive ensemble, and I told her so. Everything about her was in perfect harmony.

The forty-minute ride seemed like two minutes.

The maitre d'Hotel of the inn gave us his personal attention. The sumptuous, ten-course dinner Dolores prompted me to order was a gourmet's delight. Dolores ate with the zest of a healthy, beautiful animal. I was too engrossed in my companion to eat, or maybe it was the hamburgers that Jimmy and I had eaten at Riker's. Anyway, I nibbled my food like a lotus eater.

Dolores patted my hand and said, “It would be a nice gesture if you asked the chauffeur to have some dinner with us.”

I called to the headwaiter and told him to ask Jimmy in to dinner.

He bowed and explained, “He already has been served in the chauffeur's room. It is the custom of the Inn.”

Dolores and I laughed as if it was a terrific joke on both of us.

We went outside for a fifteen-minute walk in the pleasant, almost countrylike surroundings. She contentedly smoked a cigarette. An odd impulse overcame me before I took a cigar out of my pocket. I looked down along the driveway, searching for a discarded cigar butt. I told Dolores what I was looking for. She laughed and took my hand.

She said, “A far cry from the old days, isn't it? I'm so happy for you, honey, but—” she was grave; she shook her head sadly, “the terrible, awful life you boys lead.”

I kept quiet. She sensed I didn't want to discuss my life. She changed the subject. I was secretly thrilled that she had called me honey. It showed she was interested in me. I was thinking, for you, darling, I will lead any life you pick out. I'll retire; I'll make a break and quit while the quitting is good. I had over a hundred

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grand in the vaults. I'd heap it all at Dolores's feet and ask her to marry me. Yeh, I'd ask her on the ride back. I'd go into some kind of legit business out of town, a small town. I'd buy a house somewhere away from the stink of the city. Dolores and me, and baby makes three.

I began to hum, "The birds are singing for me and my gal."

How the hell does the rest of it go? I'll have Cockeye play it at our wedding. That'll be a new twist. Maxie will be my best man. Boy, will they be surprised when I break the news. I'm going to get married to my darling and retire. Yeh, and she's going to retire, too. No more dancing for her.

Boy, come to think of it, according to all the loused-up movie stories of hoodlums breaking away from the mob, he invariably gets the "business" if he quits. Boy, is that a load of malarkey. It never happened in real life. What the hell does a mob care if a member retires as long as the guy really quits and minds his own business? It leaves more for the guys who remain.

Dolores squeezed my hand as we walked to the car. "What are you humming and smiling about, honey?"

"I'll tell you all about it, my pretty maiden, shortly, very shortly."

I was floating on air. I helped her into the car.

"Drive slowly back to the theater, Jimmy boy," I sang out gaily.

I tossed him a cigar. He grinned. This is an okay life. I'll buy me a limousine, too, and ask Jimmy to work for me steady, but I won't treat him like a chauffeur. I'll treat him like a pal, like a human being. He's a pretty nice guy. Yeh, I'm a pretty nice guy, too. I'm a conceited bastard, too.

I took Dolores' hand and began, very sure of myself, "Dolores, honey, this has been the happiest day of my life. I have never felt so contented with anybody, or as comfortable to be with, as with you, honey."

She smiled at me and said, "Really? I am glad." She patted my hand.

Her statement that she was "glad" and her smile made me take things for granted.

Bluntly I began, "Dolores, honey, I love you. I want to marry you."

Self-consciously I put my arm around her and attempted to kiss her. She gasped her surprise and moved away.

In an astounded tone she said, "We hardly know each other. Besides—"

I cut her off. "We'll become better acquainted after we're married—"

Soberly she interrupted, "I should have had a talk with you a long time ago. I guess now is as good a time as any. I was just about to say, I'm practically engaged to be married. Besides, I'm going to Hollywood. I have a picture contract. I hope to remain there."

Shocked, I said, "What? When are you leaving?"

"Sunday evening."

I felt myself sinking. What was the matter with me? Was I that obnoxious to her? What had happened to spoil the perfect mood we were in? She isn't the same warm Dolores of a moment ago. She's sitting there cool, out of my reach. Why? She seemed to reciprocate my feelings a moment ago. I was sure of it. Now this sort of talk. I couldn't understand it. What was she, just a tease?

"Noodles, in the first place, I really never knew you, really I didn't. I didn't know you were such—such a nice boy."

"Boy?" I questioned weakly.

"Well, then, such a nice gentleman. You like that better?" She smiled politely.

"Why, what sort did you think I was?"

"Well, I won't go into that, but to be frank, I imagined that you had grown up entirely different."

"Why did you? You never gave me a chance all these years to get acquainted."

"After all, let's be practical. I remembered you as—" She laughed, then she caught my eye. "Oh forgive me, Noodles, I wasn't laughing at you. But you were," she sighed. "Well, I remember you as—" she hesitated, "pretty vicious."

I goaded her. "Go ahead and say it, a filthy, stinking East Side bum."

"Oh no." Her hand flew up in a gesture of hurt denial. "Believe me, Noodles, I meant nothing of the kind. I come from the same background as you do. I never meant to imply anything of the sort, only, somehow, I was always afraid of you."

"You were afraid, all right. Then were there other reasons why you ignored me all these years?"

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“Well, my attitude was silly, come to think of it. I should have acted more sensibly and answered your notes and calls. First, I didn't want any outside interests interfering with my dancing. I'm very ambitious. I love dancing, and it took up all my time, and besides,” she said it quickly without emotion, “I have loved somebody for a good many years. A peaceful, conservative businessman whom some day I intend to marry. That's why I went out with you today, to explain to you not to try and see me any more or to send me flowers—or things.”

I didn't say a word. I kept looking the other way. Her words were digging into my heart. I was shocked, and my vanity was hurt. I looked out the window. Slowly I turned toward her. She moved away and kept gazing out the window. Then she turned. Our eyes met. Her hand crept into mine. She squeezed my hand.

“You know, Noodles, you're a very presentable chap.” Her eyes were full of compassion. “I really like you.”

“Yeh, you like me, but you won't have anything to do with me,” I muttered.

“Well—there are so many other attractive girls—”

Girls? Don't I know there are girls? What the hell is she telling me? Something I don't know about? Me, Noodles? I've had all of them, the ones Winchell calls Debutramps, who hang out in those Park Avenue “speaks” to Broadway tramps. If I could lay out in single file all the broads I had, they would reach from the Bronx to the Battery. What the hell is she handing me? Yeh, she's only teasing me. There's nobody else for me. I got to have her. She's in my blood. She's deep inside of me. If I don't have her at least once, I'll go nuts, I'll crack up. A crazy thought struck me. Maybe, if I lay her, it will break the enchantment, this hold she has on me. I'll give it to her now. It will force her to marry me. Yeh, I'll use her. Then, so help me Jesus, I'll forget her. That's the way it works with me, lay them and forget them. The thought aroused a sharp, ungovernable excitement in me.

I sprang at her. I grabbed her in my arms and squeezed her hard, as if I could press the beauty and love out of her body into the aching, hungry void in mine.

She was crying, “Stop, Noodles, please, stop.” She was white with fear. She cried, “You're hurting me.”

I showered her with my wet, hot kisses. I bit her lips till they bled. She was like a helpless bird in my grasp. With my knee I forced her legs wide apart. A glimpse of her black lace panties against her pink beautiful thighs stirred me to a frenzied pitch.

I pulled her dress down from her white shoulders. I broke the straps from her brassiere, exposing her two round firm breasts. I buried my face in them.

She screamed out. “Please, don't! Stop it, please, stop it!”

The car came to an abrupt stop, throwing us both to the floor. The door opened. Jimmy stood there looking agitated.

He demanded, “For Christ sake, let up. You want to kill the girl? You want to get us arrested?”

Dolores lay crumpled and unconscious in a corner. In a daze I watched Jimmy trying to revive her. After awhile I realized Dolores was injured. Frantically I bent over her. I rubbed her hands. I called to her, “Dolores, Dolores.” Gently I patted her cheek. She fluttered her eyelids. She gasped. She opened her eyes wide and stared in fright.

I cried, “How are you? How are you feeling, baby?”

I mopped the blood from her lips. “I'm terribly sorry, Dolores.”

Gently I kissed her hand. She pulled it away. She cried out, “You're a brute; you're a wicked man.”

I murmured, “It's true. I am terribly sorry. Please forgive me.”

We were parked on a deserted uptown street. She moaned.

“Let me out. I'm sick. I need some air,” she said.

We helped her out and walked her up and down the street. She was like a weak, broken little girl.

Suddenly Dolores gasped, “I'm sick, oh, I'm terribly sick.” She almost fell; then she vomited.

Jimmy jumped away. I held her tight. She retched all over my new blue suit. I didn't mind. I held her closer to me. I wiped her face. She was crying. Her make-up was spoiled. Her mascara was running in black streaks down her soft cheeks.

Weakly she said, “Please take me home.”

I helped her back into the car. I told Jimmy to stop at a gas station.

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I said, "Go into the ladies' room and get washed."

Obediently she went in. I went into the gents' room and cleaned up the best I could.

On the way back I tried to talk her out of her silent dejection. I acted contrite and apologetic. But to no avail. I couldn't shake her out of it. She sat in her corner looking out the window, morose and bitter. I didn't know how to make amends. I had never felt so wretched and miserable.

I asked, "When are you leaving?"

She answered coldly, "It's no concern of yours."

"What time should I tell Jimmy to report with the limousine to drive you and Moe to the cemetery tomorrow?"

"We'll take the subway. I don't want any favors from you."

The rest of the trip back to the theater, I felt ashamed. She didn't say a word, not even goodbye as she got out of the car.

I gave Jimmy the other half of the C note. He said, "Thanks. You know you got a bum approach with the girls, pal?"

CHAPTER 20

The worst thing I could have done was to go up to my rooms. I brooded. I felt sorry for myself. I drank, played blues and torch songs on the victrola. I drank myself to sleep.

I woke up early the next morning—Sunday. My first thought was that today Dolores was leaving. My head throbbed as if somebody was drilling into my brain. I was a sick guy, all right. Sick at heart. Yeh, I was love-sick. I guess that was my main illness. I was in a mood, all right, a mood of dreary loneliness. I paced up and down the room, pounding my fist in the palm of my hand. What the hell was the matter with me? Why had I attempted it? What was I working myself into?

I got to get the hell out for some air, but where? Down to the stinking East Side and hang around all day in the back room of Fat Moe's with Max, Pat and Cockeye? I'd be bored to death. Boy, was I getting into a sorry state. If, after all these years, I was beginning to think I was better than they were—who the hell was I to get bored in their company? What I needed was a little action. Yeh, I was frustrated. I needed a little of the bang action we had had in the old days. Things were too dull with this Combination set-up.

I went out and wandered around midtown, from one "speak" to another. I tried the movies. I sat upstairs in the balcony of the Strand, smoking a cigar, thinking of Dolores and her trip. Yeh, that's where she was going. Where this picture was made. She was going today. I banged my lighted cigar on the floor, angry at the thought of her leaving, scattering sparks and ashes on the clothes of the guy sitting next to me. He turned on me belligerently.

"What the hell's eating you? You nutty or something?"

I went crazy. Before he knew it, I had the shiv pressed against his belly. I snarled in his face, "You want me to dig this into you, bastard? Sit down before I cut your liver out."

He sat down.

I hurried out with voices inside me whispering, "You stinkin bully, you stinkin bully, bulldozing defenseless people, you stinkin East Side bully."

I went around the corner to Mario's "speak." He gave me a big hello. I snapped at him in Italian, "Fon-go-lay-tay." He walked away fast. I had three quick double hookers. The bartender didn't want to take my money.

He smiled and said, "Professional courtesy, Noodles, you know your money is no good here."

I threw a five-dollar bill in his face. I spit at him, "Go ahead, you bastard, ring it up."

With a startled expression he picked it up and put it in the register.

Incensed by my nastiness, a big, well-dressed drunk with an ugly leer came lurching over.

"Hey, you're a tough guy, ain't you?" he asked.

He took me by surprise. He was pretty fast. He feinted with his left and chipped me a shot on the chin with his right. I staggered back. I almost lost my balance. There was an open quart of Golden Wedding on the bar. I grabbed it and smashed him across the face with it. He went shrieking with pain into the men's toilet. I flung the broken bottle crashing after him. The whiskey spilled all over me.

I ran outside. I remembered people shying away from me in disgust.

A kid shouted after me, "You stink like a beer saloon, mister, like a brewery."

My feet, or was it my heart, led me? Before I realized it, I was pounding the marble counter of the information desk at the Grand Central Station. "When is the next train for Hollywood?" I shouted. I had a crazy notion of getting on the train and going there.

The frightened girl said, "In thirty-five minutes, sir."

"What track?" I barked at her.

She told me. I went looking for it. Right ahead of me, holding hands and walking toward the same track, two red caps carrying baggage, was Dolores and a man. That was almost the end for me. Everything crashed in on me.

I don't know how I got back to my hotel, but I was suddenly aware of being on the bed fully clothed, with my shoes on. A quart bottle of Mt. Vernon was on a chair beside me. I was a woeful, miserable man. My

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world had cracked. Nothing was good. I was full of torment. Now I saw it all. I was a bum, an East Side bum. I began feeling sorry for myself. I took a long swig of the Mt. Vernon.

After awhile, I had drunk so much that I fell into a stupor. Hours later I woke up.

I should have known that the whiskey would only increase my longing and emptiness. Again I tried to reason away my overwhelming hunger for Dolores. What was this state I was suffering from? God, can't I shake it? Me, hard-boiled Noodles, an East Side knock-around guy, acting like a lovesick schoolboy? The best antidote is to get myself another woman. Yeh, I'll pick up a beautiful doll some place, and forget that bitch, Dolores.

I bathed and dressed with care and went out. Broadway was lit up. There were a million beautiful women on the street. Many smiled invitingly at me, but none was Dolores.

CHAPTER 21

I went into a 52nd Street night spot we occasionally frequented. I sat down at a secluded side table. I ordered a bottle of Mt. Vernon. I sat drinking by myself. Helen was sitting on the piano. She was singing her mournful torch songs. Her singing made my heart heavier and heavier. I drank some more from the bottle. I sat in a drunken daze, listening to Helen's hot, husky voice moaning a song about an unrequited love.

A girl came over to my table. She was a nice-looking girl. She smiled and said, "Hello, big boy. You look lonesome." She sat down.

There were tears in my eyes. My voice broke. I said, "Are you Dolores? I only want my Dolores."

She said, "Boy, have you got it bad."

"Got what bad?" I said brokenly.

"A case of the blues. You're burning the torch for someone, aren't you? Tell mama all about Dolores, baby, it will make you feel better."

She was sympathetic and nice. She patted my hand. She motioned to the waiter for a glass for herself. When he brought it, he whispered something to her. She looked at me with a new interest. She poured for both of us.

With a friendly smile she said, "So, you're Noodles? You're notorious, aren't you?"

I shrugged with indifference. "You know," she said, "I've worked as a hostess in many speakeasies in my day and I find out it's true."

"What's true?" I said tonelessly.

"You bad boys are always soft about something. You develop a terrific attachment for a woman, a horse, a dog, a child, a mother, something. It's peculiar how you boys attach yourselves."

"It's peculiar? Ain't we human?" I whined.

She patted my hand. She smiled apologetically.

"I didn't mean that. I meant it's odd, in a nice peculiar way."

"Yeh, but I'm not nice. I stink. I tried to rape a girl, my girl."

I began to pound the table.

I blubbered, "I'm no good. I stink. I'm a bastard." Tears of self-pity poured into my whiskey. I couldn't control my crying jag. I sobbed openly.

"Sh-sh, people are staring. Please," she whispered.

"Leave me alone. I only want my Dolores," I wept.

"Boy, have you got it bad. Excuse me." She left in a huff.

"Come, Noodles, get hold of yourself."

It was Helen. I didn't know how long she had been sitting beside me, watching me cry. She wiped my wet face with a napkin.

"Liquor and melancholy songs only make you feel worse. They're like a wind that blows the torch into flame. You've had yourself a good cry. Now go and smother the torch." She patted my cheek. "You know with what, a pretty girl. I'm surprised at the state you're in. You want me to get you a pretty little girl?"

"No," I mumbled, "I can get my own."

"Then go ahead, get some air. Moping around here will only make you feel worse."

"Yeh," I muttered.

I dropped a bill on the table without looking at the denomination. I walked out.

I walked east on 52nd Street. A girl fell in step with me.

She smiled and said, "Good evening; out for a good time, mister?"

I said, "Are you Dolores?"

She smiled and nodding understandingly, "For \$10 I will be your Dolores."

She took me under the arm and led me to her place, a small hotel on 47th Street.

In her arms, I let myself go sobbing, "Dolores, Dolores, I love you, I love you, I love you."

Through a \$10 proxy I made love and imagined it was with Dolores. But after I was satiated and had paid

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her more than her fee, I felt depressed and weary. I left, disgusted for having defiled the memory of Dolores.

I looked disheveled and beaten as I walked into Fat Moe's next morning. My entrance interrupted their conversation. I had a feeling I was the topic of discussion.

Max had a half smile and a quizzical look in his eyes.

"We were just talking about you, Noodles."

I had guessed right: they were discussing me. Behind my back?

"What about?" I growled.

"You look like something the cat dragged in." Cockeye stood up. He walked all around mockingly examining my appearance in detail.

"You smell pretty ripe, too." In an exaggerated manner he sniffed as he circled around me.

I was getting peeved. I looked angrily at Cockeye.

Patsy snapped, "Cut the clowning, Cockeye."

"Lay off Noodles," Max chided. He turned to me with a sympathetic smile. "You dropped into that spot on 52nd Street last night?"

"Yeh?" I questioned.

"Well, Helen sent this back." It was a thousand-dollar bill. "She said you dropped it on the table. You were on a bender, and you had a crying jag over a broad."

I didn't answer.

His voice was soft and placatory. "She said you were carrying a torch over some girl."

"I was drunk," I muttered.

"She forgot the name of the broad you were raving about," Cockeye added. "Anybody we know?"

"Look, Cockeye—" I snarled.

"Cut the crap, Cockeye," Maxie cautioned. "So Noodles was carrying the torch. So what?" he answered consolingly. "He's entitled."

He poured me a double. After I had drunk it, I felt a little better. I sat down. Max poured me another. That one changed my point of view. I smiled at Cockeye.

He slapped me on the back. He was apologetic.

"You know I was only kidding, Noodles?" he said.

"Yeh, I deserved it. I guess I was foolish last night."

Now I was able to think about last night's actions somewhat objectively.

"She must be a pip," Patsy smiled questioningly.

"Yeh, she's a pip," I agreed wistfully.

"Funny thing," Maxie mused, "a guy like you, that knows the score and women inside out, to be affected like that. And after all the women you had." He shook his head in disbelief. "How many women did you have, Noodles? Starting with Peggy."

Maxie laughed at his question. "Can't count that much." I shrugged sheepishly.

"That goes for all of us," Maxie mused. "Well, what the hell, anyway you ought to know by this time, a woman's just a woman." He puffed on his Corona. "But a good cigar's a smoke."

Somebody said that once before," I said laconically.

"Somebody did?"

Max couldn't believe it. "That guy who said it must have been a smart guy, as smart as I am." Max chuckled.

He leaned back expansively, spreading out in his chair. He puffed rings of smoke up at the ceiling.

He soliloquized, "Smart guys like us ought to know better than anybody else; we had all kinds of broads, all shapes, all sizes, all colors, all nationalities. Yep, you turn them all upside down: you got the same thing."

Max hesitated, he watched the smoke rising to the ceiling. He was at a loss for words.

He turned to me. "Ain't that right, Noodles?" He chuckled. "Ain't that right?" he repeated. "A woman is a woman. You turn them all upside down, and you find the same thing."

"Not all the time," I answered drily, "not when you turn a hermaphrodite over, then you get a surprise, hey, Maxie?"

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He laughed uproariously at the thought.

Cockeye asked, "What's a hermaphrodite got, Noodles?"

"Everything," I laughed.

That laugh and Maxie's disjointed talk on women in general did me good. I sat smoking and taking stock of myself. What was this silly feeling, this supposed love for Dolores? It was hard to define. Like every emotion I felt, I tried to analyze it.

There were days, weeks, months when not even a thought of her would enter my mind. And even if it did, I would give it cursory attention or dismiss it. At other times, like the other day when she called Moe and I spoke to her, her voice acted like magic inside me. It released something. Best thing is never to allow myself to hear of her, about her or anything. The hell with her, for good.

Maxie looked at his watch. "Okay, let's get moving."

"What's stirring, Max?" I asked as we walked out.

"Oh, I forgot you didn't know. I got a call from the office last night. We got to be at Frank's house."

"Have you got an idea what the Big Guy wants?" Patsy asked as we drove uptown.

Max shrugged. "I don't know. I got the message last night from the main office. All they said was 'Be prompt at Frank's house at Central Park West.'"

Cockeye at the wheel said, "I thought he was still in New Orleans."

"Hey, Max," Patsy's voice sounded incredulous. "You mean to say the Boss is up early in the morning taking care of business, already?"

Maxie said, "That guy is the hardest working man in the Combination. His day begins before seven and he works until one, two, three in the morning. I've heard that sometimes he works all around the clock."

Cockeye asked, "Does he pay himself time and a half for all the overtime he puts in?"

"He does all right for himself," Maxie assured him. "He draws ten grand a week on slot machines alone."

I whistled.

"That's half a million a year on slots alone," I said.

"How about the booze, beer, gambling casinos, dog tracks, night clubs, real estate and other legit businesses he operates?" said Maxie.

"Goddamn," Patsy said. "What do you think his entire take is, Max?"

Max shrugged. "Who knows? I bet he don't know himself. I'd take a guess anywhere from ten to fifteen million a year."

Cockeye scoffed, "Can a guy live on that?"

Maxie said reminiscently, "Do you remember, Noodles, when he first started in as a guard at the floating crap games for fifteen bucks a night?"

I said, "Yeh."

Max continued, "Then he started operating his own games. I can tell you guys something. Whoever played in any of his games was sure of a fair shake of the dice. Nothing phoney in the places he operated. Everything was on the up and up. He had the goods to get where he is today. He's got balls. Plenty of character. When that man gives his word on anything, he'll keep it, even if it means his life or ten million bucks. Ain't it right, Noodles?"

"Yeh. He's quite a guy," I agreed. "He never welshed on anything in his life."

Cockeye turned into Central Park West. We rode up a few blocks.

"That's the house, under the awning," Max said.

Cockeye stepped on the clutch, pushed the shift lever into neutral and taxied the big Caddy smoothly under the canopy.

The doorman of the tall, pretentious apartment house opened our door with a pleasant smile of recognition. The four of us got out with Big Maxie leading the way.

In the outer lobby, two husky hall-men in gray uniforms came towards us. They nodded pleasantly.

One of them said, "Just a minute, fellows. Orders are orders. I have to get the okay from upstairs first."

He went to the house phone, put in the plug and whispered a few words into the mouthpiece. He turned back to us with a smile and said, "Okay." He escorted us through the inner lobby into the elevator. We shot to an upper floor.

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Maxie pushed the button for the apartment. A smiling colored man in a white coat opened the door with a cheerful “Good morning, gentlemen.”

He took our hats and waved to the bar, asking “Something from there, or some coffee? The Boss will be out in a few minutes.”

Max said, “Well have an eye opener.”

“Certainly, Mr. Max, this way, gentlemen.”

He led us into the barroom. It was as luxuriously and tastefully furnished as any of the most exclusive cocktail lounges in New York. The bar itself was built of imported blue tile from Italy. At one end was a familiar object which seemed incongruous with the rest of the expensive furnishings—a slot machine.

The colored houseman poured our drinks.

“Ice, soda or water, gentlemen?”

“Nothing. Just plain, thank you,” Maxie replied. “How have you and your wife been?”

“We're both in the best of health, thank you, Mr. Max.”

This colored houseman and his wife had been with Frank a good many years, since his rise to affluence. An unpretentious staff, I thought, for a man of his position and wealth. What the hell. He's probably never home, and this doesn't look like such a big apartment anyway. I understood he had about ten other apartments and homes in different parts of the country. This was sure a different set-up from the old, dark, railroad flat he was brought up in. Yeh, this was a long way from the heart of the slums of East Harlem.

Our backs were to the door. On our second round of drinks, I heard someone enter the room.

Then a low-pitched pleasant voice said, “Hello, there. How are you boys?”

We turned around. There he stood, both arms outstretched, a smile of welcome on his tanned, cleanly shaven, swarthy handsome face. He was dressed in a royal purple dressing gown with a sash tied around his slim waist. It accentuated his wide shoulders. A white monogrammed kerchief stuck prominently from his upper left-hand pocket. His black hair was sleeked back from his forehead.

Somewhere, in some art gallery, I have seen a picture of a medieval king. There was the same confusing combination of coarseness and fineness in this face, the same prominent nose, the same piercing, intelligent and understanding eyes.

He was a king, all right. He was the kingpin hoodlum of the world at whose command an army of several thousand desperadoes, in every city and state in the country, would rise and serve. In every action, in every word, he exuded supreme confidence in himself.

“Francisco,” Big Max exclaimed as he saw him.

They embraced warmly. Obviously there existed a genuine affection between them. He gave each of us a warm, firm, lingering handclasp, and greeted us by name. He had a slow smile accompanied by a sharp discerning look. He joined us at the bar. We drank to his health. His manner was gracious. His bearing was suave, alert and rough, all at once. In a subtle way he asked Max leading questions. Max gave him a full resume of our activities. He nodded approval. His speech was the speech of the soup school alumni. He often substituted the letter “d” for “th”. He was direct and to the point.

“I can always depend on your level-headedness and your loyalty.” It wasn't affected or theatrical; it seemed in place. “You are tops with me in the Combination. Anything you want? More territory? Anything else I can do for you?”

He said it in such an assured, matter-of-fact way, you felt that here was a power who could grant almost any material request.

I was thinking of the time when Max, with grandiose altruism had given a speakeasy to Jake the Goniff, Pipy and Goo-Goo which would net them a weekly income of twelve hundred dollars a week. It was picayune compared to what this man could do for us. A grandiose gesture by this man could give us a territory as large as the state of Jersey with its lucrative rackets which ran into millions of dollars. One “kind” word from him and a police commissioner, a supreme court judge, a mayor or governor were accepted. It was, in fact, his “kind” word that put Jimmy Walker in office.

Frank repeated, “You guys want more territory?”

Maxie smiled and said, “We're satisfied, Frank. We're doing pretty good. Everything is okay. We would rather continue as we are, in our home neighborhood.”

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He patted Maxie on the back affectionately. “Fine, fine. As long as you boys are happy, I'm happy. One of the reasons for having you up this morning is that I really wanted to look at you, in person.” He looked us over, smiling broadly. You couldn't help warming up to the guy. “I leave for my vacation at Hot Springs,” he continued. “I left a little bonus down at the office for you boys. It's an extra dividend. A little something personally from me to you. Business is good.”

He said it with a pleased expression.

We all thanked him. He put his hands up saying, “It's nothing. No thanks, please.” He continued talking, “I got a contract for you guys. I want you to run down to...” he mentioned a fashionable South Jersey seaside resort. “Down there is a local politician. He's operating a large gambling casino. All right, I let him operate, I don't bother him. This is the point. So the crumb takes advantage of my kind nature: he makes believe to the gambling public that the casino is mine. That isn't all. His equipment is crooked; that is where it is no good to me and the Combination. The big gambling crowd, you know, the big money men in this country, have confidence in my places. It's taken us a lot of years and sweat to build that up through fair play and honest equipment. Any casinos that I am connected with, the public knows they get a run for their money. I run them on the level. Now, making it look like the casino is mine, he gets the trade, then swindles them with his crooked equipment. You boys can understand that this is very bad. These people who are cheated travel around, and they have friends—and the story goes around and around.” He gestured, waving his arm in a circle. “So on account of him my reputation and all our casinos can get loused up.”

He paused as he took a drink. Then he went on in his slow, rasping voice. “Either close him up or take the casino from him. I sent a 'kind' word that I'd buy him out at a fair price. It's no dice with him. I picked you boys to handle this tough contract.”

There was a directness in his manner as he continued: “You boys are smart. You never miss up. Anything you need for this contract, more men, money, anything, call the office. The contract is yours, all yours.” He waved to all of us. “Take care of the crumb.”

He gave each of us a smile and another lingering, firm handclasp. He walked with us to the door making affable conversation on the way.

The elevator was waiting for us. A uniformed man held the door. Frank waved from his open doorway. “Good luck. See you soon.”

We waved back and said, “So long, Frank.”

As we drove downtown to the main office, Cockeye said, “I'll be goddamned. Every time we see the Boss, he lifts me up. He has something.”

I said, “Yeh, he has what you call a magnetic personality.”

“I remember my old man telling a story,” Patsy cut in, “how he saw the king in the old country riding in his carriage and the old man took his hat off and bowed. The king smiled and waved back. My old man said he felt lit up for days.”

I said, “Mostly this aura is a lot of crap. It isn't so much their personalities—it's what they possess. It's their immense power that gives people that feeling of awe. It's not they themselves. Not that Frank hasn't got something. He has a personality. Otherwise he would never be up on top where he is. But as far as kings and other royalty are concerned—well, they are full of unadulterated crap.”

Maxie said, “You only say it because it's true, Noodles.”

Cockeye couldn't get parking space on Broadway. We left the Caddy around the corner and walked back. We took the elevator up to the office.

The office occupied an entire floor. Maxie walked over to the pretty receptionist. He gave our names and said, “We want to see P.C.”

She picked up her phone with a coquettish smile for each of us, as if to say, “That's all I can give you boys. Just a smile. Make the most of it.”

She whispered into the mouthpiece. Then she turned to us and said, “Go right in. I guess you know your way.”

She smiled her beautiful smile again.

I said, “You shouldn't. It's too devastating.”

She arched her eyebrows and smiled more beautifully than ever.

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Cockeye sighed, "I'd give her a C note any day."

"Your mind's always in the gutter," I said.

Cockeye replied, "No. In bed."

We walked in through the door, waving and shaking hands with the men at the desks. The rest of the office force was male. The place was humming with all the activity of big business in motion.

Maxie knocked on a heavy wooden door. A genial voice called out, "Come right in, boys."

A man of average height and build rose from the chair behind the desk. Everything about him struck me as average, until I came closer. Then I saw his clothes. It was hard to define what there was about them that caught the attention, something that would make Adolphe Menjou, supposedly the best-dressed man in the world, envious. He had a shrewd, good-looking face.

This was the big brain behind the Boss and the Combination. The entire criminal organization was his idea. Very few people knew that he was Frank's equal partner in many deals and enterprises. He was modest. He kept in the background. He was the power behind the throne. Years back, he had been one of the partners in a large Wall Street brokerage firm.

How are you, Maxie?" Dandy Phil asked cordially. "And you, Noodles?" He was busy shaking our hands. "Glad to see you, Pat. And how's my friend, Hymie?" His manner was brisk, but at the same time, friendly. "Frank gave you the assignment of straightening out that gambling casino in Jersey?"

"Yeh. We got all the dope, Phil," I replied.

"Okay. That's fine." Phil smiled. "Call me if anything unforeseen happens, or if you need anything at all."

Maxie nodded. "Sure thing, Phil."

Phil continued: "Of course, we can use extreme measures on this thing, but you know my stand on that: avoid violence wherever possible, unless it is inevitable, a last resort."

I said, "We understand perfectly how you and Frank feel about these things."

Dandy Phil went behind the desk, opened the drawer. He took out a long thick white envelope. He tossed it carelessly on the table saying, "I guess you know about this. A small token from us to you boys in appreciation." He shook our hands in the manner of a busy executive politely dismissing visitors. He walked us to the door. "Keep in touch, boys," he said. "So long, boys. Good luck."

We said, "So long, Phil."

As we passed the receptionist, she raised her head from the fashion magazine she was reading, smiled charmingly and said, "Bye, boys." We blew kisses at her; she blew kisses back at us with her fingertips.

"Phil is so different from Frank, hey, Noodles?" Maxie said.

"Yeh, he's more the planner. Frank is the doer."

CHAPTER 22

We slid into our customary places in the Caddy, Cockeye at the wheel, Patsy alongside of him, Max and I in the rear. Cockeye stepped on the starter.

“What's the next stop?” he asked.

“The garage,” said Max. He took the envelope out of his pocket and ripped it open.

Cockeye said, “Hey, Max, don't keep us in suspense. How much?”

Maxie looked in the envelope, and said in a solemn tone, “Well, what do you know?”

Cockeye excitedly jerked his head around. “What?”

“There's a pink dismissal slip in here saying your services are no longer required.”

We all laughed at the incredulous expression on Cockeye's face. He muttered, “You big bastard, that gag stinks.”

“But you went for it,” Maxie chuckled, counting the money in the envelope.

He was counting the money fast, on his lap, with the dexterous finger movements of a bank teller.

“Thirty weeks' extra pay.” Max had finished counting. He gave a pleased nod. “Sixty grand, not bad. Fifteen grand apiece.”

Cockeye chuckled happily. “Santa Claus came early this year.”

Max divided the money in four stacks, picked one up and lightly tapped Cockeye on the head with it. “Here you are, my Cockeye friend. Buy yourself some charlotte russes.”

Cockeye stuck his hand out and put the money in his pocket gleefully, saying, “Merry Christmas.”

Maxie smilingly handed Patsy a stack of money. Patsy kissed it, and put it in his pocket, saying, “A Happy New Year.”

Max handed me mine, “Here you are, Noodles. Buy yourself a Hershey bar.”

“With gold almonds?” I smiled.

Cockeye drove down the ramp into the garage. We got out.

Maxie said, “Cockeye, put a pair of overalls on, so you won't get your clothes dirty when you creep under the car. Take the harness off, boys.” He was addressing the rest of us. We followed Maxie's example. We took off our jackets, and unslung our shoulder holsters. Maxie rolled our guns and harness together in a canvas bag. “Okay, Cockeye, in the box— Just a minute.”

He turned to me. “Hey, Noodles, in case we get stopped in Jersey by the cops as happens on occasion,” his tone was slightly sarcastic, “and we get frisked, don't you think that six-inch piece of cutlery in your pocket will be embarrassing? What will you tell the cops? You're a surgeon, and that's your operating knife?” Max grinned.

“I forgot about it, Max,” I said, tossing it to Cockeye. “Just as you forgot the gimmick up your sleeve, I'll bet.”

“Yep, you're right, Noodles. It sounds funny but I'm aware of it all the time, yet I never know I got it on. I feel lost without it.”

He rolled up his right sleeve, unhooked the spring, and handed the .32 to Cockeye.

“I guess you're that way with the shiv.”

I nodded. “Yeh, habit,” I said.

We had a long steel box welded and securely hidden under the chassis. Cockeye crawled under the car. He put the bag of stuff into the box, crawled out and removed his overalls and washed his hands. “You ain't taking the lead sprayer, Max?” Patsy asked.

“No, I don't think it'll be necessary. First we look the joint over. If we need it, well—we'll send for it.”

We took the Staten Island Ferry to avoid the Jersey traffic and the cops. The Caddy rolled swiftly down Hyland Boulevard. Cockeye took the Perth Amboy Bridge and shot over to the highway leading to the shore resort.

We stopped at a diner not far from New Brunswick for hamburgers and coffee. Afterwards, Patsy took the wheel. Cockeye took out his harmonica. Max and I sprawled comfortably in the back seat. The Caddy

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hummed along the straight highway.

We sped through the night, arriving at the resort early in the morning. It was still dark. We checked in at the biggest hotel on the ocean front. A bellhop parked the Caddy in the hotel garage. We had two adjoining suites, which Cockeye described as “some classy layout.”

“How about a swim before we hit the hay?” Maxie asked.

“How?” Patsy asked. “We got no suits.”

“What's the matter? Can't we go like the old days, bare ass?” Maxie asked.

He smiled. “Okay, Cockeye's getting modest. We go in our B.V.D.'s.”

After our dip, we lay on the beach, smoking and looking at the stars. The beach was deserted. Max and Patsy took their underwear off to dry. The only sound we heard was the rolling of the surf. Boy, this is the life, I was thinking. A far cry from the crowded, hot, smelly East Side. The fresh, gentle breeze was invigorating. It was swell lying here free, with hardly a stitch on. I felt uninhibited.

Cockeye stood up and yawned.

“Well, how about a little shut-eye? This damp air stinks, for my money.”

Patsy said drowsily, “Don't be a shmuck. Lay down, this air is good for you.”

“You're overruled, Cockeye,” Maxie murmured lazily. “The trouble with you is you're so used to the stink of the East Side, fresh air is strange to you. We take a little nap here. Make believe you're sleeping in the sand down at Coney Island.”

He turned over. In a minute he started to snore.

Cockeye obediently stretched out on the sand, mumbling querulously, “What the hell we paying the hotel for those rooms if we're not using them?”

That was the last sound I heard for awhile. I just lay back thinking: look at us, all pooped out from a little motor jaunt. We're getting soft. We used to take a non-stop ride to Chicago, Louisiana, Florida, or do a little chore for the Combination up in Canada like it was nothing.

We had the reputation of being iron men—plenty of activity in those days when the Combination was first organized. Boy, am I goddamn sleepy. It must be this ocean air.

I guess I dozed off. We must have been asleep for hours. I began feeling warm. In my drowsy state, I thought I was in the baths, lying under a sunlamp. It was getting hotter by the minute.

I heard female voices exclaiming, “This is disgraceful.” I seemed to hear a man laughing. A girl giggled and some more voices said, “It's a shame. Somebody should call a policeman.”

At the word policeman, I opened my eyes and looked around.

There were little groups standing around at respectful distances. Some were glaring, others were laughing at us. I hurriedly reached for my pants.

“Hey, Max. Hey, Max,” I whispered.

Max jumped up, startled, and looked around. He grabbed his pants, kicking Patsy and Cockeye awake. We hurriedly put our pants on. We stood up feeling foolish, holding our shoes and stockings.

Maxie muttered, “This is stinko.”

We plowed through the sand to the rear entrance of the hotel. As we passed the first group of women, Maxie bowed and solemnly said, “Sorry, ladies, but you'll have to excuse us. We're nature lovers. We're members of a nudist colony.”

One of them yelled after us, “Why don't you practice your cult in the woods? You should be arrested, you silly nature lovers.”

The rest jeered after us.

Maxie said, “I feel goddamn silly.”

“Yeh, me, too,” I said.

We went up to our rooms and lay down in comfortable beds. There were awnings on the windows which kept the sun out. The rooms were on an upper floor, overlooking the ocean. The salt breeze coming in was refreshing. It kept the rooms cool. It was quiet; we slept all day.

It was almost dark when I woke. My watch said seven p.m. Maxie was still asleep on the bed next to mine. I lay looking at him. He was snoring softly. His face was completely relaxed, and it still had an innocent boyish look in spite of the brutal, rigorous life he had led. Yeh, we led. We'd been pretty close as far back as I

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could remember. Through thick and thin as Horatio Alger used to say. Yeh, we certainly understood each other. Well, why not? We were brought up together. We did the same things, thought about the same things, all our lives. I'd bet he and I could converse without using words, just by a glance, a lift of an eyebrow, a twist of the lip, a movement of an arm, a tap of the foot, by a series of ordinary gestures which would be missed by the uninitiated. Gesticulatory conversation. That's a pretty good phrase to spring when I'm conversing with an erudite person. Yeh, it'll make him think I'm smart, a guy with a college education.

Goddamn, why the hell didn't I continue my schooling? I could have been a lawyer, maybe. Like that shise. What the hell, that's life. The other guy's grass is always greener. So the guy has an education. What the hell does he get? Twenty-five bucks for a slot machine arrest? I spent more than that almost every night, on a piece of chippy.

That Dixie Davis: he's making a buck with the Dutchman. Yeh, but not on his law business.

Yeh, you take most of these guys that completed their education— we can buy and sell them. We make more money in one week than they make in an entire year. With their college education! Sour grapes. What's the use of kidding myself? I wish I'd followed that red-headed principal's advice. What was his name? Yeh, O'Brien. He was a pretty good skate. Maybe I could have taken up journalism like my kid brother. Yeh, I could have been a writer maybe.

Maybe someday I will write a book. Yeh, maybe twenty or thirty years later. Maybe this era we're going through will sound interesting to the new generation. That's if I live long enough to tell it. I chuckled aloud.

CHAPTER 23

Maxie stirred and opened his eyes.

“What time is it, Noodles?” he asked.

“Seven twenty,” I told him.

Maxie got up. He went through the bathroom into the adjoining bedroom. He woke Patsy and Cockeye. Then I saw him go to the phone. I heard him say to the operator, “Send up a couple of boys.”

I laughed and said to Maxie, “The operator will think you're a queer, asking for a couple of boys like that.”

Maxie smiled. “Okay, I see what you mean.” He said into the mouthpiece, “I meant, send up a couple of bellhops and the hotel barber, Miss. I assure you we're normal, if you're interested.”

I could hear the bang she gave the phone. I saw Maxie rub his ear.

Five minutes later there was a knock on the door. Patsy opened it. A well-dressed man wearing a slouch hat well over his eyes walked in. He looked us over shrewdly. He had a wide-awake intelligent appearance.

Maxie looked him up and down insolently and said, “I phoned for a barber. You don't look like a barber. I asked for a couple of bellhops, and you don't look like a couple of bellhops. What's on your mind, pally?”

He smilingly answered, “I work for the hotel.”

“House detective?” I guessed.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he grinned good-naturedly.

He looked like a nice guy who knew the score.

Max said curtly, “So I repeat, what's on your mind, pally?”

“No offense, gentlemen. Just a few questions, and I will run along.”

He gave us an apologetic smile.

Max said impatiently, “Okay, okay. What's on your mind?”

“First,” he said with the same apologetic smile, “the desk clerk overlooked the hotel rule: no baggage, payment in advance.”

Maxie took his roll of bills out with a chiding, “Tsk, tsk,” and started counting. “A thousand, five thousand? How much do we owe you?”

The house detective looked in astonishment at the money in Maxie's hand. To him it probably appeared a tremendous amount. He said, visibly impressed, “I see that can be taken care of easily enough. Any time it's convenient for you gentlemen, pay the desk clerk downstairs.”

Maxie laughed. He said, “Okay. What else is on your mind?”

The house dick seemed to be lingering.

“Our next problem, so to speak, is that bathing suit episode down at the beach, or should I say no bathing suits?”

Max said, “Okay. That won't happen again. It was just a social error.”

“I thought so. I could see you boys aren't that type.”

Cockeye put his hands on his hips and said, “Whoops, my dear.”

We all laughed in a friendly way. The house detective said, “You asked the girl to send up the barber. It really isn't customary to send one up unless you're sick or something, but in your case,” he grinned, “I'll get him up here. Now, your request for a couple of bellhops—”

Max said, “We wanted them to do some shopping for us, some fresh underwear, some soup and fish...” Underwear can be bought.”

He was tapping and rubbing his nose in thought, “But for a bellhop to go out and try to buy four suits of evening clothes at this hour...” He walked around the room still rubbing his nose and smiling to himself. “Really, it can't be done.” He hesitated, puckered his lips in concentration. “I tell you boys what. There's a Mr. Schwartz, a tailor, a few blocks down the street who rents out evening clothes. Would that be all right, rented suits?”

Max said, “Okay, what's the difference? We rent them. You take care of it. Get this Schwartz up here to take our measurements.”

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Maxie took a hundred dollar bill out of his pocket and said, "This is for your trouble. Buy yourself some charlotte russes."

The man looked at the bill in disbelief. He smiled and shook his head. "Really, really, it isn't at all necessary," in the same manner as a girl saying, "Please, please don't," but meaning, Do it some more, I like it. Force me.

"Put it in your pocket. Forget it," Max said gruffly.

"Thank you. Thanks very much. Anything else I can do for you boys? Just say the word."

A hundred bucks seemed a lot of money to the guy.

Max, shaking his fist in the air, as if rattling dice, asked, "Where can we play an interesting little game of indoor golf?"

The house detective hesitated.

There's only one place, on the outskirts of town—"

He mentioned the name of the casino Frank had given us. He continued, "The place is wide open. Anybody in evening clothes is permitted."

It seemed when he was lost in thought he had a habit of rubbing his nose. That's what he was doing now. "On second thought, better keep out of there. This I only tell my friends. The place is crooked. You'll never get a fair shake of the dice in that place."

"What the hell. So we drop a few bucks," Max said. "What's the address?"

The house detective wrote it down on a piece of paper. "I hate to send you guys there." He looked at us with a friendly smile. "You guys are okay with me. You see, it's a pleasure to steer the high and mighty society bastards to get clipped, but you guys," he repeated, "are okay with me."

He shook his head. He didn't like it.

Maxie said, "Don't worry, pal. We'll take care of ourselves."

He said, "Well, it's your money. All right, then, I'll have the barber and the tailor come up right away. Thanks, boys. So long," he said.

We said, "So long." He left the room grinning.

Max said, "Nice guy."

I echoed, "Yeh. Nice guy."

Max turned to Cockeye. "Go down to the garage and get our hardware from under the car."

Cockeye said, "Okay" and left.

A few minutes later the phone rang. It was the barber. He apologized for the delay saying he had a customer. He would be up in half an hour.

Ten minutes later there was a knock on the door. I opened it.

An elderly, distinguished looking man walked in.

"You gentlemen want to be fitted for evening clothes?" he asked.

"You Schwartz?" Max asked briefly.

The man replied, "I am Mr. Schwartz, the tailor."

He took a tape measure, a pencil, and a notebook out of his pockets.

"Four suits?" He looked around the room seeing only three of us.

I said, "One guy will be right in."

"How about shirts, ties, shoes, cuff links? I have everything else you may need for rent," he smiled. "I can fix you boys up complete. Soup to nuts. Ten dollars a day for everything. Even socks. Fifty dollars deposit on each outfit. Is that all right?"

Max said, "Okay, Pop."

The old man mumbled to himself resentfully in Yiddish, "Pop? Lusz dir poppin in kopf."

I said, "That ain't nice, Pop. We understand Jewish."

The old man smiled benignly. "Landsman? Jewish boys? You don't look like it. I really didn't mean to swear at you, my boy. I don't like when people call me Pop. I'm not so old, am I?"

The old man looked well over eighty. I said, "You don't look a day over fifty, Mr. Schwartz."

"Well," he said, looking wistfully over his specks, "a little older, maybe."

He smiled at us. We all smiled together. He was a nice old guy. He went busily to work, measuring us up.

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He jotted the figures in his notebook while humming a little “lidleleh” to himself.

Cockeye came barging through the door. He didn't see the old man on his knees in the corner taking Patsy's trouser measurements. He dumped the contents of the canvas bag all over the bed. Four big .45 calibre revolvers, Maxie's .32 with the thin spring attached, four leather sling holsters, a few extra boxes of bullets, my six-inch switch knife lay scattered on the bed, staring the old man in the face.

He got off his knees. He gazed somberly at the collection. Then gravely at us. Sadly he said, “Gangsters?” He shook his head in sorrow. “Jewish gangsters, it's disgraceful.” Disappointed, he went back to measuring Patsy's pants.

He looked like a smart old codger. He interested me. I led him on in conversation. Jestingly I said, “Mr. Schwartz, we're not all Jewish gangsters. He's an Italian gangster.”

I nodded my head at Patsy.

Patsy smiled and said to me in Jewish, “Lieg in dred, momser.”

The old man smiled at Patsy's correct Yiddish intonation.

After he had taken all our measurements, he said, “I'll call my shop from here. It's faster that way. I'll give the sizes to my boys who are working for me.”

“Your sons?” I asked.

“No, they are two smart colored boys.”

He got his shop on the wire. He read them all the data from his notebook.

We waited around for the stuff to arrive. The old man said it would take at least a half-hour for his boys to pick everything out of his large stock. He sat down on a chair. He seemed exhausted.

“I'll smoke a cigarette and rest here. All right with you boys? I'm not in the way?”

Maxie said, “It's okay, Pop. Go right ahead.”

The old man scowled. “Pop? Soil dir poppin in kopf.”

We all laughed at his comical irascibility.

The old man continued: “All right, so I'm Pop. If I'm a Pop, so I'll take an old man's privileges. I like to talk. I'm entitled, yes?”

“Go ahead,” I said, “you're entitled.”

He was an interesting, garrulous old bird. He seemed smart and alert, as if he had been through the mill. Somewhere there was an immediate feeling of mutual liking and trust between us. I guess the old man felt there was a common bond in our faith. Whatever the reason, we felt he was an old friend, and he acted very much at home with us.

Nevertheless, I cautioned him.

I said, “Mr. Schwartz, we are here for some fun. We came here for a little vacation. So, whatever you see or hear—you know what I mean? Do us a favor, a big favor, keep it to yourself, yeh?”

The old man snorted. “What do you think I am, a child or a stoolie?”

I gave him an apologetic smile.

He continued his light chatter as we sat around cleaning our guns. He showed a keen interest as Maxie practiced his sleeve gimmick. Finally he couldn't contain himself any longer. He asked us what he thought was a simple question.

In a casual way he said, “How many people did you boys kill?”

We looked at him aghast. I said, “I think, Mr. Schwartz, you see too many moving pictures.”

The old man said, “Yes, I see movies. I read papers and books, too. I know all about fellers like you. I know what's going on in this world.”

“What kind of books do you read?” I asked the old man to take his mind off his questions.

“I read Hemingway's story, 'The Killers,'” the old man replied proudly.

I was interested. I said, “I read it. How did you like it, Mr. Schwartz?”

“Fine, fine, very exciting.”

“So?”

I was amused. “Do we look and act like any of the characters in the book—those killers?”

The old man deliberated, slowly sizing us up. He looked at me intently, then at Cockeye and Patsy in turn. He gave Maxie a long scrutinizing look. He shook his head.

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“No, not like Hemingway or them moving picture holdupnick killer characters. Not at all.”

We all laughed heartily.

I asked, “Why, Mr. Schwartz? How are we different?”

“Well, I tell you. You boys look nice, not so—sin—”

“Sinister?” I helped him.

“Yes, yes,” he said eagerly. “Not so sinister. You are more intelligent,” he added smiling, pleased at the opinion he gave of us.

Maxie said, “Thanks for the compliment, Pop.” Maxie hurriedly corrected himself, “I mean, Mr. Schwartz.”

“So, Mr. Schwartz,” I said, “seeing that we are not at all like the killers Hemingway had in the book, and we're not like these moving picture holdupnicks, then you come to the conclusion that we are make-believe phoneys, and not gangsters, right?”

The old man smiled. He said, “No, my friend. My conclusion is moving picture holdupnicks are the phonies and the Hemingway killers were just coffee-pot hangout bums who kill only with conversation. You boys are the real merchandise.”

We laughed.

I said, “Yeh, when I read that Hemingway story I thought the characters were phoney as hell.”

There was a knock on the door.

Max called, “Just a minute.”

He motioned to us to put the hardware in the closet. We jumped to hide the stuff. Patsy opened the door. It was the barber. He burst into the room exuding smiles, hair tonic, and good cheer. He looked like the barber on the label of Pinaud's hair tonic.

I said, “We're having a literary symposium. The class is discussing the resemblance of Hemingway's story 'The Killers' to real gangster killers. What's your opinion?”

“Ernest Hemingway, the writer?” the barber asked. “Ah, he certainly knows his characters. Yes, I read all his works. In his story 'The Killers,' he was perfect, pure genius. By his description I would recognize a gangster-killer on sight. Where do you lads attend school? Princeton?”

I almost choked.

Maxie imitated the speech and manner of one of the killers.

“You're a bright boy, aren't you, bright boy? All we want from you, bright boy, is haircuts and shaves. To hell wit dis guy Hemingway, see, bright boy?”

The charming smile was wiped off the barber's face. In its place came a bewildered expression. He looked from one impassive face to the other. Nobody said a word. Max sat down and gestured the barber to start.

The only sound in the room was the clipping of the barber's shears as he started on Maxie's hair. Even the old man sat quietly smoking a cigarette. I smiled over to him. He smiled back. A nice old guy, this Schwartz, I thought.

He reminded me of my old man a little bit. Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah will be around soon. Before the holidays, I thought, I must pay my respects to my old man's grave. Boy, will Mama and the kid brother be pleased at the large new stone I put on it.

There was another knock on the door.

Cockeye said, “What the hell. It's getting busy by cloaks.” He went over to open the door.

It was a haberdashery clerk. I gave the clerk our order for shorts and stuff.

Max said, “Be sure it's Reis Union-Made underwear.”

The clerk smiled and said, “Righto, old chap.”

I made a mental note of the word “righto.” Everybody, including ourselves, used that goddamned expression, okay, to death. Righto sounded like a limey expression.

Curious, I said to the clerk, “British?”

He shook his head. “No, I was born right here in Joisey.”

He smiled.

“The reason for the accent and the jolly old what, old chap, is the store atmosphere I work in. The name of the joint is Ye Olde London Shoppe, old bean, old sock.”

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We both laughed. He left, saying he would be back with the stuff.

“Cheerio,” he called.

After the barber finished all of us, Cockeye stood before the mirror, one hand on his hip, the other patting down his curly locks. He lisped, “Aren't we all thweet and pwitty looking?”

We all mimicked his effeminate mannerism.

Max gave the barber a double sawbuck. He left, completely bewildered. The old man guffawed in delight.

Patsy said, “How about the feed bag? Ain't we entitled?”

Max said, “Okay, we're entitled. As soon as we dress for dinner.”

Cockeye said, “Did you say dreck for dinner?” We ignored Cockeye's vulgar question.

A few minutes later, the Jersey British clerk came in with the stuff we had ordered. Max paid him. He wouldn't accept a tip. That we couldn't understand.

By the time we had finished our showers, one of Mr. Schwartz's boys came in. He was laden with boxes. He barely made our door. Maxie tossed the boy a sawbuck tip. He embarrassed us with his profuse thanks. Mr. Schwartz remained to do the unpacking.

He said, “I can knot a beautiful bow tie for you boys.” As he helped us he rambled on with small talk. He beamed at us like a proud parent. When we had finished dressing, he insisted on inspecting us.

His judgment was, “Now you boys look like nice gentlemen.”

We all went downstairs together. He asked wistfully, “May I visit with you boys sometime again?”

I said, “As long as we're around here, Mr. Schwartz, you're welcome. Would you care to join us at dinner?”

“No, thank you. Enjoy yourselves.” The old man waved and walked down the lobby.

After dinner we walked to the hotel garage and got the Caddy. After driving awhile, we located the casino. Cockeye drove around it a few times to get the lay of the land: it was a low, sturdily constructed wooden building, isolated, surrounded by spacious and luxurious lawns. In the rear was the parking space crowded to capacity with expensive, chauffeured automobiles singing out “dough–re–mi.”

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Cockeye rolled into the driveway. A uniformed man opened the door. "Good evening, gentlemen," he said. He handed Cockeye a parking check. Another man in uniform drove the Caddy into a space. We counted ten uniformed men loitering around the building.

Maxie's terse comment was, "Guards."

We entered the building. The foyer was small. A girl took our hats. Two tall men in evening clothes were carefully sizing us up. We ignored them. One of them came over.

Politely he asked, "Strangers?"

Maxie said drily, "That's why we came—to get acquainted."

The man led us to the cashier's cage. Maxie took out his money. In a pseudo meek tone he said, "Just to make a few small bets. Purely for amusement. Ten thousand dollars worth of hundred dollar chips."

Nonchalantly, he peeled ten thousand dollars off his roll and tossed it on the counter.

The cashier was a cool sonofabitch. He wasn't impressed. He only raised his eyebrows slightly. With unconcern he pushed out the stacks of chips. We put them in our pockets.

We entered a large room, the length and breadth of the building. Patsy said, "Class." That described the furnishings and the people. We hesitated at the entrance, taking a fast count.

I said, "Approximately four hundred and fifty people."

Patsy said, "It looks like four hundred and fifty suckers to me."

The men and women without exception were in evening clothes. Maxie looked over the crowd. "About twenty-five are shills," he said.

I added, "The rest are pure, unadulterated suckers."

"Plenty of chumps with plenty of kupper," Cockeye said.

"Just for the hell of it I would like to find the gimmick in their equipment," Max said as we followed him into the room.

There were about ten card tables along the walls. In the front center of the room was the roulette layout; in the rear center, a nice new dice table. The bar was way off in a corner.

We mingled with the crowd playing the roulette wheel. Patsy stood alongside the croupier. Cockeye took a position behind what our practiced eyes concluded was a shill. I took a station opposite Patsy. The crowd was giving the wheel a good play.

Maxie put two chips each on three even numbers. All bets were laid. The wheel spun round. Maxie lost. He put three chips each on three odd numbers. I did not understand what Max was doing, but from his appearance of concentration, I supposed he was giving the wheel some sort of test.

All bets were placed. The wheel revolved. I looked at Patsy. He was watching the croupier closely. Patsy put on an act as if he were excited at the play. He pushed the croupier to one side. Deftly he slid his hand under the table feeling for buttons and switches. Smilingly he apologized for his clumsy excitement.

On the next play I didn't notice where Max played his chips. My eyes were focused on Pat who was moving alongside the shill Cockeye was covering. He gave the same treatment to the shill as he had to the croupier. He appeared excited as he pushed him aside and felt under the table.

On the next play, Maxie didn't place any bets. Instead, making it appear accidental, he dropped all his chips on the floor. Nonchalantly, smiling, with apologies to everybody, he crawled around the table picking up his chips. In reality he was feeling to see if there were any hidden controls under the rug. I saw he was disappointed. He found nothing. Maxie continued playing, testing with all sorts of play combinations, to no avail. He continued a consistent loser.

I was watching the people who were winning with regularity. They were definitely shills. But how they managed it, I couldn't understand.

Maxie quit the game and walked to the washroom. To avoid being conspicuous, we followed him in one by one.

Max said, "The wheel is crooked, all right. But I'll be goddamned if I can see how they do it. You guys

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found out anything?"

Patsy said, "The croupier isn't controlling the wheel, that's for sure."

"Yeh," I said, "it looks like somebody else is."

Cockeye said, "I saw nothin' with nothin'."

"How could anybody else control the wheel?" Maxie asked.

I shrugged. "Maybe by remote control somewhere."

Maxie said, "I dropped more than three grand, the crooked bastards. Let's give the dice table the elzoo."

On the way we stopped at the bar and had a round of drinks.

The dice table was regulation: green covered felt with a board on the far end for the dice to bounce off. We stood around the table and watched. There were no chips in this game. Straight money was bet and faded. When it came Maxie's turn to shoot, he laid five hundred bucks.

The gimmick in this setup was simple to understand. The slow fading of Maxie's five hundred bucks was the dead give-away: it was a sign he was going to be allowed to win; the shills weren't betting against Max on this roll.

Sure enough, he shot eleven. Max doubled. He laid a grand. He was quickly covered by the shills. We knew Max would lose. They didn't even give a sucker a run for his money. They took no chances. The croupier's assistant threw Maxie the dice. It was a switcheroo. Max rattled. Then he threw the dice. His point showed up. It was a four.

The shills bet with onlookers against. They laid their odds. The assistant returned the dice. Max smiled and whispered to me as he rattled them together, "Bust-outs," meaning that nine out of ten times a seven would show up. He threw the phoney dice against the board. Seven showed up.

Then it was a shill's chance to shoot. He laid heavy. He made six passes in a row and won four grand. It renewed the suckers' interest in the game. It was obvious that the croupier, his assistant, and the shills were operating as a smooth team. The croupier was the boss in this set-up. He gave the signals to his assistants for the kind of dice to palm out to the customers. The shills watched his signals. It was that simple.

As we strolled away from the dice table, Cockeye remarked, "Dumb clucks!"

Patsy said, "Yeh. They never wise up that the winner is working for the house and has to return the money later."

We walked along the sides of the room, easily spotting the gimmicks in the card games. They were all running full blast. A different kind of card game at practically every table. There was a smooth team working at each table, consisting of a dealer or banker in combination with a shill or a stick, supposedly on his own.

In one game, they were using the "paper" vernacular for marked cards. Every game had a slightly different set-up. The second game we watched took about three deals before we caught the crooked angle. It was a tiny mirror cleverly concealed in the dealer's ring. He could read every card he threw to the players.

In the third game, a sandpapered deck was used. We could tell by the way the banker felt the edges as he swiftly dealt out the cards.

We walked around with make-believe indifference, stopping for a moment at a table to watch. At another we participated in the play. Slicked aces were being used. They were so thoroughly waxed it was surprising no one wised up. The dealer, a professional sleight-of-hand artist, could pick them out of the deck, shift them to the bottom and pass them at will to any shill or to himself, wherever he thought they would do the house the most good. He was an artist at it.

The biggest game of all was being played at a poker table. No chips. Straight money was being bet. The opening was blind for a C note. The sky was the limit in this game. Max took a hand for awhile and the rest of us kibitzed. We watched closely. We knew there was something phoney, but we couldn't catch the gimmick. The only thing that struck me as peculiar was the way the dealer had his odd-colored eve-shade well over his eyes. One chump dropped six thousand dollars in the game in about twenty minutes.

We completed the rounds by throwing a few quarters into the slot machines. They were hidden way off in a corner. Even they were doped up. It was simple to detect: the middle bar was fixed, making the jackpot impossible to hit. We went to the cashier's window. Max turned in his chips for cash. We got into the Caddy. Driving back to the hotel, Maxie said, "The players certainly get a good screwing in that joint."

"Yeh, and without vaseline," Cockeye observed.

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We stopped at a diner for hamburgers and coffee. We were sitting at a back table, and over our cigars we compared notes on the casino's crooked gambling.

"I dropped five grand in that joint," Maxie remarked. He puffed at his cigar. "But, I'll get it back. Them bastards will pay through the nose before I'm finished with them."

I said, "That dealer at the big poker game was a clever card, wasn't he?"

"He'll be dealt with," Max said drily. "I'm wise to him. Did you guys notice the gimmick he was using?" Nobody answered. "Didn't you guys notice the eyeshade over his eyes?"

"Yeh, I noticed he was looking through it, but what?" I said.

"Noodles, I'm disappointed in you. It's what you call a luminous reader. Gather round, pupils."

Maxie was all smiles. He was in his glory. He knew something I didn't know.

"You guys remember as kids we used to go into the five and dime store on Delancey Street and for a nickel get an envelope of pictures and a colored piece of isinglass?" We nodded. "Well, don't you get it? When we looked through the isinglass, the design on the pictures changed. The hidden picture appeared, remember? Well, chumps, the deck this dealer uses is a specially designed pack with tell-tale hidden markings on the backs of the cards that can only be read through colored isinglass. His eyeshade is made of colored isinglass."

I looked at Max with admiration. "A pretty good deduction, Max."

"Thank you, my dear Mr. Holmes," he laughed.

"How about the wheel, Max? Did you figure that out?" I said.

"Nope," he shook his head. "It's got me. But we'll look into it again tomorrow."

"No quick action on these bastards, Max?" Patsy was impatient.

Maxie replied, "Well, I was thinking of calling the New York office and having them send me a couple of shabonies, you know, the demolition squad from Mulberry Street, to blow the joint apart. That would be quick action. But what the hell's our hurry? It's nice out here, and it's all on the Combination."

"I guess you're right," Patsy said. "We don't need help from them wild zulus."

"Phil didn't want any violence, so we'll try if we can do it the smooth way," Max said. "Let's go up to our rooms and have an honest game of stud."

We drove to the hotel and played all night. Max sent the hired suits to Schwartz by bellhop with instructions to press and return them.

We slept until about seven p.m. Max called service. "I went to order some breakfast sent up."

Evidently he was told on the other end of the wire it was an odd hour for breakfast.

He said impatiently, "Okay, okay, call it what you want, just send up some orange juice, ham and egg sandwiches, with coffee for four."

After we had finished our light repast, Max called downstairs for some bathing shorts.

There were very few people on the beach.

Cockeye said, "It isn't as much fun as swimming in the East River in the moonlight, hanging on to the garbage tugs."

Maxie said sarcastically, "But we'll make the best of it."

We swam out quite a distance. Then we went up to our rooms, took showers and waited for our dress suits. Finally Mr. Schwartz came in, struggling under his load which he put down on the bed with a sigh.

"How are you boys? Enjoying?" he asked.

"Thank you, Mr. Schwartz," I said. "We're having a pleasant vacation."

We started dressing. Mr. Schwartz sat around smoking, making inconsequential talk. In the midst of a lull, the old man asked us one of his queer, direct questions.

"You boys are brave, yes?"

I smiled and shrugged.

Maxie could only ask, "Why?"

The old man with his quick smile and surprising candor retorted, "Because they say Jews are supposed to be cowards."

Patsy and I laughed at Maxie. He was stumped for an answer.

I said, "Courage or the lack of it isn't a racial trait, Mr. Schwartz. Sometimes it's a question of circumstances, necessity, discretion. Oh, many reasons go into acts of behavior. From my observation, and

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believe me this conclusion is based on a view from the first row, you can't just put a stigma on any group of people. Particularly for a lack of courage. Courage is developed—I mean the consistent kind, not a flash here and there—just as great physical or mental prowess is developed. May I submit in evidence,” half jestingly, I waved my arm around the room, “these living proofs to clinch my argument?”

“Thank you,” Maxie bowed in mock gravity as he buttoned his fly. “In all modesty, did you, my dear Noodles, include yourself as a living proof?”

“In all modesty,” I returned Maxie's bow, “I did include myself.”

“Shy fellow.” Maxie bowed again.

“You guys going to chew the rag all night? I'm hungry,” Patsy said.

“Okay, you guys all dressed?” Max asked. He looked around the room.

We slung our shoulder holsters and put our jackets on.

“Dressed like gentlemen,” the old man clucked fondly.

CHAPTER 25

After another sumptuous meal we went to the casino. Maxie went over to the cashier's cage and again bought ten thousand dollars worth of hundred dollar chips. The casino was as crowded as on the previous night. We went directly to the roulette wheel. Max lost steadily. He played for hours. I watched the play with meticulous care. The ball. The wheel. The croupier. I took into account every insignificant move. To no avail. Max dropped about six grand but continued playing. I moved away from the table in disgust. Here we were, four experts, supposed to be in the know on every trick in the trade, unable to catch this gimmick.

Then, I noticed a shill glance rapidly at the ceiling. I followed his look. It seemed to me there was a little hole, part of the decoration on the ceiling. I signaled Patsy because his eyes were sharper than mine. We walked aside. I whispered my suspicions. He confirmed them. We walked back to the table. It was odd. I guess it was a farfetched idea, but I felt as though a pair of eyes were watching me from the ceiling. I caught Maxie's attention. He followed me into the washroom. I told him what I had discovered.

"Good work, Noodles. That's probably it," he said.

Maxie cashed in the remainder of his chips. We left the place. It was about two in the morning. We drove over to the all night diner, sat at the same secluded table, ordered hamburgers and coffee and sat quietly smoking afterwards. More than an hour passed.

I broke the silence. "We got to get into the joint tonight and give it the elzoo."

Max nodded.

"That's what I was thinking," he said. He looked at his watch. "Three-thirty," he read. "Let's go."

We drove back to the casino. We parked some distance away with our lights out, watching the place. One by one, cars left the parking area until only two remained. Most of the lights were out in the building. We sat and waited until we saw all the lights go out. Then the two remaining cars pulled away together. We sat awhile longer to make certain everything was quiet and dark in the building.

Maxie got out of the Caddy. "Okay," he snapped.

We avoided the gravel roadway. We walked noiselessly on the grass and circled the building. We saw a light flashing and heard muffled footsteps in the building.

"That's probably the watchman," I whispered.

Max motioned for us to follow. He took out his gun. With the butt end he tapped one side of the building. We heard a window being opened. We ducked behind some shrubbery. A head appeared.

A voice said, "Who's there?"

Then a flashlight played all around the grounds. "Goddamn," said the voice. The window closed with a bang.

Maxie repeated the tapping performance. Again the window shot open, the flashlight played around. An angry voice said, "Who the hell is there?" The window shut with a bang. A door opened. A tall man in a business suit stepped out, gun in right hand, flashlight in the other.

He was muttering to himself, "I'll be goddamned."

Big Maxie crept behind him. His Roscoe was in his hand. Patsy, Cockeye and I were in the bushes. We had our guns leveled at the guy's head. Maxie swung and clipped the guard a terrific smack over the head. The guy fell on the grass. He didn't utter a sound. He was bleeding from the head. I leaned over him. Max looked at me questioningly. I shrugged. I didn't feel any heart beat.

Max whispered, "Is he finished? Did I croak him?"

"Yeh, I think so."

Then very faintly I felt a beat.

I said, "Wait a minute." I bent down with my ear to his chest. I heard a steady beating. I said, "Yeh, hell be all right."

We picked him up and carried him into the building. We tied him securely with some handkerchiefs and laid him on the floor. We walked silently around the place, ending up in the cashier's office. The room was about twelve by twelve, with a little window in the corner. It faced the lobby like a bank teller's. It had

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bullet-proof glass. We looked in the cashier's drawers. And then in the small safe. Everything was unlocked and empty.

There was a door in the rear of the office. I opened it cautiously. It was just an ordinary bathroom. The rest of the furniture was sparse. It consisted of a few chairs, a desk with empty drawers, and a refrigerator. I thought it was a peculiar place for a refrigerator. I looked in. All I could see were three quarts of milk. Nothing else. Maxie peered over my shoulder.

He remarked, "The cashier's probably got ulcers."

I said, "A peculiar place for a refrigerator."

There was a narrow stairway leading to the attic. We noticed a trap door. It lead down into the cellar.

Maxie stood in the center of the room, perplexed. First he looked up at the attic, then down in the cellar. Undecided which to explore first, he started up the stairway. He motioned us to follow. The attic was low ceilinged. It was filthy and unfinished. We had to crouch to go through the door. Max lead with the flashlight he had taken from the guard. What we figured out was directly above the front center of the big room below. We came to a door. We entered a small room about four by nine. Maxie played the flashlight around.

When it hit the floor we saw the gimmick: a roulette wheel painted on the floor, and next to every painted pocket of the wheel was an electric switch. A hole covered by a magnifying glass was directly in line with the roulette wheel in the room below.

"Clever bastards," I whispered. "The ball in the roulette wheel downstairs isn't regulation marble. It's evidently a steel ball covered with some imitation marble. Just as I guessed. It's run by remote con-

"So what?" Cockeye asked.

"So what?" Max mimicked in disgust. "Don't you get it?"

Cockeye shook his head.

"The guy up here," Max explained impatiently, "looks down at the table, and watches the shills. One of them lays a large bet on a number. As the wheel revolves," Max demonstrated, "he pulls a switch sending a powerful magnetic current. It hits the pocket the shill has got the bet on. The magnetic current holds the steel ball. The rest of the chumps lose." Max rubbed his chin. He admired the set-up. "Not bad, not bad at all. I guess they let a sucker win a small bet occasionally, to make it interesting."

He continued to survey the set-up, grinning and talking as if to himself. "If I had a cooperative friend up here pulling switches in my interest, it could be profitable."

The grin developed into a broad smile. "Hey, Noodles?"

"Yeh, you got something there, Max," I agreed.

We walked soundlessly out of the room and investigated the rest of the attic. We explored every corner. There were observation holes all over the floor. A watcher from this attic could keep tabs on everything happening in the room below. Quietly we went down the stairs and back into the cashier's office. Max looked at the trap door uncertainly.

"May as well see what's down there." He picked the ring up, slowly raising the door.

We were four surprised East Side hoodlums—we gaped at the unexpected sight. There sat an elderly man at a wide table covered with heavy books. One book was open in front of him. He was writing in it diligently under a dim desk lamp. He barely raised his head and said, "You boys came a little early, but I'm almost finished. These are complete. You can start moving them."

Max whispered, "What the hell?" in my ear.

I shrugged, "I don't know."

The old man waved toward the finished books.

"You can have these. These are finished."

I whispered, "Let's humor the guy."

Max said, "Okay."

We started down the stairway. The old man glanced once at us, then went back to his writing. I looked over his shoulder to see what the hell he was doing. He was copying names. I looked closer. Then it dawned on me what he was doing: he was forging names in the county election registration books.

He asked me proudly, "How's it look, son?"

"Perfect," I answered, "perfect." I didn't want to let the cat out of the bag by asking questions.

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"I'm up to the last page, last book," he said working swiftly. We stood around watching him with admiration.

Cockeye whispered, "That old guy's an f.w."

The old man put his pen away with a sigh. "I'm glad I got this job only once a year. It's a pain in the ass."

He smiled, "Where's John?" I was thinking he probably meant the guy Max hit.

With his usual presence of mind Max said, "He's taking a crap."

The old man nodded. "All right, let's start moving the stuff."

We started carting the books upstairs. Max said to Cockeye, "Pull the car up to the door."

We piled the books in the car. The old man was naive. He didn't ask any questions. He sat down in the back seat. Max and I sat on both sides of him. Cockeye stepped on the starter. We went rolling out to the highway.

Maxie said, "Hotel, Cockeye, boy."

The old man looked at Max curiously.

At the hotel, Max, Patsy and Cockeye went to the rooms to change. I remained in the car with the old man. I had my hand on the shiv. When they came down it was my turn to change. I paid the clerk for a week in advance, and told him to send the suits to Schwartz. We drove away.

I could see that the old guy was beginning to feel that everything wasn't kosher. He looked at us suspiciously.

"Where are you men going? Aren't you driving to the storeroom of the courthouse?"

We didn't answer him. We sat deadpan. He looked frightened.

Tremulously he inquired, "Who are you?"

Maxie smiled and patted him on the back.

"You be a good boy, Pop. Everything's going to be all right. Just take it easy." He turned to Cockeye. "Fat Moe's," he said.

During the ride, the old man seemed to relax, especially after he saw we treated him with respect and consideration. By the time we were halfway to New York he was our friend. Max had picked up a quart in a "speak" in a small town. It helped lubricate his tongue and make him friendly. He told us all about the politician who ran the county. He described him as a "fat-bellied, greedy, crooked sonofabitch." Very powerful politically. He ran everything in the county. He was even head of the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan.

"He's a bad guy to tangle with," the old man warned. "All the men working in the casino are members of the Klan. And this politician is a sure-thing wise guy. He never left anything to chance. He stacks everything in his favor, from the equipment in his casino to the county elections."

The old man asked, "You boys from the opposition political party?" I shook my head. He took another guess. "From the state D. A.'s office?"

Max was frank. He told him. "No. We're from an organization whose only interest is the casino."

I was curious. I asked him about his background. "How come you're so expert at copying names? How did you get mixed up with this guy?"

The old man explained. "I'm doing my second hitch for forgery. This fat-bellied politician borrows me before every election to doctor up the books."

"Columbia the gem of the ocean, the home of the free and the brave," I sang and laughed to myself. Typical, typical, typical, goddamn how typical, in this home of the free. The *nebishes* and the *schlemihls* certainly get an all-around friggin.

At the most, we "hoods," through Frank, endorse a candidate here and there. We back him up with some dough. Maybe we send a few repeaters around to vote a few times more than the law permits. Maybe we do a little genteel intimidating of voters. But this guy! He cops the cake. He's no hood. He's supposed to be a legit guy. But he could teach us how to steal an election. In spades. Yeh, how typical.

Hoods are amateurs in every respect compared to these so-called legit guys in high places.

I asked, "So you're really supposed to be in jail right now?"

The old forger said, "I'm a two-time loser. John, the man we left behind, is my guard. He's head of the county detectives. He was supposed to take me back to the hoosegow." The old man frowned. "What did you

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guys do with him? He's the politician's ace strong-arm guy."

I said, "We put him to sleep."

The old man was alarmed. "What do you mean? You killed him?"

"No," Max replied. "We just put him away temporarily."

"Oh," he smiled in relief.

"Is there a regular night watchman in the casino?" I asked.

"Not that I know of," the old man said. "I understand they take all the money out of the joint when they lock it up."

We reached New York City. Maxie said to the old man, "What do you want to do, Pop?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Maxie repeated, "What do you want to do? You want to go back to jail or fly the coop and stay here in New York?"

"I'd like to stay here in New York if I can find something to do, and if they won't find me," he added.

I said, "Don't worry, they won't."

"Okay, Pop, we'll get something for you to do. No penmanship. Something else to keep you out of mischief." Maxie smiled at the old man's eager look. "How are you fixed? Got any dough?"

The old man shook his head. Max took out fifty bucks. He handed it to the old man.

He mumbled, "Thanks very much." The look of deep appreciation the old man gave Maxie had much more feeling than the words he uttered.

We arrived at Fat Moe's. We carried the books in through the back. We stacked them in the closet. When Moe heard us walking around, he came in with a tray.

Max turned to the old man, "Okay, Pop, have your choice. What kind of job do you want? A job handling cold stiffs in a funeral parlor, or drunken stiffs in a speakeasy?"

"I'd enjoy working right here," the old man said hopefully.

"Moe," Maxie called out, "give the old man an apron. You got yourself another assistant."

"Please call me Philip," the old man suggested quietly.

Maxie smiled. "Okay, Philip. Moe will show you the ropes and get you a room."

Moe stood nodding and smiling his approval. "Okay, Phil, you're all set."

Max turned to Cockeye. "Next stop is Jake's place."

We got into the car and drove to Broome Street. Pipy was tending bar. He greeted us cheerfully as he set up a round of doubles.

"How's business? Everything O.K.?" Max said.

Pipy remarked joyfully, "Everything's all right."

"Where's Jake and Goo-Goo?" I asked.

"Resting up. They were on the late shift. We had a busy night."

Pipy had a satisfied air.

"I need the services of you, Jake, and Goo-Goo for a couple of days. A little out of town business. Get somebody to take care of the joint."

Max's manner was curt and authoritative.

Pipy said, "Sure thing, Max. When do we start?"

Max said, "The three of you be ready sometime this evening. Well pick you up here."

"We'll be on the ball okay. I'll get in touch with Jake and Goo-Goo right away."

When we got outside Patsy asked, "How about a little chow?"

"I second the motion," Cockeye said.

We drove over to Sussman Volk's delicatessen on Delancey Street. Each of us had double orders of hot corned beef with French fries and bottles of celery tonic.

"You remember the address on Fourth Avenue?" Max put the question to me.

"What address?" I helped myself to some of Maxie's French fries.

"You know, the address of the guy that handles dice."

"Oh, you mean the guy that handles crooked gambling paraphernalia? The place the Professor sent us years ago to get some stuff for him?"

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“Yep, that's the guy; you remember the address?”

I thought a moment as I put a dab of mustard on a juicy slice of corned beef.

“No, I don't, but I would recognize the building. Yeh, it's somewhere on Fourth Avenue. On the east side of the street. Why?”

Max thoughtfully chewed on a toothpick.

“I want to pick up a couple of things there,” he said. “I got an idea.”

“To give them a taste of their own medicine?” I asked.

“Yep, something like that.”

“If we take a slow cruise on Fourth Avenue, we'll find it,” I suggested.

We drove slowly along Fourth Avenue. I recognized the building; Cockeye pulled over to the curb. Max and I walked up one flight and sauntered over to the counter.

“Hello, there, how have you been?” the proprietor greeted us.

I couldn't believe he had recognized us. “You guys certainly have grown,” he said.

“You remember us?” I said in wonder.

“Sure,” he laughed. “How could I forget? It seemed as if it was just a short time ago. Two tough kids came in talking through the sides of their mouths, like this: The Perfessor sent us.” We laughed at his mimicry.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, all business. Max described the luminous reader deck we wanted.

“Sure thing,” he said. “These I keep only for my real discreet clientele.”

From underneath the counter he produced several decks with accompanying isinglass eye shades. He showed us how to read the backs. It was fairly simple to understand once we had memorized the code.

He explained, “Every deck of cards has its individual code. No two decks operate the same.”

We bought a dozen pair of loaded dice, and left.

“Down to Rubin's, the guy who makes glasses, on Canal Street,” Max instructed.

“Make these into eye glasses?” Rubin was dubious. He fingered the isinglass shades. “There's no logic to it. What's the sense?”

“Let us worry about the logic, Rubin. You make up two pair.”

Max threw a ten-dollar bill on the show case. “Will this cover it?”

“All right, all right.” Rubin pocketed the ten. “I'll have them ready in an hour.”

We walked out. We stood outside undecided how to kill the hour.

There was a small movie house next door, showing two thrilling cowboy pictures, “Destry Rides Again” and “A Bloody Trail.” This was Cockeye's meat because he had never altogether outgrown his secret yen to be a gun-fighting cowboy—perhaps none of us had. The others decided to go, but I wanted to visit my mother.

“O.K. go ahead. Meet us at Jake's place in an hour.”

I walked out and grabbed a cab. I walked up the rickety stairs and along the smelly dirty hall. An uncomfortable apprehensive feeling came over me. I knocked softly on the door.

A curt voice answered, “The door is open. Come in.”

It was my brother's voice. I opened the door. He was sitting at the kitchen table, reading and smoking a cigarette.

“Oh, it's you,” he said.

He gave me a cold look.

I walked in. “How come you're home so early? Where's Mama?” I asked.

“A neighbor phoned me at the office, mama is sick. She's sick; she's in there.” He gestured to the back bedroom.

“What's the matter?” I asked. With an uneasy feeling I hurriedly walked to the bedroom.

“Don't disturb her, she's asleep. The doctor just left. He gave her a pill,” he barked at me.

I turned back. “What's wrong?”

“Are you really interested?” he sneered. “You make me laugh with your show-off devotion. Why don't you come around more often, big shot?”

“That's why I don't come around, on account of your lousy sarcasm. Besides, this dump gives me the creeps. Why the hell don't you move uptown to a decent place? Maybe I'd come around more often. Maybe I d

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move in. I'd pay all the expenses, like I told you many times before."

"In the first place Mama won't move. She's used to the neighborhood, and she has all her friends here."

"Yentes and kurshineerkehs," I grunted. "Besides, it stinks around here."

I realized too late my frankness would only make him more nasty. That I had tried to avoid.

"Yentas, kurshineerkehs, and it stinks," he said bitterly. "The people in this neighborhood are beneath you, my big, brave, hoodlum brother. Who the hell do you think you are?"

The corner of his lip curled in a sneer.

"I didn't mean it that way," I said apologetically.

He didn't hear me. He was too engrossed in needling me.

"Tell me, do they still call you Noodles the Shiv? So Noodles the Shiv is too good to live around here? What do you think you're made of? Different stuff from the decent people in this neighborhood? A hood like you who carries a knife and gun like most decent peaceable people carry a pen and pencil? Who uses whiskey and drugs to bolster his courage?"

"I don't use drugs," I mumbled. "Occasionally we kick the gong around and that isn't habit forming," I argued weakly.

"Smoking opium isn't a drug? Isn't habit forming?" he sneered. "Also you think bulldozing people requires courage? Also you think the only way to get money is by stealing and conniving? You've got no respect for religion, God or people? You and your hoodlum friends think you're above law and decency, don't you? With your guns and knives and brass knuckles? You guys rationalize that everything that's phony and illegal is okay, and anybody that's legitimate is a sucker. You visualize yourself as a romantic figure, don't you? As some sort of modern Robin Hood. Don't tell me. I know your way of thinking."

"Look," I snarled. "Don't start that crap again every time I come around. Let's cut the Cain and Abel act. I didn't come here to continue the same ridiculous discussion. I came to see Mama."

"You came to see Mama," he mimicked. "Another thing I want to discuss with you, who the hell gave you permission to move our father's body to a different plot and put an elaborate stone on his grave? For a guy who never gave him respect when he was alive or even said Kaddish, Yiskor or any prayer at all, for his father's soul, this sudden filial devotion stinks. You don't ask anybody. You take things into your own hands as usual. Why the hell don't you do things like a normal, decent man?"

"Look," I snapped. "Don't crowd me too far. I'm liable to forget you're my brother. Don't ride me all the time about decent people. Decent people. What the hell do you think—you're such a bargain? You and your kind? You newspaper guys? So, you got yourself a byline. That makes you an authority on life and everything. Don't shit me about ideals and clean living. Who was implicated in the ambulance chasing scandal some time back? Wasn't it the newspaper friends you pal around with? How does the Combine get the winning number before it's printed, so they can lay off bets, if not from some newspaper guy like yourself? Who writes crapped-up stories to mislead the public? A publicity agent can buy you guys to flavor a story or give a guy a mention for a buck and a charlotte russe. Your bosses, the publishers, are decent and ethical? Big business buys them off with advertising. Don't the big money guys dictate their policy? Don't you guys use violence in your business? You never heard of legitimate publishers using force to sell their papers? To put them on newsstands? Who have they got in their circulation departments? Hoods, that's who they have. Don't legitimate, so-called decent publishers hire goons to break drivers' strikes? Weren't we approached time and time again by so-called decent church-going legitimate newspaper men to commit acts that even we would not have the heart to do? Don't the so-called decent merchants in time of war, when certain commodities are scarce, profiteer and steal from the public all they can without pity or consideration? Yeh, don't hand me that bullshit. Nobody's decent. The whole world is corrupt one way or another. Most people aren't honest. They make believe and kid themselves that they are. Yeh, so we—we're elementary about it; we flaunt it; we carry guns. So, what the hell do you expect to gain by baiting me every time you see me? You sound like a nagging old woman."

He glowered at me as I went into the back bedroom. Mama was sleeping soundly. I kissed her cheek and tucked five hundred bucks under her pillow.

I tiptoed back to the kitchen. My brother was smoking a cigarette and reading his paper. "What was it—her heart?" I questioned. He nodded without lifting his eyes off the paper.

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“How bad was it?” I questioned.

“A mild attack.” He mumbled, “She’ll be all right.”

I was still hot under the collar. I wanted to needle him. I said, “I read some of the crap you got syndicated in the Sunday papers.”

“So you don’t like it?” He glared. “At least it’s an honest and decent way to make a living. It’s decent money.”

“Decent money,” I sneered. “It’s the same kind of money a prostitute receives.”

He turned white with anger. “You sonofabitch,” he snarled at me.

“Yeh,” I continued. “It’s the same kind of dough. You’re paid off. You’re bought off to write a load of reactionary crap. Where are your liberal ideas? Weren’t you the guy who admired his hero, Heywood Broun? Remember? Yeh, where is your love for the underdog? You’re bought off. You sold out your liberal point of view. You sold out for a charlotte russe. Why? Because you’re afraid to write what you want for fear of being branded. You got shit in your blood, like the rest of your friends in your profession. ‘The pen is mightier than the sword,’ you used to say. But your bosses give you guys a tap on the wrist, and your pens fall out of your hands, and you murder each other to get on the reactionary wagon.”

“You can’t get a job if you write liberal stuff today,” he mumbled.

“Yeh, that’s what I mean. You’re the guy who used to quote Lincoln and Tom Paine. You’re the guy who gave me that quote ‘God give me strength to face a fact and express it, though it slay me.’ You remember? That’s what I mean. You sold yourself like a whore.”

“You and your goddamn long-winded discussions,” he mumbled. “Always picking a goddamn argument.”

“I pick the arguments?” I asked.

“Yes, you always picked the arguments and made the long-winded discussions around here.”

“Well, I’ll be goddamned.” I looked at him in disgust. I said, “Oh well, what the hell’s the use. Give my love to Mama.”

He didn’t answer. I gave him a warning look.

He said, “All right.”

I added, “Next time I come around if you start that crap, I’ll throw you out the window.”

He didn’t answer me. He just glared his defiance.

I went out. At Jake’s place a stranger was tending bar. I had a few drinks to cool off. The place was crowded. Evidently the bartender knew who I was. He motioned to the back room. Max, Pat and Cockeye sat opposite Jake, Pipy and Goo-Goo. They were engrossed in a poker game. We exchanged greetings. I watched the game for a few hands. Max and Patsy wore the luminous glasses for practice. They looked like ordinary sunglasses.

CHAPTER 26

I supposed Maxie had already thought out his strategy for the casino job. Of course that was one of the reasons he had invited Jake, Pipy and Goo-Goo to accompany us on this second visit to the casino.

Finally, with a laugh, Maxie said, "Okay, break it up. Let's get started."

Maxie asked Jake, Pip and Goo-Goo, "You guys got your hardware?" The three nodded.

With questioning glances at Maxie, they laid their rods on the table. Take produced two pieces: a Luger and a Police Special. Pipy took a .38 out of his back pocket. Goo-Goo had his .38 stuck into the front of his pants.

"How about these?"

Jake and Pipy each produced his collection of keys.

"No use looking for trouble," Max said. "Throw them in the pile. That goes for us, too."

We took our holsters off. I took out my knife and Maxie unhooked his sleeve gimmick. It made a sizeable pile on the table.

We put everything in the canvas bag Cockeye opened up.

"All right to put it under the chassis?" Cockeye asked.

"Not yet. Go over to the garage, get the Tommy, and then put the whole works under the chassis. We'll wait here for you."

Cockeye picked up the bag and left.

We went to the bar and had a few rounds. Cockeye came back in twenty minutes.

"Did you attach the Tommy okay?"

"Don't worry, Max," Cockeye replied. "The lead sprayer is on good."

The seven of us piled into the big Caddy, which wasn't too uncomfortable. In a pinch we could accommodate nine.

Cockeye said, "This will give us plenty of weight for a smooth ride."

That's what it was—a smooth, uneventful ride back to the resort.

We checked in at the hotel at about eleven p.m. Jake, Pip, and Goo-Goo were assigned a large room on our floor. We were all tired.

Max said, "Let's hit the hay. We get up at four a.m."

We took showers and went to bed.

I quickly fell asleep. It seemed as if I had been asleep for many hours. I felt refreshed as I looked at my watch. It was four-ten a.m. I looked over at Maxie. He was lying perfectly relaxed, snoring as usual, with a peaceful expression on his face. I called to him. He sat up rubbing his head.

"How do you feel? Okay?" he asked.

"Yeh," I said.

We had a whispered discussion. I suggested a plan of action. Maxie agreed to it. He started dressing. Then he went into the next room and slapped Patsy and Cockeye on the buttocks. He walked down the hall in his stocking feet and woke Jake, Pip, and Goo-Goo.

It was four-thirty a.m. when we left the room one by one to meet in the garage. Cockeye crept underneath the car and took out the canvas bag, including the Tommy gun. Maxie distributed our equipment. He examined with interest Jake's and Pipy's keys.

"You want to learn the second-story trade, Max?"

Max smiled, "No thanks, Jake. Everybody to his own racket."

We stopped at a diner for coffee and flapjacks. Maxie ordered a dozen hamburgers to go.

"Yeh, it's a good idea," I said. "We'll be pretty hungry before the day is over."

"Yep, you and me both," he said significantly.

It was five a.m. when we stopped a block away from the casino. It was still brightly lit up. There were plenty of cars in the parking area. We waited. About five-thirty, cars began pulling out of the lot in bunches. Lights were being extinguished in the building one by one.

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At five–forty–five, there wasn't a car on the lot. The building was in complete darkness. We left the car and walked quietly to the building. Max whispered, “Take your rods out. Jake, you take your shoes off and follow me.”

Max motioned for the rest of us to stay where we were. He and Jake crawled to the casino door. Five Roscoes were covering them. Jake went to work quietly with his master keys. It took him five minutes to unlock the door. Big Max motioned to us to come along. We walked noiselessly into the building, our Roscoes ready for action. We went over the entire building, up the attic and down the cellar. The building was deserted. We adjourned to the bar. Maxie served Mt. Vernon.

Jake went outside for his and Maxie's shoes. We stood around as Maxie began his curt instructions.

“Me and Noodles will be parked up in the attic. You guys go back to the hotel and rest up. Call Schwartz, the tailor, and get fitted out. Come back to this casino at eleven p.m. sharp. When you get here, Patsy, you concentrate your play on the roulette wheel. Start betting light. Then towards the end, make it heavy. Eleven–thirty on the dot, put all your money on one number.”

Patsy looked uncertain.

Maxie said, “On any number at all. You, Pip, get into the dice game. Cockeye will give you phony dice to operate with. Eleven–thirty you shoot for all. Here's five grand to play with.”

Pipy took the money and nodded confidently.

“You, Jake, and Goo–Goo, get into the poker game, do the best you can in there. Cockeye will supply the dough, and will explain how to use the glasses and the deck. Eleven–thirty, quit the game, win or lose. That goes for all of you. You, Cockeye, at eleven–forty have the Caddy at the door, just in case.”

Max gave Cockeye a look. Cockeye nodded.

“Now then, this is the important thing,” Max continued. “Eleven–forty on the dot all you guys, with the exception of Cockeye who stays at his wheel, walk into the cashier's office. Noodles and I are coming down the stairway from the attic at exactly eleven–forty. We don't know what kind of reception committee will be there to greet us. So you guys be on the ball. Understand?”

Maxie looked at our faces slowly and significantly. “Now, stay in the hotel until it's time for you to leave. Clean your rods; there may be fireworks.”

Maxie turned to Cockeye. “Get the bag of hamburgers out of the car and the lead sprayer.”

When Cockeye came back with his arms full, Maxie asked, “Are there any questions? Is everything understood?”

The men nodded.

“Okay. Get going. Jake, lock the door from the outside.”

The lock snapped shut as Jake turned the key on the other side of the door. We heard the car pull away.

Maxie picked up the bag of hamburgers and the Tommy gun with a grin. “We got a long wait. No use starving, eh, Noodles?”

“You and Napoleon,” I said.

“Napoleon?” he questioned. “What about Napoleon?”

I told him about Napoleon's logic.

“Yep, it's common sense,” Max said.

He walked up the stairway. I followed him. We took our jackets off in the attic, pulled a couple of chairs over to the small window overlooking the driveway. We made ourselves comfortable.

Maxie picked up the conversation where he left off. “Like I said, Noodles, it's common sense. Now, take you and me. We got a long wait, twelve hours, maybe, or more. Napoleon was a smart guy. An army travels on its stomach. He was quite a guy, hey, Noodles?”

“Yeh,” I said.

Max tossed me a Corona. We both lit up. We smoked awhile. He continued: “Tell me about the guy; he lived a life of action, didn't he?”

I smiled, spit out of the window, and said, “Yeh, he did.”

For hours we discussed Napoleon. I quoted from a book I had read, told Max about his life, his military career, his loves. Maxie was very much interested in the episode where he cast his lot with the revolutionists and became a popular hero of the French people.

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Then, I explained how all the acclaim went to his head. He tried to take over the world. We discussed his military campaigns, his mistake in trying to invade Russia.

“The trouble with that bastard was, he was too cocky,” Maxie said.

“Yeh,” I agreed. “He could have been a really great man and done a lot of good for his people. Instead he looked for personal glory.”

“The stinkin bastard wanted to become a world dictator.”

“Yell, there's always some bastard trying it. They always underestimate the little people.”

“You know Frank comes from the same place Napoleon did, doesn't he, Noodles?”

“Frank? Oh, you mean the Boss. No, Frank comes from Sicily. Napoleon came from Corsica.”

“You know, Frank is a pretty cocky guy.”

“Yeh, in a way. But I don't think he has a Napoleonic complex. He has respect for people. Underneath he has humility. How about some drinks, Max?” I said.

“O.K., we may as well stock up. You watch the road, Noodles.”

Maxie got up from the chair and went downstairs. I had a good observation point. I could watch the main highway, and see instantly if cars turned into the drive leading into the casino.

Presently, Max came back, his arms full of Hoffman ginger ale, Coca-Cola and a bottle of Mt. Vernon. We deposited the bottles in the room where the gimmick roulette wheel was painted on the floor.

“What, no ice?” I said.

“If the opening at the stairway was larger, I would accommodate you. I would bring that office refrigerator up here.” Max took an opener he had picked up at the bar and opened a couple of bottles of Coke.

We sat down by the window and sipped our drinks slowly. It was a dreary wait. We took turns walking around and lying on the floor, catnapping. The sun beating on the roof made the attic as hot as a Turkish bath. We stripped, one piece at a time, until all we had on were our shoes and shorts.

Maxie laughed at me. “You should see yourself in a mirror, Noodles.”

I was wearing my sling holster and gun. My knife I had stuck in my shorts. Sweat was running down my body.

“You aren't exactly dressed to receive polite company either, Maxie.” I grinned.

Besides the holster and gun attached to his sweating body, he had his gimmick .32 tied to his right arm. The Tommy gun lay on his lap. At twelve-thirty we had hamburgers and half a bottle of ginger ale. I added some whiskey to the ginger ale. It made a warm but palatable drink.

“How about getting some ice cubes from the refrigerator downstairs, Noodles?”

I went down to the office refrigerator, and pulled at the ice tray. It was one opaque solid block of ice. I looked around for something sharp to dislodge the tray, but I could find nothing. I tried my knife. Then I reasoned, the hell with it. I didn't want to dull my blade.

“What, no ice?” Max asked.

“The goddamn tray is frozen in a solid mass. I need an ice pick.”

“To hell with it,” Max grumbled.

After awhile we ran out of conversation. Time dragged as if we'd been up there for days.

Finally, at about 2 p.m., an old Ford pulled off the highway into the casino drive. We watched with interest as two colored men stepped out of the car. One of them produced keys. He fumbled at the door for a moment. Then they walked in. We watched their progress through the peepholes in the attic floor. They went to a closet and brought out pails, mops and brooms.

“Crap. They're only porters,” Max said in disgust.

“What the hell, at least it breaks the monotony.”

We watched them vacuum the rug. I never thought I'd be interested in watching such a monotonous job. At four o'clock, they finished their work. They put the cleaning equipment back in the closet and walked over to the dice table. They started to play for small stakes.

“How about joining them, Noodles?”

I looked at Max to see if he was serious. With him anything was possible.

They played until one of them lost all his money, three and a half bucks. It was six o'clock when they left. They locked the door behind them.

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We ate some more hamburgers for supper and washed them down with our warm concoction of ginger ale and Mt. Vernon. The heat increased. The attic felt like an oven. We sat as close as we could to the little window, and sipped from our bottles. Even after the sun went down, the heat was stifling.

It was just about eight-thirty. We watched a Hudson and a Buick pull into the driveway. They discharged ten husky men in uniform at the door.

Max whispered tensely, "Guards."

We watched them intently. Obviously, none had keys. They took up their stations outdoors.

Big Maxie flexed his muscles. He danced around shadow-boxing. He said in relief, "Soon we'll get a little action, maybe."

At nine o'clock, two straight eight Chrysler Imperials shot up to the door. Five men with revolvers in their Sam Browne belts stepped out of each car. Two were carrying little valises, the kind doctors use.

"They're probably carrying the dough-re-mi," Max whispered.

One of them unlocked the door. The ten men walked in. We watched them through the holes in the floor as they began getting the casino ready for the night's play. They put the valises in the cashier's office. The cashier deftly counted and distributed the money, according to denomination, to various drawers under the window.

"Hey, Maxie," I whispered, "it looks like a hundred grand at least."

He nodded. My palms were itching.

We heard cars pulling up the graveled driveway. I went to the window. Men in evening dress were walking into the building. I recognized them as the roulette croupier and the rest of the shills and attendants.

CHAPTER 27

It was ten p.m. I was looking down into the cashier's office. I called Maxie over. A tall, fat man was coming upstairs. He carried a flash-light.

I took my knife out and whispered to Max, "A noiseless slit across the throat?"

"No, Noodles. I'll handle the guy. I want to ask him a few questions."

I saw something white in Maxie's hand. It was his shirt. The fat man came puffing up the stairs. Our eyes were accustomed to the dark; his weren't.

When he reached the top of the stairs, his flashlight went out. He bent over to tap it on the floor to get it to light again. Maxie grabbed him from behind, his left arm around the guy's neck. Maxie's right was busy stuffing the shirt into his mouth. The guy went limp. Max was supporting him. I looked closely at his face. His eyes were closed.

"He's out," I whispered.

We carried him into the room and laid him down on the floor. I looked down to the floor below, into the cashier's office.

I whispered, "They didn't hear a thing, it's quiet down there."

Max took the gag out of the man's mouth. I poured a little of the Mt. Vernon between his lips. I gently slapped his cheek. We put the light on his face. He was coming to. His eyelids fluttered.

He whispered hoarsely, "My pills."

He fumbled in his vest pocket, and took out a small flat box. He put a pill on his tongue, motioned for a drink, and swallowed. He held his heart. His face was deathly white. Slowly, a little color came back into it. He gasped. He rubbed his heart.

"I got a bad condition," he murmured feebly.

Maxie hissed into his ear, "You keep quiet, bastard. Do as we say or we finish you."

He trembled. He looked at Big Maxie towering over him, then at me. I guess we looked like some hellish apparitions.

He almost passed out again. I slapped his face gently.

"Take it easy. Take it easy. Behave. We won't hurt you."

I gave him another slug of our ginger-ale-whiskey mixture. He took a good drink.

Maxie asked, "How're you feeling?"

"A little better." He sat up staring at us.

"What's your job?" Max prodded him. "What do you do up here?"

"I work that thing." He pointed with an unsteady hand to the switches on the floor.

"Anybody come up during the night to help or relieve you?"

He just sat. I didn't know if the guy was awed into silence or was stalling for time. We couldn't take a chance. We were in a spot. I had to make sure he was frightened sick, so he would obey our slightest command. I pressed my knife to his heart.

"Get smart, bastard. Cooperate or I cut your heart out," I hissed at him.

His trembling lips faltered. He moistened them. He swallowed. He said hoarsely, "I'll cooperate. What shall I do? Please don't hurt me."

"Answer," Maxie whispered. "Does anybody come up to help or relieve you?"

"Nobody, unless I press that button." Trembling, he pointed to a button. It was a little off to the right of the painted wheel.

The first operation that goes wrong, you get croaked," Max said in a fierce whisper.

"With this," I said, pressing the point of the shiv to his jugular vein.

"I'll do just as you tell me," he protested.

"Okay, no slip-ups," Max told him.

I looked down a hole. People were beginning to come in. Card games were being organized. It was ten-thirty p.m. A well dressed party of four sauntered over to the roulette wheel and showed an interest in

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playing. In a short while more people walked over. The play was about to begin.

Max snapped, pointing to the floor below. "That man, that man, and that woman are shills?"

"That one, too," the fat man pointed to a broad-shouldered guy with a mustache.

"Four shills on this wheel?" Max demanded. "What happens next?"

"Yes," the man stuttered. "I watch which of the four makes the biggest bet, then I make that number the winner."

"Okay," Max said. "Operate as usual."

It was simple. We made him explain the manipulation as he operated. The wires ran from the switches along this floor, through the wall, down to the floor below and into the play table. All he did to control the play was to pull the right switch. He could make any number win at will. I left Maxie and him in the room.

I walked around, looking through the various peepholes. The place was filling up. I walked over to the window. Cars were pulling up rapidly, one right behind the other, discharging their well dressed cargoes. I could see the guards patrolling the grounds. It seemed to be getting a little cooler. I wondered if it was time for the rest of our guys to show up. My watch was in the room where Max and the fat man were. I walked back into it. Big Max gave me a smile of confidence. He was smoking a Corona and watching the play downstairs.

I looked at my watch. It was ten-forty-five. I was tense as hell like a prize fighter training for months and raring to get into the ring and kill somebody. Max reached over to his pants and tossed me a Corona.

He said, "Take it easy."

Maxie was looking down the hole. There was delight and affection in his voice. "Patsy boy." He motioned for me to look.

"Goddamn. He looks good to me, Max," I said. "Tall, dark and handsome Pasquale. Eleven o'clock right on the dot," I smiled.

Then I saw Cockeye, then Jake, and finally Goo-Goo nonchalantly walking around. Max and I laughed at the sight, especially Jake the Goniff in evening clothes.

Max remarked, "I'll bet it's the first time."

They were a welcome sight among those hundreds of alien faces. Knowing they were down there gave us as good a feeling as a shot in the arm. Patsy started to play. He put down small bets carelessly. Max didn't say anything to Fat Boy, operating the switches. He let Pat lose the small amounts.

Pipy wandered away to the rear, out of my vision. I went over to the hole covering the dice table. Sure enough, there was little Pipy squirming through the crowd. I watched him making small bets against the shooter.

Then it came his chance to roll the dice. He was marvelous. He suddenly got busy with a cigarette, fumbled for his matches, then fast, he shot the dice. I laughed; a terrific thrill went through me at his artistry. He wasn't wasting any time.

He shot a seven. I could see the croupier look at Pipy in surprise. Then he looked sharply at his assistant, evidently thinking it was his fault for throwing Pipy the wrong dice. I watched Pipy make a few more wins. His finesse with dice was astoundingly smooth.

I went the rounds looking through the various holes on the floor. I looked out the window; I looked down into the cashier's office. Everything was normal. Everything was copasetic.

I went over to the hole covering the big poker game. I watched Jake and Goo-Goo, both wearing the luminous glasses. The game looked like an even match from up here: the banker with his phony eyeshade and his shill versus Jake and Goo-Goo. The only time Jake could get the advantage would be when he had the chance to slip his own deck in the game. The game was getting interesting. I hated to leave, but I had to keep an eye on the whole place. I went regularly from one hole to the next.

Finally, I went back into the control room. Max was puffing his cigar. He was surprisingly at ease though he was hovering over Fat Boy like a hawk. He smiled at me. "How goes it?"

"Everything's copasetic," I said.

A few minutes later Max looked at his watch. "This is it," Max said. "It's eleven twenty-three."

Max picked up the Tommy gun.

His easy manner changed. "This will tell the tale, Fat Boy," he snarled. Big Max's voice was savage and

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brutal. "One move out of line, and you're cold meat."

The fat guy looked like he was about to konk out.

"I said I'd do as you say," he insisted in a pitiful whine.

"Okay, watch the play downstairs, and answer questions. Who's the bum that runs this joint?"

He gave the big politician's name.

"What's his phone number and address?"

He answered, "It's in a book downstairs."

"When we go downstairs, you call him up and tell him to come over."

The fat guy nodded fearfully.

I watched the wheel downstairs. I looked at my watch. It was eleven twenty-five. Patsy was increasing his bets gradually. The croupier, with satisfaction, was pulling in Patsy's losses. Pat skipped a play. I was watching him. I saw him glance at his watch. I looked at mine. It was eleven-thirty.

This was it. Patsy was pushing all his chips together in one heap. Then he pushed them slowly and carefully on number eight. The croupier looked at Patsy in amazement. It was the largest bet made.

The other bettors nudged each other. They fidgeted and whispered in their excitement.

The croupier hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders. I guess he couldn't help himself; out of nervousness he glanced furtively up at the ceiling.

Big Max put the Tommy gun to the fat guy's head. He hissed fiercely, "Okay, bastard, that big bet wins, or your head gets blown off."

Breathing in gasps, hands shaking in fright, he put the switch on Patsy to win.

Downstairs, eyes followed the ball around and around. There was a hush as it stopped. Then pandemonium, a terrific furore downstairs. People came running to the table.

We could hear the shouting, "He broke the bank!"

Strangers were slapping Patsy on the back in congratulation. The croupier was looking up at the ceiling, aghast.

A short stocky guy with authority in his manner hurried over to the table. For a moment he stood, a bewildered look on his face. Then he shrugged and told the croupier to continue the play.

Patsy gathered his winnings and started toward the cashier's office. The stocky guy and two husky men followed close behind.

Then I saw Jake, Pip and Goo-Goo move in from different directions.

Max looked at his watch. He nudged the fat guy with the machine gun. "Okay, Fat Belly, downstairs."

With reluctance the fat guy made for the stairway. Maxie with the Tommy in the fat guy's back, and I, with my .45 and knife, started down.

We reached the bottom of the stairway. It was like a play with all the actors converging from different entrances on to the stage. The cashier, an amazed expression on his face, had turned, facing us.

Patsy crowded in from the doorway holding his .45, looking fierce and incredulous at the same time. Behind him was the stocky guy and the two tall men. Back of them pushing into the room were Jake, Pip and Goo-Goo with rods. All eyes were fixed on us, Maxie and me. Big Max had the Tommy gun in his hands. His .45 in the holster was strapped to his bare chest. His .32 was attached to his right arm, and I crouched with my .45 in my right, my big knife in my left hand.

We were a dirty, sweaty, savage, bizarre-looking pair. We were the protagonists in this play, and this was our big scene. For the moment I had a feeling, a wonderful feeling that everything was going our way. In my imagination I heard drums beat, bugles blow. I heard stirring martial music.

Boy, this is what I was living for. I was Noodles. Yeh, I was Noodles the Shiv from Delancey Street, the fastest man with the knife on the East Side, yeh, the fastest man with the knife in the whole world. This was my exalted moment, a moment that packed the biggest thrill of my life. It was more intense than a sexual gratification. It was wonderful. Every nerve in me was screaming for action.

The action started. Patsy turned savagely. He grabbed the stocky guy by the head and flung him headlong into the room. Jake, Pip and Goo-Goo pushed the other two in. I was crouched low.

Max rapped out, "Close the door!"

Jake turned to close it. The stocky guy made a dash for the door pulling out his gun. He was my meat. He

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was mine, all mine. I was as confident as a cat with a mouse. I flew through the air. I made a tremendous leap with my knife. I slit open the hand that held the gun. The gun dropped to the floor. His hand gushed blood. He fell to his knees. I had the knife at his throat.

I snarled, "You want to croak, you friggin bastard?" He froze like a statue as I wiped the bloody knife on his cheek.

Big Max motioned to one of the tall men. He snapped savagely at him. "Fix the bastard up before he bleeds to death."

The tall guy looked at Maxie with defiance. He mumbled under his breath, "You sonsofbitches."

Patsy, with a lightning movement, lashed viciously downward on his face with the butt end of his gun. It caught the bridge of the guy's nose, almost taking it off completely. He sank slowly to the floor, groaning. He sat there. His two hands held his hanging, bleeding nose. He rocked from side to side in agonizing pain.

That did it. That gave them the feeling we wanted to instill in them, the feeling of the necessity for immediate obedience. We were in a spot. We were outnumbered. We had to show them that we were vicious, that we would kill.

"Okay, you." Big Max motioned to the other tall guy.

"Fix your friend's hand up before he bleeds to death. Any more goddamn remarks you'd like to make?"

Quickly he shook his head in fright. With a handkerchief he tried to stem the flow of blood. His hands were too shaky. I took over the job. I tied a tourniquet tightly around the guy's wrist.

"Frisk them, Jake." Maxie made a quick movement of the Tommy gun. Jake removed three "pieces" from the group.

"Okay, these four down the cellar."

Max pointed with the Tommy to the two guys that were hurt, to Fat Boy, and to the remaining tall man.

I lifted the trap door. Jake helped the stocky guy down. The tall guy helped his sobbing companion. The weak-hearted fat guy labored down last.

"Okay, Jake, you stay down with them," Max ordered.

Jake disappeared downstairs. I kicked the trap door shut.

The cashier stood looking at us, panic-stricken.

Maxie snapped at him. "Call your boss. Tell him it's very important to come right over." He moved menacingly closer. "One wrong word, bastard, you'd wish your old man shot his load into a rubber and you were never born."

The cashier timorously picked up a telephone book. With shaking fingers he turned the pages. He went over to the phone. In a quavering voice he gave the operator the number. He had a little difficulty with his boss.

We could hear the boss shouting at the other end of the wire, "What's up? What's up? What's so goddamned important?" But finally we heard him say, "I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Damn you, it'd better be important."

A man and a woman started walking over to the cashier's window. Max and I in our odd garb barely had time to duck into the bathroom. Maxie snapped to Pat, "Let the cashier conduct his business. You stay with him." Patsy edged closer to the cashier.

Pipy and Goo-Goo sank to the floor out of sight. The couple bought five hundred dollars worth of chips and walked away. We came out of the bathroom.

"Goo-Goo," Maxie said tersely, "tell Cockeye to park the car close by. You come back in with him."

Goo-Goo walked out through the door.

Just in time, we saw another guy walking toward the window. Again we ducked into the bathroom. I left the door slightly ajar. Pipy dropped to the floor.

The man stuck his face to the window. He looked curiously at Patsy standing alongside the cashier. He said, "Where's Paul? In the crapper?"

The cashier, at Patsy's nudge, answered, "Yes, he's in there."

I quickly flushed the toilet for the sound effect.

The guy at the window peered at Patsy suspiciously. "Who's this guy?" he asked.

"I'm his new assistant," Patsy volunteered.

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He looked intently at Patsy. "I never seen you before. Hey, Si," he was addressing the cashier, "you better tell Paul I want to see him. There's something funny going on. I can't place it. There's something wrong with the wheel. It's throwing too many winners. Everything's going haywire."

Patsy, with a disarming smile, said, "Come in and tell him about it yourself."

Pat opened the door wide. The guy paused before coming in. He seemed a little chary. Pat coaxingly took him by the arm, smiled in his face. "Come in, pal, come in."

As soon as he was inside the door he got suspicious. He tried to twist out of Patsy's hold. Pipy slammed the door shut. The guy was startled.

He said to Pipy, "What're you doing here?"

"You're a nosy bastard, aren't you?" Patsy said sarcastically.

Pat twisted the guy around and gave him a chop with his gun on the back of his neck. He fell to the floor, sprawled face down like a dead rabbit. Pipy went through his clothes and extracted a .38 Colt. "Tsk, tsk," he said, "these big local boys acting tough, carrying real pistols. Water pistols they should carry."

He jauntily twirled the gun around his finger like a cowboy. Then he put it in his pocket.

We walked out of the toilet. Max said to me, "Okay, Noodles, throw the jerk down the cellar."

Pat and I carried him to the trap door. We started to ease him down. He slipped out of our hands. He went head first down the stairs. Jake called up.

"Hey, you guys, where do you think you are? Down on Delancey throwing garbage down the street?"

I went down to see how the guy was. I was the mob doctor.

Jake asked, "How is he, Noodles?"

I examined him. "He's all right; he's breathing," I said. "But he could have a broken head."

Jake had the four of them herded in the back on a bench. We carried the limp guy over. "Move over," Jake barked. "You guy's got yourself some company."

I cautioned Jake to watch them closely.

"Don't worry. I got my two Roscoes."

I went upstairs. Goo-Goo had come back with Cockeye.

Maxie said to Cockeye, "How's them big shmucks outside?"

He meant the uniformed guards.

"Them donkeys?" Cockeye sneered. He spit to show his contempt. "They don't know their elbows from their asses. Them dumb shmucky bastards."

More customers came to the window. Patsy and the cashier changed their money into chips.

Patsy said to the cashier, after the customers walked away, "You may as well cash mine, too. I'm loaded down with the crap."

The lowest chips Pat had in his pockets were hundred-dollar ones. Most of the rest were five-hundred dollar ones. The total ran to seventy-four thousand, five hundred dollars.

The cashier hesitated.

"Cash them," Max ordered.

"Look, bastard," I growled, "we can clip all of it anyway."

"That's about all there is," the cashier complained in a hopeless tone. Maxie prodded him with the Tommy. He hurriedly counted out the money.

I thought Maxie went to a lot of trouble for nothing, to beat the wheel and everything. Now the chips, I laughed to myself; all he had to do was take the money out of the drawer, and throw the chips away.

Maxie was sizing up the cashier. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Simon Robinson," he retorted meekly.

"What does the boss pay you a week?"

"Forty dollars."

Maxie flipped his ashes. "Your boss is a cheap bastard, ain't he, Si, to pay a guy so little who handles big money like you do."

"I agree with you on that," the cashier smiled weakly.

Maxie looked at him speculatively. "You look okay to me, Si. How come you tied in with a crumby outfit like this?"

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Si shrugged his shoulders.

Maxie turned to Pipy who was standing quietly near the door. "How did you make out in the dice game, Pipy boy?"

"I was just getting warmed up," he replied. "I'm ahead anyway. Seven grand. Do you want the dough now?"

"We'll straighten out later," Max said.

CHAPTER 28

I was watching the entrance to the lobby intently. I whispered, “Hey, Max, this looks like the big shot coming in.”

Si looked out and nodded, “Yes, that's him.”

I watched him striding toward the office with two of his outside guards for escorts. He was the loud, sporty type. His suit was a bright powder blue. He was wearing a noisy red–striped tie, barber pole style. His pearl white hat was slouched on the side of his head a la Jimmy Walker.

“Pat, you stay with him,” Big Max pointed to the cashier. “You guys behind the door,” Maxie gestured to Cockeye, Pipy and Goo–Goo. I followed Max back into the toilet.

The sporty big shot burst through the door. He bellowed through the side of his mouth like a movie gangster.

“What the hell is going on here? What's up?”

He spied Patsy. “Who the hell are you?” he shouted at Pat.

Patsy was about to say something. He didn't have a chance to answer. The big shot snapped sharply to the cashier, “Goddamn you, Si. How many times did I tell you never to allow anybody in here? Where the hell is Paul? That sonofabitch is never around when you want him.”

His rasping voice annoyed us.

We walked into the room. Max pointed the Tommy gun at him.

“What have you got, diarrhea of the mouth, you bastard? Don't you ever close that trap of yours?”

Max spit on him.

His mouth opened wide, but no sound came out. Then he saw Cockeye, Goo–Goo and Pipy with guns in their hands.

The silence was broken with Patsy's laugh at the bastard's quick change. He just stood there speechless, like a deflated balloon. He seemed to have shrunk. There was no more wind coming from that loud mouth.

He whispered, “Is this a heist?”

“Look—you—friggin—bastard.” Big Max spit out every word separately with a slow savage violence. “Y o u ' r e — f u l l — o f — w i n d — a n d — p i s s — l i k e — a — b a r b e r ' s — c a t . From—here—on—I—do—all—the—talking—or—I—plug—your—mouth—with—this.”

Big Max with ferocious brutality jammed the nozzle of the Tommy right in his mouth, knocking two teeth out. He fell back with a yelp of pain. He spit teeth and blood out of his mouth. He sat down on a chair, holding a handkerchief to his mouth.

“Pat and Cockeye take care of things up here.” Maxie motioned to me to pick up the trap door. “Everybody else down the hole,” Max barked.

Patsy yanked the big shot up by the collar and pushed him down the cellar. “More garbage coming down, Jake.”

Jake was standing at the bottom of the stairway, grinning. He had two guns in his hands.

“Okay, all you goornoughs with horns, get to one side,” Max snapped, once everybody was downstairs.

They obeyed with alacrity, all but one of the uniformed guards. He was pale and in a sweat. He didn't move.

“Get going,” Maxie lashed at him.

“I can't. I got a nervous stomach,” he stammered. “I got to go upstairs.”

“Okay,” Maxie said, “you got to go, you got to go. Goo–Goo, you escort this gentleman up to the office crapper.”

Big Max bowed with mock politeness.

Maxie called derisively after them. “Hey, Goo–Goo, make sure the jerk defecates and doesn't masturbate.”

We thought the remark was hilariously funny. I saw Goo–Goo turn to Maxie and laugh. That was his mistake.

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We heard a shot.
Big Max whipped around with his Tommy.
Goo-Goo was falling down the stairs.
We saw a pair of legs running up.
Big Max sprayed a stream of hot lead after them.
The guy in uniform came tumbling down.
He lay sprawled on top of Goo-Goo.
He was shrieking, "Oh, my legs!"
Blood was pouring all over Goo-Goo.
It came from the holes in the guard's legs.
Patsy came running down the stairs.
His face bore a wild murderous look.
"You'll croak for this, you friggin bastard." Max stopped him with a reprimand.
He held his Roscoe ready in his hand.
Goo-Goo was grimacing in awful pain.
I took his jacket and shirt off. There was a nasty hole in his back high up around the right shoulder. I tore his shirt and bandaged him up.
Max bent over anxiously. "What do you think, Noodles?"
"He'll be okay," I said. "We can't waste too much time. Hell need attention. The bullet's got to come out."
"I'll make it short and sweet with these bastards," Maxie promised.
"Hey, Pip," I called, "get two bottles of whiskey from the bar."
"Good idea," Maxie said. He held his big hand over the wounded guard's mouth to suppress his loud crying.
I took the guard's pants off. Funny how the holes were evenly distributed. He had four in each leg. I tore his shirt into strips. I made two tourniquets, one on each leg. I plugged up the holes and bandaged them.
I whispered to Maxie, "This guy needs a hospital, bad, or hell be a goner."
Maxie shrugged indifferently.
Pipy came down with two bottles of whiskey. I gave one to Goo-Goo, the other to the guard.
"Sip them slowly," I said.
Maxie asked Pipy, "How are the people upstairs? Did they hear the shooting?"
Si, the cashier, answered, "A few people asked questions. I told them it was nothing, just some workmen using a pneumatic drill down the cellar."
"Thanks for the cooperation. I won't forget you," Max said. "Okay, Pat, you better go back upstairs."
We took the politician owner of the place to one side. Jake and Pip stood guard on the rest. We backed him up in a corner. There was no getting away from it. Loudmouth's braggadocio was all gone. Even his clothes, including his tie, seemed subdued in the dim light. His hat was no longer at a rakish angle. There was fear in his eyes.
"The first thing, bastard," Maxie had the nozzle of the Tommy dug into the guy's belly. "You close the joint up, okay?"
He mumbled a timid, "Okay."
I interrupted, "I think I better go up to the attic and get our clothes. It's chilly down here."
"Right," Max said. I left.
I came down with our shirts and suits. We dressed quickly.
"Okay, bastard," Maxie nudged the guy sharply with the Tommy towards the stairway. "Upsa daisy."
When we got upstairs, Maxie gave fast and curt instructions.
"Pat, you go around with Si. Tell everybody to leave. Everybody— shills, guards, everybody. Tell them the place is closing early tonight. As soon as they start moving out, come back here with Si. We'll cash all the outstanding chips for the customers. And you, bastard," Maxie motioned menacingly with the Tommy to the quaking boss of the place, "you stay by the window to assure any of your men who may get suspicious that everything's okay and for them to scam. One wrong move from you, I'll splatter you over the floor like cow crap. Noodles, you stay with him."

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Maxie went into the toilet. I stood alongside the guy, my shiv sticking in his ribs.

In twenty minutes most of the people had left. Only a few stragglers stood around.

One of the shills seemed a little too inquisitive. He kept asking at the window, "Why we closing so early, boss? What's up? What happened to your mouth, it's bleeding?"

I didn't like his looks. He seemed suspicious. I whispered to his boss, "Tell him to come in."

He came in, reeking of perfume. I opened the trap door and said, "Down you go, sweet boy."

He hesitated. I flashed the ten-inch blade at his throat. He ran down in a hurry, pale with fright. I slammed the door after him.

One at a time, we got rid of the rest of the stragglers. We locked the door. We had the place to ourselves.

Max, Patsy, the boss of the place and I adjourned to the bar. Max put the Tommy down and said, "Okay, boys, put the hardware away."

We put our Roscoes in our holsters.

Max put four glasses on the bar. He took a fresh bottle of Mt. Vernon and poured.

Loudmouth smirked ingratiatingly as he reached for his drink. "I sure need this." His speech sounded odd with his two teeth missing.

On our second round, Max asked, "Do you know what we're here for?"

The liquor gave him a little courage.

He simpered, "Not for any of my good, I suppose."

He hesitated to see how we took his remark.

Maxie prompted him, "Okay. Go ahead."

Blood was still trickling from his mouth but he managed a small smile.

He continued, "At first I thought you lads were out on a heist." He took the bull by the horns. "I suppose you're some of Frank's boys from the Combine?"

Max deadpanned. "Never heard of the guy." He scrutinized him speculatively. "Okay, let's say we come from a source that wants to take this joint over. What then?"

Maxie poured the third round. He was feeding him whiskey, evidently to restore him to his blatant self. Max was proving the old Roman adage, *In vino Veritas*.

Sure enough.

He straightened his noisy tie, adjusted his felt hat to the rakish Jimmy Walker angle, and answered Max out of the corner of his mouth.

"Why should I give this joint up? I had big offers to sell out. This place is a gold mine. I built it. It's mine. And I tell you guys something: nobody's going to push me out or muscle in either."

I guess he caught Maxie's warning expression. His thin veneer of Dutch courage evaporated.

"Ain't I right, fellas? Is it the right thing to do to go around bulldozing people? To scare people into giving away their rights? I—I," he pounded his chest self-righteously, "built this casino, I tell you, fellas. It isn't legal, especially to a foreigner like this Frank guy." His eyes lit up with justification.

"I'm an American, a hundred percent American."

At the word "American" Max spit his burning cigar square into the guy's eyes. Ashes and sparks flew all over his face.

Patsy clipped him a left hook in the belly.

He lay on the floor moaning, wiping the ashes out of his eyes.

"You flag-waving stinkin' bastard." Maxie spit in his face. "I was going to give you a break. I was about to give you a proposition. To let you run this joint with honest equipment. On a partnership basis. But there's no hope for you. You're lousy through and through. Aren't you, bastard? You talk about rights? You sonofabitch, you're lower than whale shit and that's at the bottom of the ocean. You run a crooked gambling joint. You grab all the profits for yourself. You underpay your help. You probably intimidate everybody with your yellow-bellied Klan set-up. You, a good American? You rob the people of their vote with your forged registration books. You consider yourself a better man than Frank? You rat bastard. A man who'll give a guy a break? Who runs his joints on the up and up? Who overpays his help? Who don't give a damn for a buck? Whose word is his bond? Who gives away more in charity? He's more of an American—"

"Yeh," I was thinking, "they're both right. This bum is America, with his Ku Klux Klan and everything

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else crooked around him. Where else in the world but in America can you find a character like this crooked politician? Where else but America could a fabulous figure like Frank be produced? And the rest of us hoods, all true and typically American?" I laughed to myself. "God bless America."

Big Maxie continued his ridiculous harangue on true Americanism. He was working himself up to a murderous frenzy. He picked up his Tommy gun and held it to the whimpering guy's head. "Pray, you goornough, pray." The guy was looking at Max with horror.

He sniveled and pleaded. "Please, please, give me a break. I got dough. I'll give you my dough. Anything. Let me go."

I shook Maxie by the arm. I whispered in his ear. We retreated to the bar. I poured two drinks. Max cooled off. We turned back to the guy.

I said, "How much other cash you got lying around? We won all the money Si had in the office. You got any more lying around?"

"You fellas will give me a break?" he whimpered hopefully.

"We keep our word, bastard. We aren't like you," Max said.

"A deal is a deal," I assured him. "What's on your mind?"

"I have some more money on the premises. I'll give you all of it. You let me go?"

"How much you got?" I asked.

"Forty-five thousand."

"Yeh, it's a deal. Where you got it?" I asked.

"You promise to keep your word?" he whimpered.

"Yes, we promise," I assured him. "Where do you keep it?"

"I got it right here in the joint," he mumbled.

"Where in the joint?"

"In the refrigerator."

"In the ice box?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, I got it in the office refrigerator."

"Okay, let's go."

Max motioned him to get up. We followed him into the office. He opened the door of the refrigerator. All we could see was the milk bottles. He put his hand in and tugged. He was trying to get the ice cube tray out. The one I had tried to get for our drinks earlier in the day.

"In there?" I asked, surprised.

He nodded.

"For forty-five grand, I'll dull my blade," I said. I started to chip away. I picked with my knife all around the tray. I gave a strong yank. I almost fell over backward with the tray. It was a solid block of ice in my hand. The ice wasn't transparent. It was cloudy.

I asked him, "You mixed the water with milk when you froze it?"

"Yes," he said weakly.

We took the block of ice into the toilet and put it under the faucet. The water loosened up the ice. I tapped it gently with my knife. A package wrapped in white oilskin appeared.

Maxie unwrapped it. He counted ninety five-hundred dollar bills in the bundle.

"This is okay," Max said in delight.

The guy asked warily, "All right, then? You let me go? I can operate the casino?"

"Look, I didn't promise you could operate the casino. Don't try to outsmart me by putting words in my mouth. All I said was we'll let you go," Maxie said angrily. "What do you think—I was made with a finger, bastard?"

Maxie took Cockeye aside and whispered to him for a while. All I could overhear was the one word "gasoline."

Cockeye said, "Okay," and left the building.

Maxie turned to Patsy. "Stay with that goornough."

He turned to me. "Come on, Noodles."

We went down into the cellar. Goo-Goo and the guard were resting comfortably. They were drunk.

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I said, "How you feeling, Goo-Goo boy?"

"Copasetic," he said with a silly smile all over his face.

"We're going to move you, okay, Goo-Goo?" Max asked.

"I don't care what you do," Goo-Goo giggled.

Big Max picked him up gently in his arms. Over his shoulder he said, "Everybody upstairs. You guys bring him up." He nodded to the casino employees to carry upstairs the guy shot in the leg.

We all walked through the office toward the bar. Patsy remained in the office guarding the boss of the casino.

We propped the two wounded men comfortably on the dice table. I poured drinks for everybody.

Maxie faced the group.

"Sorry we had to be a little rough with you guys," he said. "Your loyalty to that cheap sonofabitch was more than he deserved. We're putting the bum out of action completely. No more casino for him. He's finished. Forget all about us or I guarantee I come back and bury the lot of you."

Maxie went down the line waving the lead sprayer under their quivering noses.

Maxie took money out of his pocket. He counted out one thousand dollars and walked to the guy with the eight slugs in his legs. "One G for you until you get back on your feet."

For the moment the guy looked dumbly at Maxie's extended hand. Then the combination of pain, fear, drinks and money got him. He was laughing and crying at the same time. Finally, he stuck out his hand.

In a drunken emotional voice, he said, "Thank you, Mister. You're a fine man. Thank you."

Maxie handed the guy whose nose was broken five hundred dollars. He also gave Si, the cashier, five hundred dollars. The rest, he gave two hundred apiece.

I kidded Max. I said, "You giving these guys severance pay?"

Cockeye came to the doorway. He called out. "Hey, Max, I got it."

"Okay, leave it outside."

Max turned back to the group and warned them again. "From here on, you guys saw nothin', heard nothin', and know nothin' or—" Maxie patted the Tommy significantly.

Max and I went outside. There were two five-gallon cans of gasoline standing by the door. Maxie tapped them with his foot. "Full?"

"To the top," Cockeye said.

A Buick and a Plymouth were in the parking space.

Max said, "I guess the Buick must be Loudmouth's. Noodles, let's get everybody going." Max walked briskly back into the building.

With compassionate care he picked Goo-Goo up, gently laid him on the back seat of our Caddy.

The guy wounded in the legs we carried into the Buick. Maxie turned to Si. "You drive?" he inquired.

"Yes," Si answered.

"Okay, take the wheel of the Buick. The rest of you guys in the Plymouth. Jake, you drive. Pipy, you help Jake chaperone those fellas."

Maxie continued snapping out orders. "Si, you follow the Caddy. Jake, you keep behind the Buick, okay?" They nodded.

He walked over to Cockeye at the wheel of the Caddy. "Drive down the road around that bend." Maxie pointed. Cockeye nodded. "Wait for us there."

Cockeye said, "Bight."

The three-car caravan started. We waited until they were out of sight around the bend.

Max picked up a five-gallon tin. He motioned for Patsy to pick up the other. "Pat, you go down the cellar and sprinkle three quarters of your tin down there. Careful now, spread the stuff all over. But look out for your clothes."

Pat gave a curt nod and went down the stairway with the tin.

"You wait here, Noodles. I'll take care of upstairs." Maxie disappeared up in the attic with the tin.

I looked around the main floor with regret. It seemed too beautiful a set-up to destroy. Plenty of dough could be made in this joint if properly handled. I bet the Combination could clear a half million a year if they operated it by giving the player a break. I thought Maxie was acting a little too drastically, too hastily. It was

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in his hands. I guessed he figured this was the only cure. Maybe the joint was too loused up for the Combination to handle. Oh well, it was probably for the best, but it did seem a shame. Such a beautiful set-up.

Maxie came down first. He asked, "Pat still down there?"

I nodded. "He must be doing a good job," I said.

Maxie went to work briskly on the main floor, swishing gasoline around with the motions of a porter sprinkling water on the floor.

Pat came up grinning. "Boy, did I do a good job!" he said.

"Okay, Pat, finish emptying your tin on the other end of the room." Max gestured with his thumb.

Regretfully I watched them wetting everything down with conscientious care.

When they had finished, Max said, "Okay, Pat, down the cellar for you. You got matches?"

Patsy nodded.

"Take this wad of paper to work with." Maxie was rolling up a newspaper. He gave it to Patsy.

Maxie prepared more wads of newspapers. "Okay, Noodles, you work here. I'll work upstairs. Be careful," Maxie cautioned.

I went to the far end of the room. I lit the newspaper into a torch. The rest was simple. All I did was touch the saturated floor and furniture. It lit up instantly.

The roaring flames seemed to do something to me emotionally. I felt like running around, shouting and laughing. It was wonderfully exhilarating. I guess everybody has a little of the instinct of a firebug.

Maxie came down the stairs laughing. He shouted, "How you doing, Noodles? Patsy still down there? He's a conscientious worker, isn't he?"

Maxie laughed as he ran to the trap door. He shouted down, "Hey, Pat, come on up. Aren't you finished yet?"

Patsy appeared through the smoke. He was black with soot but smiling.

We ran out of the roaring building. The three of us were laughing like kids. We stopped a little distance away to admire our handiwork.

"Goddamn, isn't that a beautiful picture?" Maxie was dancing around. "Some fun. Just like election night on the East Side."

He slapped me on the back. He did a jig step on the lawn.

It took a minute for the flames to work their way through the roof. Then they swept down the sides until the entire building was enveloped. We heard a fire siren go off in the distance. We ran all the way to the Caddy.

The three-car caravan took the highway back to New York. We rode about twenty miles. Then, under Maxie's direction, we pulled into a secluded sideroad and stopped.

"Jake, Pipy, and you, Loudmouth, get into the Caddy," Maxie ordered curtly.

He went over to the guy shot in the legs. He asked, "How you feeling, boy?"

"I'm beginning to get the pain back. I ain't got no more whiskey left," he answered, grimacing.

"Okay, then back home for you, boy. Hey, Si, as soon as you hit town, take this guy right over to a hospital."

"Yes, I certainly will," Si said.

"Okay. One of you guys drive?" Max asked.

A guard slid behind the wheel of the Plymouth. We watched the two cars turn back to the highway in the direction of town.

"What are you going to do with me?" Loudmouth asked fearfully.

"Don't worry, chum," Maxie replied grimly.

He whimpered hopelessly, "You promised to let me go."

We didn't answer him. The guy looked from one impassive face to the other. We drove down the deserted road about five miles, then stopped.

Maxie barked, "Okay, Loudmouth. This is for you."

He obeyed like a somnambulist. Max and I walked him deep into the woods. We put him up against a tree. Max shoved his forty-five into the guy's ear. He rasped, "Pray, bastard."

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He got down on his knees. Unintelligible moaning sounds came out of his mouth.

Maxie laughed in his face. He put the gun back in his holster.

“Okay, bastard, this time we keep our word. If you squawk about anything or try to get back into any of your past activities, you'll be food for the worms. You promise?”

The guy slumped to the ground sobbing weakly, “Yes, I swear in the name of the Holy Mother.”

“Besides,” Maxie continued, “we have an ace in the hole to keep you in line, in case you forget. We have your phony election book set-up. I may send them to the opposition party, get it? The best thing you can do for yourself is retire.”

“Yes,” he barely managed to say. “I've had enough. Honest, I promise I'll do as you say.”

Maxie turned on his heel. We left him sitting on the ground. His head was in his hands, and he sobbed inconsolably.

When we came back to the Caddy, Patsy said, “We didn't hear no shot. Did you give him the business, Noodles? With the shiv?”

“No, Maxie just scared him,” I answered briefly.

Part way to town, about ten miles up the highway, we doubled on our tracks and took the road cross-country to Philly.

When we hit the outskirts, Maxie called Loo-Loo, the boss of Philly, on the phone. He wasn't in. He got Johnny, his right-hand man, instead. We made a rendezvous with him on Market Street. He met us. He directed us to a discreet private hospital on a side street.

We carried Goo-Goo in. The doctor went to work on him immediately. He probed the bullet out of his shoulder.

Max spoke to Loo-Loo's man, Johnny.

“We want to hole up for a couple of days in town, just in case. Can you fix us up?”

The hood pursed his lips. “Just a minute.” He went over to the doc. They engaged in a whispered conversation. The doctor smiled and nodded his head. Loo-Loo's man came back to us and said, “This place okay for you guys?”

“This place is okay by us,” Max said.

“With nurse service?” Cockeye asked hopefully.

The doctor laughed. “We don't have any nurses around unless I'm doing an abortion.”

It was a shabby ten-room wooden house. We had the run of the place. Besides the doctor and ourselves, the only other occupant was a stooped-over old man who did the cooking and cleaning. The old man was oblivious to what was going on. He went about his business talking to himself.

Cockeye said, “He must have plenty of dough in the bank.”

“Speaking of dough,” Max said. “That reminds me. Let's divvy up.”

We went upstairs. Patsy, Pipy and Jake threw their winnings on the bed. After deducting his expenses, Maxie split it evenly, seven ways.

Max and I fooled around with the Tommy, taking it apart, cleaning it and putting it together again. It was a small army Browning. It weighed about fifteen pounds.

Max said with a chuckle, “I'm getting pretty good with this thing.”

“Average, just average,” I said.

“Why? I aimed for his legs. Don't forget he was a running target. I got eight bullets, four in each leg. If that ain't good shooting, what is?”

“You missed half the shots, Max. You gave a three-second burst. That was more than twenty bullets expended.”

“Okay, okay, Professor. Someday we'll go up in the 'borscht' country and practice up,” Max smiled.

CHAPTER 29

For two days we slept, played cards, ate, drank, read newspapers and listened to Cockeye play the harmonica. It was a lazy, idyllic two-day rest for us and a pleasant recuperative period for Goo-Goo.

Maxie gave the doc a grand for his services and for the use of his house. We hit the road for New York and Delancey Street. The tires hummed on the hot concrete highway. The speed of the Caddy through the scorching heat and the fiery draft from the motor combined to create a sirocco through the open windshield.

“Whew, it's as hot as in an East Side matzoh bakery before Passover,” Maxie commented.

We made the trip in less than two hours. The Caddy pushed its way through the traffic, noise, pushcarts and smells of downtown Manhattan.

“Home sweet home, the good old stinking East Side.”

Cockeye threw kisses out the window in a gleeful mood.

The dark back room of Fat Moe's, with its cool, damp, musty odor of beer, was a welcome relief after our hot dusty ride. We threw our jackets off, slung our holsters on chairs, and stretched out with a sense of release at being home.

Fat Moe beamed as he came in with a cheery, “How you douchin, fellas?”

He looked at Goo-Goo's shoulder bandage. With surprising concern in his voice, he said, “What happened, Goo-Goo boy?”

“Oh nothing much,” Goo-Goo replied carelessly. “I caught a mild case of thrombosis of the blowhole.”

“He caught a lead slug,” Jake cut in drily.

Moe went back to the bar and came in with his welcome bottle of refreshments.

After we drank up, Maxie said to Cockeye, “How about running over to Katz's for some good old non-kosher hot corned beef and hot pastrami?”

“Okay by me,” Cockeye said. “How many? Two dozen?”

“Make it three dozen, assorted, Cockeye boy.”

The sandwiches disappeared fast. Max took out his everlasting box of Coronas and passed them around with the remark, “You guys jumped on those sandwiches like a hot groom jumping his bride on the wedding night.”

“Hey, Max,” Jake said. “One more round, then all right if we take a powder?”

“Sure, sure. I guess you want to see if your joint is still there, hey, Jake? What do you think—Goo-Goo's brother-in-law put wheels under the joint and moved it away?” Maxie chuckled.

“My brother-in-law is okay, I hope, I hope,” Goo-Goo replied.

We had another round of double hookers. The three of them said, “So long,” and left.

Moe came in with his arm around his new assistant. “You guys remember him?”

It was Philip, the old gent with the good penmanship.

I said, “How you doing, Phil?”

“All right, thank you.”

Max said, “Everything okay? You got yourself a room? Satisfied with your set-up?”

“Everything is fine. Just perfect.”

He was smiling cheerfully.

“I got Phil a room with the widow Fanny,” Moe volunteered.

“Benny the bum's widow?” Max raised his eyebrows.

Moe nodded smilingly. “She says Phil is a very nice man, so different from Benny. A real gentleman.”

“A sweet woman, a wonderful cook and housekeeper. I never had such—” Phil hesitated. He seemed embarrassed. He finally admitted, “Such wonderful conveniences. She would make a wonderful wife.”

“You marry the widow Fanny, and your salary will be raised to a hundred a week.”

Max was a little abrupt and awkward in his role as magnanimous matchmaker. I couldn't help bursting out laughing.

“That was our intention. The lady and I have already discussed it.” Phil's voice carried a tender undertone.

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“Not that I'm mercenary, but your kind offer makes it more definite. It simplifies the problem.” He smiled gratefully. “Thank you, gentlemen, for all your kindness towards me—and Fanny.” He added with a touch of humility, “As the sweet lady Fanny said when I asked for her hand in marriage, “The Lord taketh and the Lord giveth.””

“The Lord performs in mysterious ways,” I murmured.

Maxie smiled. He turned to Moe.

“So what else is new? Anything happen? Any calls or anything?”

Phil said, “Excuse me, gentlemen. I'll attend to my duties.”

He left the room.

“Okay, Moe, spill the dirt,” Max said briskly.

Moe sat down. He chuckled to himself. “I got to laugh,” he said apologetically. “You would have pissed in your pants if you saw what I did to them Himmelfarbs.”

“Why, what's with them?” I asked.

“I gave them some knockout drops in their whiskey. They slept for two days out in the alley.

“Very funny,” I commented drily.

Moe changed the subject. “That guy Phil is all right. He's a fast worker.”

“Especially with the widow Fanny,” I said.

Moe chuckled as he wiped the table and walked out.

Max and I went up to the main office the next day to make our report. Phil congratulated us on our “good work,” as he called it. “You boys are 'in,” he said. “You'll see soon just what that means. Meanwhile, I have a little assignment for you lads. Something our friend down in City Hall tossed in our laps, unofficially of course.”

He continued in his casual manner. “Yes, City Hall is embarrassed by this situation, this elevator strike. Nobody downtown seems able to handle it. We have to settle it. Too many factions are involved. The public and the newspapers are beginning to raise a clamor. It's purely a favor to City Hall, otherwise it's of no interest to the Combine.”

“None?” I said.

Phil chuckled. “All right, all right. I forgot I was talking to Noodles. You can't hide anything from this guy. Okay, I'll lay the cards on the table. We're going to take the union over for our usual reasons.”

He smiled and nodded to me. Max and I both knew what the usual reasons were: power, loot, and shakedown for the Combine.

Phil continued, “As I said before, we have the blessings of City Hall on this.”

I interrupted. “We didn't see any pickets on the streets. How long is the strike on?”

“The strike is only along Broadway and some of the West Side streets. It started yesterday. We want to stop it before it spreads further.”

Max asked, “Are they organized? Anybody behind them yet?”

“Well, this is what we were able to find out. Mostly it's a disorganized wildcat strike. Somebody has a union charter. I have all the dope here.”

He fumbled in his pockets while he talked. “The union is in the first stages of organization. Naturally there are the usual elements involved, ready to pounce for their share of the booty, in the form of two or three outlaw, irresponsible mobs, a few union officials, and possibly a representative of the real estate interests. They're all in on this deal: to grab whatever they can for themselves. I have definite information these people are going to have a meeting at—” Phil continued to fumble through his pockets until he produced a sheet of paper. He read, “The Eden Garden on Columbus and Sixtieth Street at two o'clock this afternoon.”

“Yeh, we know the place,” I said.

“That's where that guy 'Salvy' and his 'shabonies' hang out,” Max added. “Is he in on this?”

“Yes, he's in on this, the much publicized Salvy. And we want him out of it.” Phil looked at Max and me. “Nothing drastic, just convince him it would be healthy to stay clear.”

“He's pretty notorious, this chap Salvy. He's the chap the newspapers call the indestructible one, isn't he?” I said. “We never met the guy, but from what we hear, he's been shot about five or six times and left for dead.”

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“How about the story about him being put under a car, and they rode over him?” Max chuckled, “But they couldn't kill him. They tell how he crawled away like a snake to a hospital.”

“Yeh,” I said, “that was nice gentle Vincent at the wheel of that car.”

“Yes, that's him,” Phil continued, “the reports from our intelligence bureau are that this fellow Salvy pushed out a little mob that had this union. And as the story goes, the little mob that Salvy pushed out, in turn pushed somebody else out.”

CHAPTER 30

"It looks like big things in the air," Max said in the cab.

We were on our way back to Fat Moe's.

"Yeh, it looks like it."

I began thinking of the elevator strike and Phil's casual way of throwing it in our laps. But a royal ukase just the same.

"I was thinking of the strike, Max," I said. "I guess the first thing we do is take a gander later on at the Eden Garden and put the pressure on Salvy to lay off!"

"Yep, that's the first thing to do."

I looked out the window as we passed Twenty-third Street. I caught the time on the Metropolitan tower clock as it chimed out. It was eleven a.m.

"I suggest we get to the Eden before the two o'clock meeting and grab Salvy and his mob, whoever they are, and lay the law down as a starter."

"Yep, it's a good idea, Noodles. It's always best to be there first."

"Yeh," I grunted.

Traffic thinned out. The driver made good time the rest of the way.

Cockeye had a chair tilted up against the wall and was playing, "What'll I Do." It had a sweet, haunting melody. Patsy was at the other end of the room. He had most of his clothes off and was punching away on the heavy bag. They looked at us for a moment, but neither stopped what he was doing. There was a bottle of Mt. Vernon on the table. Max poured two double hookers. We sat sipping quietly for a while. Max caught my look. He called out, "Okay, Pat, we got a contract."

Patsy came over.

"What we got?"

"Phil gave us the elevator strike," Max answered.

Pat walked away. He started dressing.

Cockeye stopped playing. He asked, "Third Avenue elevator?"

"Office and commercial building elevators," Max said.

Pat adjusted his holster under his left armpit. "Who's behind this thing?" he asked.

"That Salvy," Max said.

"That crumb?" Pat said disdainfully. "I know the bastard. Salvy the Snake, they call him. He's a real 'boonyet.' He hangs out in that Eden Garden up on Sixtieth Street. His partner's Willie the Ape."

"I was up there with a tomato two weeks ago," Cockeye said. "Big Mike and the Fairy bought the place for fifty grand from this Willie the Ape."

"The Ape sold out?" Pat asked.

"That's what I said," Cockeye answered.

We piled into the Caddy, shot across town to West Street. Cockeye dodged recklessly in and out of the truck traffic like a maniac, into Columbus Avenue and Sixtieth Street.

"Goddamn, what a fast ride," Pat said.

"Are we here already?" Max was astonished. "Cockeye, that was a ride like Peggy used to give us," Max laughed.

"What do you mean, Max, smooth?"

"Nah, full of fast twists, bumps and grinds."

From the gaudy canopied street entrance, we walked one flight down. I pushed the door open. Jesus, were we surprised. We expected to find the place deserted at that hour. Instead it was jammed with girls. They were everywhere. They swarmed all over the place.

They wore every kind of costume from G strings to shorts and sweaters, to evening gowns. We were surrounded on all sides by bizarre colors, by the musical babble of female voices, pretty painted faces, soft and shapely hot perfumed bodies. We ate them up with our eyes. In our imaginations we fondled their breasts

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and caressed their warm naked bodies. For a long moment we stood there. Our masculinity was aroused. Like passion-crazed studs we stared with glazed eyes on a large herd of sleek mares.

I looked at my companions. I'll swear to God Almighty, each of them was in the same state I was in. We stood there in a stiffened, cataleptic state, leering and being leered at.

Patsy made the first sound. It was a long, deep, primordial wolfish "Wo-o-o-o" of longing.

The girls took up the sound. They repeated the "Wo-o-o-o," laughing and whistling all around us.

"This is Eden," Maxie exclaimed.

A tall, lithe, middle-aged man came hurrying over from the rear of the room. He walked in a graceful, gliding, effeminate manner.

"Here, here, girls, girls," he shrilled, clapping his hands sharply together. "What is this abominable commotion?"

Unceremoniously he pushed the girls aside. He confronted us. His hands were on his hips.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" He enunciated each word separately and distinctly, pursing his lips after each syllable. He didn't recognize Cockeye until Cockeye laughed and said, "Hello, Fairy."

"Oh, hello," he said, smiling coldly. "Please do not call me that. Address me by my given name, Theodore."

Cockeye introduced us. "This is Maxie, Patsy and Noodles. Meet my friend, the Fairy."

The name is Theodore," he repeated, shaking hands ceremoniously.

I felt a slight repulsion taking his hand. It was cold, moist, and small, like a child's.

He smirked and scratched the palm of my hand suggestively.

"Oh, Theodorah, you are the bold one," I lisped.

The shmucky bastard was delighted. "Oh, I have heard of you, of you, of you." He enunciated daintily, waving a waggish finger. He leaned over, closely and quietly tittered, "You men are notorious gangsters."

"Oh no, please, anything but that," I begged in mock supplication. "Excuse us for a while, girls," I said to the charming, smiling throng around us.

"Shoo, shoo, shoo," Theodore shrilled, waving his hands as if dispersing a flock of chickens.

And I'll be goddamned if they didn't sound like a flock, scampering away, giggling to each other.

"Silly bitches, haven't you seen men before?" Theodore shrilled after them.

"O.K., lover boy," Maxie snapped. "When does Salvy come around?"

"Oh him? That ruffian, that snake in the grass," Theodore said with repugnance.

"Yeh, Theodore, what time does he generally arrive?" I asked.

He smiled at me; he pursed and licked his lips and wagged his tongue suggestively. "Oh, I should judge about two p.m. or so."

"Okay, well sit in the back and wait," Max said.

"It is customary and polite to wait until you receive an invitation, don't you think?" He stared at Maxie, unafraid and indignant.

Before Maxie took it into his head to clip him on the point of his indignant chin, which would lift him in the air and cause him to slide the length of the room, I said, "Do you mind if we wait, Theodore?"

"I'm a very hospitable person," he said angrily, "if people permit me to be hospitable."

"Very commendable," I murmured politely. "Do you mind if we wait?"

"No, go right ahead; sit where you want. You can watch me select and rehearse the girls for my new show."

Maxie laughed good humoredly. "Thanks for permitting us."

"You're welcome, I'm sure," the Fairy said huffily.

We chose a table toward the back of the room but close enough to watch the entrance and the dance floor.

It was a large place, half the size of a city block. It looked expensively furnished. There was thick carpeting from wall to wall. Colorful, pastoral murals were painted skillfully on every inch of the walls. Tables were scattered all around the room. In the center was a large, square, highly polished dance floor. A short distance to one side, was a railed-off enclosure crowded with instruments but without the musicians.

A lone, bald-headed guy sat at the piano. On the side, close to the entrance, was a well-stocked bar. The lighting arrangement was dim, flattering, and indirect.

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Theodore sat at a small table at the edge of the dance floor.

“All right, ladies,” he clapped his hands imperiously. “Attention and quiet, please.”

A girl gave a suppressed titter. He looked around to see who it was. He shrilled out, “Any of you ladies who are here for amusement can leave right now.”

He glared. The girls remained motionless and quiet.

“The Fairy knows how to handle them,” Cockeye commented.

“Yell, that's because they need the jobs,” I said drily. “Otherwise they wouldn't take his crap.”

“All right, ladies,” he called in his high pitched voice. “Those who do specialties walk over to the right.”

About twenty of them crowded around the right side of his table. Most of them were extremely pretty. He glanced at them coldly.

“These are my requirements. First, I want an accomplished ridotto.”

A cute blithe little thing called out, “What's that, Mr. Theodore?” Such ignorance,” he snorted. “Don't you know? It's a person who dances and sings simultaneously?”

“Oh, that's me,” she said gaily. “I've been called everything but that.”

“You're much too flippant, you won't do at all.” He looked at her with righteous satisfaction. “You can leave right now.”

“He's a bastard, isn't he?” Maxie murmured.

Angrily the girl gathered her belongings and made for the exit. Maxie stood up and intercepted her. Curiously we watched as he spoke to her. She shrugged, smiled, nodded her head, and walked to a nearby table. Max lit her cigarette. He came back and sat down. She smiled, blew smoke, crossed her shapely limbs, lifted her skirt to expose them more and sat swinging them gaily.

“Date her up, Max?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, I just hired her as the ridotto for this joint.”

I laughed. “We taking the joint?”

“Maybe, in our spare time.”

“Good idea, Max, we could have a lot of fun in this joint,” Cockeye said.

“Yep, fun we'll have, but then—” Maxie shook his head. “It'll take our minds off business.”

“We'll attend to business,” Cockeye promised. His voice sounded like a small boy's, pleading.

“You'll attend to monkey business,” Max grunted.

We watched Theodore as he “tried out” and hired a cancan dancer, a strip tease artist, a combination tap-dancer and contortionist, and a ridotto, as he called it.

Max observed, “He's got himself two ridottos, but he don't know it.”

“I'm paying you ladies fifty dollars a week including meals,” Theodore said.

He looked at the specialty dancers. The Fairy knew they were entitled to more. But none objected. I guess jobs were hard to get.

“All right, you ladies of the chorus, line up.” He snapped his fingers at them.

In a coldly objective manner he walked up and down the line.

“Hey, Cockeye,” Max nodded toward the bar, “get a bottle of Mt. Vernon and glasses.”

We sat and drank. The Fairy was engrossed in his job of picking a chorus. He would pick a girl, motion to Baldy at the piano and make her do a short, chorus, kicking routine on one leg. It had a tendency to make her breasts shake up and down. I guess that was the reason he made them go through that routine. Even though he was indifferent, at least he knew his business, and understood what normal men were interested in.

I watched the movements of the last one he hired. She was a voluptuous, fully packed, sexy-looking doll. She reminded me of Dolores a little. No, she wasn't like Dolores. Dolores was more regal and esthetic.

But this one definitely had exceptional appeal. Yeh, now I analyze your appeal, baby. It's all centered around your—how did Maxie describe them? —sweet, small, round honeydews.

When I came up to her, I smiled and said, “Hello.”

She said, “Yes?”

I stuttered, “You're wonderful.”

I tried to look down her neckline.

“I don't believe it,” she said with a half smile.

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She caught my wandering eyes. She lifted her bodice up a bit.

“What I meant was, I watched you dance, you have wonderful ti–t–talent.”

“Yes? So I have ti–ti–talent; now what?” She stood there with a teasing smile and an amused light in her eyes.

I lost my glib tongue for once. I was at a disadvantage. She knew what I was after, and she seemed to be laughing at me.

“All right, bashful boy,” she said. “So I have talent. You'll get me a Hollywood contract or a large part in a Broadway show if I'm nice to you, right? Does that help you? Is that what you wanted to say?”

She laughed at my chagrined expression.

“Something on that order,” I joined her laughter. “How would my chances be if I got you a dance number all alone, a solo, a specialty, right here?”

She looked at me with a teasing, speculative smile for a moment. She nodded her head in snap decision. “All right, tootsie boy,” she smiled. “I'll give you a deal. You get me a solo spot here, and I'm yours for tonight.”

“A bargain is a bargain,” I said. “No suitor has ever had a more arduous or perilous deed to perform for his lady fair.” I rattled it off. I was in good form again.

“You mean tackling that queer?” she laughed, motioning to Theodore.

“Yeh, him, Miss Theodorah,” I grinned.

“A tootsie boy like you should find it easy to handle a jerk like him,” she said.

“Why, what do you mean?”

“Give him your tootsie roll,” she laughed gaily.

I laughed at her brazenness. “Not me, baby, I ain't the type. I'll persuade him with a different tool.”

I walked over to the Fairy.

“Theodorah,” I said, taking him under the arm and walking him to one side. “I would like to converse with thee, dear, in private. There is something I would ask of thee.”

He was flushed and excited. He gushed out, “Yes, yes, dearest. This is what I prayed for. This is more than I ever expected. The moment I laid eyes on you, I knew we were meant for each other. I love you wildly. You will marry me, won't you?”

He looked at me with wild pleading eyes. “I'm rich. I have money.”

Jesus Christ, I thought to myself, this bastard is crazy in the head besides being queer sexually. What the hell did I let myself in for? I looked at the girl. She waved and smiled to me.

“Look, Theodore,” I said gruffly, “cut out the goddamn histrionics. What the hell is the matter with you? Get control of yourself. Can't you tell when a guy is kidding in a tolerant sort of way?”

He looked at me, bewildered. “You weren't serious?” he whispered.

“Serious about what? You were thinking wishfully, running away with yourself. I didn't say anything to give you any kind of impression. I just thought I was being kind, pleasant, period. I understand a little of your condition, that you can't help yourself, that your nature is beyond your control. I feel sorry for your kind, Theodore. Repulsion and pity are the only emotions I feel for you.”

“Then what else did you want to speak to me about?” he whined.

“I'm sorry you misunderstood.”

What the hell is the matter with me? I'm too tolerant. I should lay the law down to this bastard. Tell him what I want done. If he doesn't do it, smack him around until he does. Nah, what the hell will bullying the guy prove? I'm more of a man than he is. I don't have to assert my manhood. This guy is mentally a woman.

I said, “I want you to do a favor for a friend of mine.”

“What kind of favor? And who for?”

“That girl there, the one smiling at us.”

“Her? That insipid hussy? I don't see what in heaven's name you can see in that uninteresting creature.”

“She's a woman. For me she's fun.”

“Women are for breeding children. Men are for pleasure,” Theodore said waggishly.

“Everybody to his own tastes, Theodore.” I was beginning to get annoyed. “I want you to give the girl a solo part.”

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“All right, all right,” he sighed hopelessly. “For you I will do it.”

“Thanks, Theodore, I appreciate it.”

As we sauntered toward the girl, he whispered, “It will take me ever so long to overcome my infatuation for you.” I made out I didn't hear him.

To the girl he was all business. Briskly he said, “Have you a routine for a single?”

“I can develop one in a very short time,” she said. “By tomorrow.”

He looked at her, shaking his head.

“Theodore, you can teach her; you're known as the best dance master on Broadway.” To myself I said, you should live so long.

“Really? You have heard of me?” he smiled.

“Who hasn't?” I lied. “You have a reputation for your original dance improvisations and your masterful choreography.”

“M–m–m,” he murmured delightedly.

Maxie was gesturing to me. Jesus, he wants me to talk to this shmuck about the bimbo he's interested in. Goddamn. I forgot all about her. This is getting to be a pain in the ass. Oh, well. I approached the Fairy.

“Theodore, one more thing,” I began.

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The door opened. I ignored Theodore and everybody else in the place. Max and I walked toward the tall heavy-set figure coming in. Cockeye and Patsy fell in behind us. When he came closer, Cockeye recognized him.

“Hello, Mike,” he said.

Cockeye whispered, “Big Mike, the Fairy's partner.”

“Oh, hello, boys,” Mike said.

Cockeye introduced us. We shook hands all around. He laughed after the introductions in a forced sort of way.

By his timorous and ingratiating manner it was evident that he had heard of us, and to him our names demanded respect.

“Can I do anything for you boys? Is everything all right? I hope my partner showed you boys around. Does he know who you are?”

Max said, “Boy, this lunkhead is a real tauchess licker if I ever met one. He sure is a first-class brown nose.”

“Yeh, the Fairy knows who we are,” I said. I was going to add, and he wasn't as impressed as you are, you big shmuck. But I left it unsaid.

Did you notice the beer, whiskey and slot machines? They're from the proper sources, aren't they?” he asked. “I'm kosher all around. I make sure of that.” He gave a sycophantic laugh.

“Yep, we checked,” Max said tersely.

Liar, I thought. We didn't even think to check anything but female contours.

“Before I forget,” Max said, “I want you to do something for me.”

“Sure, anything, sure, what can I do for you?”

“Put that little girl on in your new show. She's a helluva good singer.”

Max pointed to the diminutive charmer who was sitting patiently and demurely at her table.

“That's in my partner's department. But don't worry. It'll be taken care of. A nice little piece.”

Mike lifted his eyebrows roguishly.

“We're waiting for Salvy,” Max said.

“That guy a friend of yours?” Mike asked. Quickly he added, “You don't mind me asking, do you fellers?”

“He's no friend of ours, and we don't mind you asking,” I said.

“You sound as if he's no friend of yours either,” Max said.

“No, he ain't.” Mike looked furtively over his shoulder. “Salvy has had an affair with the Fairy. Besides shaking him down he wants a piece of the joint.”

“So what do you intend doing?” I asked.

Big Mike shrugged his hulking shoulders.

“Can't you handle him?” Max questioned.

“The guy takes a needle; he's a junky,” Mike said.

“So that's what makes him tough?” I asked.

“He's nasty, he's a killer.”

Mike looked hurriedly around again. “He uses an ice pick.”

“He does sound like a bad boy,” Max said sarcastically.

“Do you mind if I ask a personal question? If it's none of my business I want you fellows to say so.”

“Go ahead, shoot, Mike,” Max said.

“Are you here to give Salvy the 'business'?” Mike asked with a hopeful expression on his face.

“No, but that's some question to ask, Mike,” I said to chasten him.

“I'm sorry,” Mike said humbly.

“We're here to put him in line, if that will give you any solace,” I said. “This ain't a friendly visit as far as he's concerned.”

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He nodded, a little satisfied.

Then he said woefully, “I don’t know what to do. He threatened to push the Fairy out. He wants to muscle in as my partner. I don’t care for the goddamn Fairy, but I know what Salvy’ll do after that. He’ll push me out, and take the joint for himself.” He wrung his hands like a woman. “Christ, this lousy business, this goddamn Prohibition. Nothing is legit. I can’t go to the cops; this place is illegal. As far as the cops are concerned, there is no Eden Garden, except on payoff day. And they don’t give a good goddamn who takes over. As long as they get their payoff.”

“It’s tough all over,” I murmured.

“Even the subways are in a hole,” Patsy said.

Cockeye continued our private gag. He said, “Even the Palisades are on the rocks.”

“Horseshit,” Max said.

“What?” Mike asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Can’t you fellows do something? The Fairy told Salvy to drop dead yesterday. Salvy will kill him sure as hell. He’s nasty that way, that Salvy.”

“So, he’ll kill the Fairy. That’s no skin off your ass,” Max said impatiently. “Or ours for that matter,” he added.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” Mike said tensely.

“What will you make worth our while?” Max asked casually.

Mike looked slowly and fearfully all around the room. He leaned closer. In an awestricken voice he faltered, “The Fairy and I will pay ten grand if you give Salvy the ‘business.’”

Max shook his head slowly, “No, Mike. We don’t do those things for hire.”

Only in the line of duty, I said to myself.

A girl came walking over. She was the one with the wonderful, beautiful, perfect, bouncing protuberances.

“Tootsie,” she called out.

“That’s me. Excuse me, gentlemen.”

I walked over to her.

“I didn’t want to interrupt, but I’m leaving.”

“So, you’re all set?”

“Yes, I’m to report tomorrow for practice and rehearsal. That Theodore is a marvelous dancing master. I want to thank you—tonight.”

She said it with a seductive smile on her face. “But where? And when?”

I clowned a little. I bent over to look down her neckline. I licked my lips and said, “M—mh, mmh, I’m hungry.”

She giggled, “After Theodore, a normal man is refreshing.”

“You’ve got what Theodore hasn’t got.” I patted her on her curvy tauchess.

“Leave that for tonight, Tootsie boy.”

I gave her the address of my hotel and the suite number.

“You want supper before or after?” I asked.

“Before.”

“Steak or chicken?”

“Steak and french fries,” she said.

“Supper will be served at nine,” I said.

“The other thing will be served at ten,” she said as she went out the door.

In groups, pairs and singly, all the girls left. We watched as the Fairy danced solemnly around the dance floor accompanied only by the tinkle of the piano.

He twirled and capered with an uninhibited, unabashed and dazzling artistry. One moment his feet twinkled in a mad rhythmic tap interpreting anger and frustration. Then around and around he went, his hands waving with the graceful significances of a hula dancer.

He stooped in front of me out of breath, and whispered, “I danced a message especially for you.”

I walked away without comment. Maxie laughed. We sat and waited around. It was one p.m. Cockeye, to

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the disgust of the Fairy, foraged round the kitchen. He came out with thick ham and Swiss cheese sandwiches. We sat eating, and drinking highballs.

Big Mike came over.

He said with an apologetic smile, "I guess I'll leave you fellows. Salvy'll be here soon. I can't stand it, in case there may be rough stuff."

We looked at him coldly.

Max grunted, "Okay."

He left.

Baldy, the piano player, left, right after Mike. Theodore retreated to the cubby hole of an office. Through the glass door I saw him writing in a big ledger.

I looked at the clock over the bar. It was one-thirty. We sat around drinking and smoking, hardly talking.

The door opened. Two people walked in. Both about five nine. One was middle-aged and stocky; the other, young and whippet lean. I sized them both up as Irish. I shook my head to Max. Salvy was Italian. Willie was German.

He said, "Yep, that's not them."

They stood, looking around. Casually, I meandered over.

"Looking for somebody, fellers?" I asked.

The older one said, "We have an appointment with Salvy and some people."

The young one looked at me curiously, with a tinge of hostility.

I said, "Yeh, Salvy told me, we're in on this with him. He'll be a little late. Meanwhile we can become acquainted. Have a drink with us?"

Without waiting for their response, smiling sociably, I took them under the arms and led them to our table.

Max looked at me.

I nodded and smiled. "These are part of the group Salvy told us to expect."

I reached for the bottle. I poured two drinks.

The young one said, "Thanks, I don't drink."

The older one smiled as he reached for his. He said, "Thanks, I do."

In my most gracious manner I pulled up two chairs.

I said, "Won't you fellows sit down?"

They sat down, looking at us self-consciously.

I said, "May I introduce ourselves?"

I tried to make my laugh as self-conscious as their behavior. I gave fictitious names. I said, "My name is Morris, this is Miltie," motioning to Max, "and this is Murray and this is Mario." I gestured to Cockeye and Patsy. Maxie laughed at all the names which began with an "M".

The older man smiled in a friendly way and said, "People call me Fitz, short for Fitzgerald, and he's Jimmy."

"Another drink, Fitz?" Max asked.

"Yes, I don't mind," Fitz said.

"Which group do you fellows represent?" Max asked.

"Oh, it's pretty obvious," I said coyly.

"We're from the union," Fitz said. "We're the delegates."

"Yeh, I supposed so," I said sagely.

"How's it going?" Max asked smiling.

"Any action?" Cockeye asked.

Max gave him a warning look. He tightened his lips as a sign for him to keep quiet.

"Not much action, the little there is—Salvy sent some of his boys out. That helped a little," Fitz said.

Cockeye gave Max a triumphant look.

"So a little progress has been made," I prompted.

"Yes, not bad. There's a few buildings Salvy don't want touched. I guess he has his reasons," Fitz said.

"I don't like it, the way things are run," the young man named Jimmy said.

Fitz sighed. He gestured with his head to Jimmy. "He's new in this business; he just got elected. He thinks

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he's a knight in shining armor. Out to save the downtrodden workingman."

Fitz patted the young Irishman on the back. "You got ideas, Jim, but you got to play ball with people."

Fitz turned to us. "You ought to see this kid at a meeting. A real spellbinder."

Jimmy muttered, "I promised the men this would be on the up and up."

I looked at the young Irishman. He had a clean, fresh, honest look about him.

I said, "Listen, Jim, in this labor business you got to be a politician, just like Fitz said. You got to compromise your position at times."

He shrugged. He looked at me stubbornly.

"I don't compromise. What is there to compromise? The men who elected me depend on me for honest representation. They aren't making a living. Married men, making twelve and fifteen bucks a week for fifty-four and sixty hours work, and Salvy said to keep my shirt on, and he'll get us a buck raise. Without shorter hours or any other conditions." He looked around at us stubbornly, "I came here to tell Salvy off, I got hundreds of men and their families to take care of."

"For Christ sake, Jim," Fitz said, looking around at us apologetically. "Excuse the kid, fellows, he's a little excited."

"Jim's all right," I said. "Never mind what Salvy said. What do you expect?"

Fitz said in a shocked tone, "Never mind what Salvy said?"

He looked at me uncertainly as if I had committed blasphemy.

"Yep, never mind what that snake bastard said. He's out of the picture," Max said grimly, looking at Fitz.

Fitz looked at Max. Then at me. Then at Patsy. Then slowly at Cockeye. We were all smiling. We were genuinely amused at the awe on his face. Just because Max had said snake bastard.

"Nebish," I said.

"What?" Fitz asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"I thought you guys were friends of Salvy's," Fitz said. "What are you guys doing—taking over? Muscling in?"

"Yep, that's what we're doing," Max said.

"Oh," Fitz said with a nascent understanding.

"I don't like this," Jimmy said.

"I don't blame you, Jim," I said. "Now, tell me, what's the 'package' you would like to deliver to your men?"

Jim looked dubiously at me for a moment. Then he blurted out, "A forty-eight hour week, forty cents an hour minimum and time and a half for overtime. Pay and time off for the legal holidays and recognition of the union."

"Wrap it up, Jim," I laughed. "The package is yours."

Max looked at me and smiled. He nodded, "Okay."

Jimmy and Fitz looked at me as if I were crazy, or, at least, kidding.

"How are you going to produce a package like that for me to deliver to my men?" Jim asked. "On whose authority?"

"That's our problem; you follow instructions and everything will be all right," Max said confidently.

"I don't know how you fellows can be so positive. What are your relations to this strike? What I mean is, what's your interest, what do you fellows get out of it?"

Before I was able to think of a reply, Fitz snapped at him. "For Christ's sake, Jim, don't be so goddamn green. Their interest is the same as Salvy's. They're taking it all over. The union, everything."

"I don't know. I didn't like it then, and I don't like it now. It isn't good unionism."

Max looked at me. I shook my head at Max.

I said, "Listen to me, kid. There's a lot for you to learn. Especially this end of it. This branch of labor relations work isn't found in any textbooks or taught in any schools. But it's the most important part of labor relations. Don't you know that whichever side we happen to be on usually comes out on top?"

"Yes, but you fellows have no business interfering. You aren't workingmen; neither are you employers. It's between us—the bosses and us—let us fight it out."

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“Oh, for Christ sake, Jim, don't be so goddamned stupid,” Fitz muttered.

“Leave him alone, Fitz,” I said, “the kid's perfectly right. It's true we have no business interfering. But it seems in the scheme of things we're a necessary evil. One or the other side invariably calls us in. And, as far as I know, the bosses were the first to use us—us—” I hesitated.

“Gunmen,” Jimmy muttered.

“Aw, for Christ sake, Jim,” Fitz lamented.

“Okay, Fitz,” Max laughed, “we ain't embarrassed.”

“Yeh, as I was saying, it's unfortunate but true. Bosses originated this custom from way back—of hiring strong-arm men to intimidate workmen and their elected union officials. And if they couldn't intimidate the union officials, the employers, through their lawyers and business associations, bribed them to sell their men out. This part also is not mentioned in textbooks or taught in schools. Intimidation and bribery are the fundamentals, the basic, the deciding factors, in most labor disputes. Something the public rarely finds out about.”

I looked at the clock. It was a quarter after two. Salvy was really late.

“Besides, Jim,” I continued, “and Fitz will bear me out, if we didn't step in, some other mob would. This part you can understand for yourself. Before Salvy, there was somebody else, wasn't there, Fitz?”

“Yeh,” Fitz said, “a little mob from uptown.”

“Salvy chased them,” I pointed out, “and we ease Salvy out. Get it, Jim? You'll always have somebody to contend with. So it may as well be us. We have influence. We can do things for you. We'll save you a lot of headaches, especially after you're completely organized. All sorts of parasites will flock around for a shake: cops, city officials, petty hoods and you will refer them to us. We'll take care of them. Besides, believe it or not, we're partial to labor. We were organizers ourselves once. You and your men will get a better break from us than from anybody else.”

“You were organizers?” Jimmy snorted. “For what union?”

“Laundry drivers,” I said.

“All right, say I'll play ball with you fellows. I'm not saying I will, mind you—”

“We're sure you will, kiddo,” Max said.

“I'm not sure,” the kid flashed back.

“Go ahead, Jim, what were you saying?”

I looked at Max.

“How do I know somebody else doesn't come around and muscle in, and push you guys out?”

Maxie and Patsy laughed.

I smiled. “Of course it's possible, Jim, like anything is possible—like we'll have an earthquake in New York tomorrow. But it's highly improbable. We're the largest and most powerful mob in the country.”

Fitz leaned over and whispered in excited, delighted tones, “Combination?”

I nodded.

“I'll think it over just the same. I'll consult the membership.” Jim was pale but stubborn.

“I'll talk to him, private. I'll explain the facts of life,” Fitz said.

“Look, Jim,” I began impatiently, “let me explain it this way—”

I didn't. I was interrupted. The door opened.

CHAPTER 32

Never, in all my experiences have I laid eyes on two such apparitions as came through the Paradise door. I'll be goddamned if I ever saw anything—fowl, fish, man or beast, living or dead—as grotesque as this twosome. Not even in my wildest pipe dreams. The devil himself must have paired this combination: nobody else could have. No mere accident produced this masterpiece of hideousness.

I looked at Max. Max looked at me. We couldn't believe it.

One was a long, lean, creepy-looking bastard. He approached with a gliding, reptilian movement. I could almost believe he had no spinal column. His rubber-like torso seemed to undulate. His elongated head grew out from an abnormally extended neck. His face was a sickly jaundiced color. As he looked at us with his beady, bright eyes, his head darted forward and from side to side, in sharp, jerky movements. He wore a flashy, form-fitting, yellowish-brown, striped suit with a shirt and tie of similar color. This was the guy who was reputed to have untold knife and bullet holes all over his body. This was the much publicized Snake, the one who couldn't be killed, by a car or by any other lethal weapon, who always survived to kill those who were his enemies. This was the man who was too vicious and irresponsible to be a member of the Combine. There was no mistaking him.

And his companion—boy!—was he a distorted-looking sonofabitch. He was slightly gibbous and bow-legged. He was flat-nosed and thick-lipped. He was a throwback to way back. A real Pithecanthropus type. He was a genuine shmuck with ear laps. He was Willie the Ape.

At the sight of us they stopped in their tracks in the middle of the room. The four of us had our rods out. We walked over, and surrounded them. Salvy's hand was reaching for his pocket.

Maxie barked out, "None of that, Salvy. Let's keep it on a friendly basis."

They looked perplexed, but defiant.

"Who are you guys? What do you want?" Salvy said. He jerked his head from side to side.

"If you don't mind, Salvy," I said, "we have a little business to discuss."

I motioned to some chairs at a nearby table. Reluctantly they sat down. We put our guns away.

I saw the Fairy standing at the door of the office watching us. The two delegates, still at the table, looked startled at the turn of events.

Maxie came right to the point. He said, "We're from the Combination. We're taking the strike over—and the union. And you guys are stepping out."

The Snake gave each of us a quick, furtive glance. "How do I know you guys are from the Combination? Besides, me and Willie don't belong. Why should we take orders from the Combination?"

"We're not asking you to take orders," I said. "We're giving you orders—lay off."

"That ain't right, the Combination muscling in on everything," Willie the Ape said. "We got to eat, too, you know."

"Why?" Patsy asked coldly.

"Why?" the Ape repeated foolishly. "We got to live, don't we?"

"Why you got to live?" Cockeye looked Willie in the eye.

"Keep quiet, Willie," the Snake said. To us he said, "So this is it?"

"This is it," Maxie said coldly.

Salvy said, "What can I say? Nuthin." He shrugged.

"Say nuthin. Do nuthin. And nuthin will happen to you," Maxie said.

Willie looked at Salvy. Salvy looked at us. They said nuthin.

The Fairy came over. He said to me, "Can you make these ruffians stay away from this place? I don't want them hanging around."

The Snake slithered across the table at the Fairy, an ice pick in his hand. He hissed, "You friggin queer. I told you I got a piece of this joint."

The Fairy danced backward, out of his reach. He shrilled, "You filthy snake in the grass."

"I'll kill you, you friggin fairy, and take the whole place away," Salvy hissed.

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“You won't, you won't. I'm not afraid of you.” The Fairy danced around angrily but at a safe distance. “Chase those ruffians out of this place.” He shrilled at us.

Salvy looked at us.

Maxie said, “We don't interfere in a lover's quarrel.”

The Ape guffawed. Salvy glared. He walked toward the Fairy. The Fairy danced backwards, onto the dance floor. The Snake followed with the ice pick. The two delegates looked at the tableau, their mouths wide open.

I walked after the Snake, my hand in my pocket fingering my knife.

I called out, “Hey, Salvy, cut the crap.”

He wheeled around at me.

I said, “Go ahead, scram, take a powder. Leave the Fairy alone.”

He glared at me for a moment. Then he walked away into the toilet.

The Fairy came over. “Good God, isn't this situation awful? I'm really ashamed of myself. How did I ever complicate myself with that disgusting creature.”

The Ape said, “G'wan, you friggin Fairy. Didn't you say you loved him once? And didn't you make a play for me, too?”

Theodore was about to answer when the door opened. There stood a man. He filled the entire frame of the doorway, he was that big. What a goddamn place, I thought: everything comes into this joint. He walked in.

He was a colossus: about six foot six with an enormous potbelly. His red face was crisscrossed with tiny purplish veins. He looked as though he ate rare steak every meal. His pig eyes glared from behind thick bifocals. The tip of his long thin nose actually ran into his mouth.

Fitz came hurriedly over to us.

He whispered, “That's the big mucky muck from the employers' group. Anything he says that group does. I been on his payroll. His name is Crowning.”

I nodded to Fitz. I walked over to the guy. I said, “Come in, come in. We were just discussing you, Mr. Crowning.”

“Discussing me? Who was discussing me? Where's Salvy?”

“Salvy's slightly indisposed for the moment. We're in his confidence. We're close associates of his.” I smiled at the guy.

“Huh,” he grunted as he followed me to our table. He nodded to the Ape.

He said, “Hello, Fitz.”

“Have a drink?” I invited.

I poured a round.

He said, “Thanks” as he reached for his. He raised his glass and chuckled. “To a long and bloody strike.”

Jimmy said, “Horseshit.”

“Who is this kid?” Browning asked.

“He's all right, he's the new delegate. A little new at the game,” Fitz said.

“New delegate, hey?” The big guy said, “Young to be a delegate— well, well, I like young boys.” He gave Jimmy a pinch on his buttocks.

Jim edged away. He snarled, “Keep your goddamn hands off me, you fat bastard.”

The big guy looked hurt.

He said, “I didn't come here to get insulted. I came here on business.”

“Okay,” Max said, “let's get down to business.”

“Where's Salvy? Let's wait for him,” the big guy said.

“We can make decisions without him,” I said. “How is it going at your end?”

“Without Salvy? All right—if you think it's all right. Did Salvy tell you I want this thing to run another two weeks at least? So I can make it look tough to my associates and get some decent assessments from them?”

He rubbed his hands, a smile of satisfaction on his face. “This time it's going to be a big bundle. There'll be enough for all of us. Even that young boy. Hey, good-looking,” he called to him. “How would you like about four—five thousand for yourself?”

“Drop dead, you bastard,” Jim said.

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“How do you like that for an answer? Oh well, that's what I like in my boys: spirit. But not too much of it. Yes, don't show too much of it, or I'll have Salvy throw you out of the organization.”

“Salvy ain't throwin' anybody.”

Jim looked at me.

I nodded and smiled, “Go ahead, Jim,” I said. “You tell him.”

“Salvy has been thrown out himself,” Jim said with malice.

“Who threw who out without my permission?” The big guy glared around the table.

The Ape guffawed and gestured with his thumb at us. “These guys.”

“These gentlemanly boys?” the big guy said, looking at us.

“Gentlemen, my ass,” Max said.

Salvy came out of the toilet. I didn't like his new look. I signaled Max. Max watched as he came closer.

The big guy saw Salvy.

He said, “Hello, Salvy, what's this I hear? You let these guys push you out?” He baited. “How come?” He chuckled, “Of course, it makes no difference who I pay off.”

“I'm still in. You pay me off,” Salvy snarled. “I got men out on the street, workin this strike. I got to pay them. Nobody ever pushed Salvy out of anything.”

He stood there, wild. Suddenly an ice pick appeared in his hand.

Max had his gun out. He pointed it at Salvy. “Drop that ice pick, you stupid bastard,” he growled.

I could tell Salvy had given himself a needle by the wild look on his face. He had the temporary crazy courage of a junky. His beady eyes narrowed into knifelike slits.

I stood up and smiled at him.

“Salvy, take it easy. Put that thing away,” I said.

I walked up to him, my thumb on the button of my knife. His eyes were heavy with hate.

He hissed at me, “You friggin bastard, keep away,” like a snake.

He spit at me. It caught me full in the face. I slashed out at his hand. My knife was longer and quicker than his ice pick. My blade slashed in between his fingers. The point went into the palm and right through to the back of his hand. His pick dropped to the floor. He stood there for a split second amazed and shocked. I jerked my knife out and wiped the blade on his yellow suit. His hand was dripping. He looked at it and began shrieking again, “Bastard! Bastard!”

Maxie walked over and whacked him on the side of the head with the butt end of his .45.

He writhed and shuddered a few times on the floor, then lay still. I felt his heart. It was beating.

I said, “He's okay.” I ripped his shirt off and bandaged his hand.

“Okay,” Max said, “we did enough screwing around for one day. Now we get down to business. You,” he motioned to Jimmy, “sit down.”

Jim sat down.

“Okay, you, sit down and listen—”

He motioned to the big guy. The big guy sat down, but he didn't listen. He began talking.

“A fine piece of work,” he said, nodding to the prostrate figure. “You're the type of guys I want on my payroll. Action, that's what I want, action. Put people in their places where they belong. People are getting too smart and uppity these days with their goddamn radical ideas and things. Especially all these goddamn foreigners, these lousy Jews, these goddamn Niggers.”

Maxie was going to clip the bastard. I signaled him to take it easy. I needed him. His cooperation would facilitate things. Even so I couldn't refrain from asking, more out of curiosity than satisfaction:

“Hey, fat shmuck with ear laps, don't you know most of us here are Jewish? Even Salvy recognized that.”

The big guy said, “I didn't know you were Jewish.” He smiled, “But that makes no difference to me. I have many Jewish friends and business associates, in fact one of my partners is Jewish. You got to meet him.”

“We want this strike settled today,” I said. “This is the package I want you to recommend to your group.”

I gave him the details I had promised Jimmy. He sat there red-faced, shaking his head. He stood up.

“What are you talking about? Are you fellows working for me or for the union?” he asked.

“For the union,” Max snapped, “but you'll take orders from us just the same.”

“No, I won't,” he said in a huff. “Where do you fellows think you are? This is still America, you know. We

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do things here in the American way.”

Maxie took a step in his direction.

I said, “Nix, Max.”

I turned to the big guy.

“You illegit, sanctimonious bastard, when it serves your purpose, you wrap the flag around yourself, don't you?”

He didn't answer. He turned around and started to walk away. Patsy grabbed his arm and twisted it behind him and marched him back to the table.

“Let the shmuck go,” I said.

He flicked imaginary dirt off his arm and glared righteously at us. He walked away.

At the door he turned and shouted at us.

“You fellows want a fight, you'll get it. I'll do things the businesslike way. I'll hire strikebreakers and guards through a private detective agency. In one hour I'll have them in every building.”

Maxie clattered with his feet, pretending to go after him. The big guy turned and ran out. We heard him hurrying up the stairs.

Max and I looked at each other. I shrugged.

“We should have beat his brains out,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“What do we do?” Fitz asked.

“Continue pulling them out,” I said to Jimmy. “Tie up every building you possibly can. Keep your membership perked up.”

“It's tough. They're broke. The guys on the picket lines haven't even got coffee money,” Jimmy said. “But I'll keep them in line.”

I took out my dough. I tossed him four five-hundred dollar bills. “Buy your men some coffee,” I said. “If you need more, let me know.”

He looked at the money in his hand unbelievably. “Gee, this is big money,” he said. “Thanks, a couple of guys need a small loan of a few bucks. Is it all right?”

I said, “How come they're so broke? They're only out a couple of days?”

“They're always broke; they don't make a living wage,” Jim said.

I gave him a grand. “Spread it around, there's more where this came from,” I said.

What did I care? I knew on an assignment like this, or, for that matter, on any assignment, Max or I put in a tab for twice the amount we laid out. Then we'd split the difference among the four of us.

“Here, you fellows take this address down in case something important comes up.” I gave Fitz and Jim the address of Fat Moe's. “Give me the phone number and address of your local, Fitz,” I said.

He gave it to me.

“Well, I guess we may as well go out and see what's doing on the street,” Jim said.

“Yeh,” I said. “And there's no necessity for coming back to this joint either.”

“Yes.” Jim smiled for the first time.

We shook hands.

Fitz and Jim left. Willie the Ape came over.

He said, “I know who you are. I could tell by the way you handle the shiv.”

“Yeah?” I said.

“You're the guy they call Noodles the Shiv from Delancey Street.”

“Nah, you got me wrong, pal,” I said. “I'm Chief Potch-in-Tauchess from Mulberry Street.”

I looked coldly at him. “What else is on your mind?”

“Nuthin much. Only I want to say I'm not like Salvy; I got respect for people, for the Combination.”

“You'll live longer that way,” I said, “and so will he.” I nodded to the prone figure on the floor. “Can't you teach him a little of your good sense? To have respect for people, so he won't get banged around?”

“Nah, you can't teach him anything; he's worse than the Crazy Mick. Besides, he takes the needle.”

I shrugged. “That's his business.”

“The Snake, he never forgets,” the Ape smirked.

The Hoods

I walked over close to him. “So he never forgets? So what next?” I said.

“I want to make a deal for him and me.”

“We don't make deals with nobody,” Max cut in.

I was curious. “What's on your mind?” I asked.

“Me and the Snake, we got three buildings. We do shylocking, and a little booking there—horses and numbers. The big guy from the association, the guy who just left, Crowning, he's the real estate agent of those buildings. If the union organizes those buildings, the big guy won't let us do business there.”

“What buildings are they?” I asked.

He mentioned three immense loft buildings in the garment center.

I shook my head. “No dice; everything get's organized, especially that district.”

“We make two–three gees out of them buildings every week. The Snake won't like it.”

“So he'll lump it,” I said.

“He won't like it,” the Ape repeated gloomily.

“Look, you stupid bastard,” Max growled, “we could give you, the Snake and the Fairy 'the business' right here and be done with it. No witnesses or nothing.”

“I didn't mean nothin, honest, fellers. I told you, I got respect. You say no good, it's no good. I take orders. There's no harm askin, is there?”

I heard a grunt from the Snake. He sat up. He looked around dazedly, and rubbed his head.

Max said, “Now remember, both you guys, lay off. No horseshit from either of you.”

The Ape nodded. The Snake just looked dazed. We walked out. The Fairy looked after us.

CHAPTER 33

We drove downtown on Broadway.

I looked out through the window. I saw the first picket line. I nudged Max and pointed.

He nodded, “Yep, I guess we better get started. Hold it, Cockeye.”

Cockeye pulled up to the curb.

Max said, “I’ll just give it a quick once over.”

He was gone five minutes. When he got back, he said, “The elevators are being worked by strikebreakers.”

“Who’s in, a mob or an agency?” I asked.

“Detective agency,” Max said. “To me it looks like this guy Crowning had them lined up all the while.”

“Let’s go up to the union office. Maybe we can get some dope up there,” I said.

The office was a few blocks away. Max and I went up. Nobody of any consequence was in. Only a few strikers waiting for instructions. The girl told us where we could find Fitz and Jimmy. After twenty minutes scouting around, we found them in a picket line. They were a bit discouraged.

Jimmy said, “We pull the men out, but as quick as we pull them, they’re replaced. It don’t look too good.”

“Don’t worry, Jim,” I said. “You got an idea where the strikebreakers come from?”

Jim shook his head.

Fitz said, “Maybe they’re from that bastard, Bergoff.”

“Well, we’ll find out,” I said.

“And put a stop to them,” Max promised.

“We’ll break their heads, them boonyets,” Patsy added.

We walked away. Max looked at me.

“How about we join the police department, Max?” I suggested.

“Yep, just like in the old days. That’s a good way to find out things,” Max smiled. “I wonder if them ‘potsies’ are still laying around.”

“Yeah, they must be,” I said. “That closet hasn’t been cleaned out in years.”

“Well, we’ll see,” Max said.

When we arrived at Fat Moe’s, Max walked directly over to the closet. He picked up the exercise mat. He called out, “Yep, there it is. Cockeye, get that box of ‘potsies’ out of the bottom of the closet.”

“Like the good old days. Cops one day, revenue agents on a raid the next. Remember, I used to ask who the hell we going to impersonate today, chicken inspectors?”

Patsy laughed.

Cockeye laid the cardboard shoebox on the table. He said, “How about being whorehouse inspectors, Max?”

Max dumped the box upside down without comment. He scattered an assortment of shiny badges on the table. “Today,” he said with affectation, “we are going to be members of New York’s lousiest.”

“We going to be plain cops?” Patsy asked.

“How about making me a police captain, Max?” Cockeye cut in.

“You guys start from the bottom, then maybe I’ll promote you to captain later in the day,” Maxie said.

He picked up three nickel-plated regulation patrolman badges. He tossed one to each of us. For himself he picked out a shiny yellow metal police lieutenant’s badge. As he put it in his pocket, he assumed a gruff basso, “I’m Lieutenant Broderick and I want you plainclothes men on your toes today.”

“Up Broadway, Patrolman Cockeye,” Maxie called out as he seated himself next to me on the back seat.

“Kish mir in tauchess, Lieutenant,” Cockeye said.

“That’s what I want from a member of New York’s lousiest, that kind of respect,” Max said.

We rolled up Broadway. Groups of people were gathered at the entrances to loft and office buildings. Pickets with big sandwich signs were walking up and down in front of the buildings. It had grown into a general elevator and building maintenance strike.

“Yep, this is our meat,” Max said. “Okay, Cockeye boy, pull over,” Maxie directed.

The Hoods

We parked in front of a tall office building. We passed the pickets when we entered the building. They looked at us curiously. Then they shouted after us, "You lousy finks!" Somehow, I felt guilty as we walked into the elevator.

The elevator was crowded in spite of the strike. It was being operated by a short stocky strikebreaker. By the time the elevator reached the top floor, only two husky passengers besides us remained.

The operator looked suspiciously at us and said, "Top floor, all out."

Maxie said, "How about these two guys?"

One of the husky men, through the corner of his mouth, said pugnaciously, "What's it to you, wise guy?"

Max took out his badge. "I'm Lieutenant Broderick, Police Department. Who are you men?"

The guy apologized, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I should have recognized you. We're from the Thespis Detective Agency."

Max said gruffly, "Let's see your credentials."

They showed cards signifying their employment by the agency.

Maxie examined them carefully. "Okay, they're in order, but no violence from you men will be tolerated under any circumstances. Understand?" Maxie said it with exaggerated sternness.

"Yes, Lieutenant," they replied meekly.

"Okay, operator," Max said briskly. "Down and make it express."

"Yes, sir," he answered with alacrity.

Walking out of the building into the Caddy, the pickets again shouted after us, "You lousy finks!"

Maxie laughed, "Hey, Noodles," he said, "listen to your meek nebishes."

Others shouted after us. "You friggin bastards."

I laughed sheepishly, "They must be a new breed."

Every few blocks we went through the same pattern. The setup was the same—a strikebreaker as operator and goons as guards all from the Thespis Detective Agency.

We sat in the car on a side street for awhile, thinking what to do next. Cockeye and Patsy made one or two suggestions which we discarded without comment.

For want of something better to do, I followed the enticing movements of a shapely smartly dressed miss swinging down the street. I wasn't the only one.

Cockeye said, "What a figure, what a pair of shafts."

"She's probably a dress model," Patsy said.

She reminded me of my date. I speculated on her measurements. I'll bet my date's a twenty waist and a forty bust, I thought to myself.

"What are you smiling at? Thought of something good?" Max asked me.

"Yeah, I'm thinking of something, something damn good," I laughed.

"Okay, spill it," Max said.

"I got to turn it over first," I said smiling, "in my mind."

"Don't sleep on it," Max grunted.

"I hope to," I mumbled.

"What?" Max asked.

"Nuthin," I said.

"Oh, I thought you said something," he said.

We lit fresh cigars. We sat saying nothing, just watching the girls pass by. I was hoping nobody would think of anything to do that would keep us out late tonight.

To forestall them I said, "The best thing to do, in my opinion, is to see if we can put this agency, this Thespis detective agency, out of action for the duration of the strike. And the best time to put them out of action is early in the morning. Sort of get them unawares. When they first open up for business. What do you think, Max? We got to keep those elevators idle. Make the pressure of the complaints of the stranded tenants count."

Max considered it for a moment. He scratched his head.

"Well—yep—it sounds okay, I guess."

He was uncertain.

The Hoods

I followed up, “Yeh, I think it's the best bet, Max. If we stop them from sending out men, we got it pretty well licked. We take a ride over to Eddie's and tell him to have a couple of hundred 'zulus' ready to break the heads of the strikebreakers we can't reach. Have the office contact the deputy commissioner to move the cops out of the area so Eddie's 'zulus' can have a clear field for action.”

“Yep, that I like, Noodles.”

Max slapped me enthusiastically on the back. “You still got the ole noodle working on all sixteen, ole kid, ole sock.”

“Yeh,” I grunted modestly.

“Smart feller that Noodles,” Cockeye laughed as he swung the Caddy away from the curb.

Eddie was sitting in the office of his hotel with his feet on the desk. He was reading one of his Gideon Bibles. We shook hands.

Maxie said, “How you douchin, Ed?”

“With cold water,” Eddie answered.

Maxie told him about the contract we received from the main office.

Eddie nodded his head. “Yeh, I heard.”

Max continued, “We need a couple of hundred 'zulus' to break heads tomorrow morning. Okay?”

“Okay, HI have them on call whenever you need them. Two hundred enough? Maybe an extra hundred?”

Max nodded. “Okay, three hundred.”

“How about the cops?” Eddie asked. “I'm going up to the office in half an hour, you want me to tell them?”

“Yep, Ed, if you're going up. You'll save us the trip.”

“Okay, then,” Max said. “We're going to relax, Ed. We're staying for the night.”

“With or without?” Eddie asked archly.

“What do you think,” Cockeye cut in, “we're vegetarians?”

Patsy said, “Cockeye's been eating plenty of oysters.”

“I'm not staying, Max,” I said.

“No party?” Max asked.

“I got a private party tonight.”

“Oh, the one with the nice—big ones?”

“Yeh,” I said.

Max smiled. “Okay—enjoy—enjoy—but early tomorrow. Six a.m. at Fat Moe's.”

“Yeh,” I said. “Six, at Fat Moe's. Hey, Max.”

“Yep?” he said.

“I was just thinking. Have Moe spike a couple of bottles of Mt. Vernon. We might need them for tomorrow.”

“With knock-out drops?”

“Yeh,” I said. “Spike them extra strong.”

“Okay, I'll call him tonight to have them ready for us in the morn—

“And a dozen glasses.”

“And a dozen glasses,” Max repeated.

“So long,” I said, “enjoy, enjoy.”

“So long, enjoy, enjoy,” they echoed after me.

I walked towards Broadway. I passed Gerhaty's Cordial Shop. That give me an idea. A good wine for supper, or maybe champagne. Yeh, a couple of magnums.

CHAPTER 34

I swung down Broadway. The weather was fair. It was just edging into dusk. The street was coming to life. The thousands of signs and millions of bulbs that were dead during the day, slowly came alive. At first, they came a few at a time, as if being given artificial respiration, then as the hot current rushed like a life-giving blood through all the arteries and veins, the signs blazoned, obscuring the sky.

And as if the current had magically charged into the traffic and people, the tempo of the street accelerated.

I am part of this, I thought. This infectious, bustling, rushing joy. Pretty prostitutes, neophytes and professionals, sparkled with the artificial brightness of rouge, mascara and lipstick. Their wandering, shining eyes sought among the crowd for the one interesting, generous man to whom to give themselves. Just for one night. That's all I saw: women, millions of beautiful women—all mine.

Already the episodes of the day were a memory. They were far back in my mind. I was in a happy glow of anticipation. I was an excited, happy guy, hurrying down Broadway as if to my first lay. I laughed. Yeh, me, Noodles, excited and anxious, as if I didn't get more than any guy, yeh, more than any guy alive, or in history. I'll bet within two or three blocks I could pick up five, ten, a hundred. This was mine, my Broadway. My happy hunting grounds, my private harem.

Ah, here's something cute.

I tipped my hat and smiled and said, "Hello, cutie pie."

She smiled and murmured a melodious, "Hello, Baby." I passed her by. She threw a come-follow-me smile over her shoulder. I laughed like a kid at his first flirt. I was caught in the excitement of the street, in the thrill of the chase. Yeh, this was my private, well-stocked hunting domain.

Ah, here's another doll—umm—nice. Hunting's very good tonight.

I aimed my eyes at her. I tipped my hat and smiled.

"Hello, Doll," I said.

She smiled and cooed, "Hello, Handsome." I let that charming piece of game go by also. Goddamn.

I laughed to myself. Am I a bastard. Am I having fun. What the hell, I'm entitled. I'm single at least. Look at Patsy and Cockeye, both married and still chasing. At a party at Eddie's place with some wild chippies this very minute. At least Max is entitled. He's single like me.

Funny how neither of us ever got married. I wanted to, but Dolores didn't want me. Lucky she didn't, for both of us, because I'm a satyr. One woman doesn't satisfy me. I got to have a different one every night. Yeh, lay 'em and leave 'em. That's me, Noodles."

This one tonight, she's got something. Jesus, she has got something—a beautiful pair of somethings. Boy, could I bury my face in her soft, full somethings right now. For an owner of a pair of beautiful somethings like hers I should get her something special.

I went by a negligee shop. I got it. I'll get her a dozen of those seductive-looking black lace brassieres, like the one hanging in that window, marked down to three eighty-five.

I walked in. The store was crowded with women. It seemed as if they were all staring at me. I felt a little nervous. I pulled myself together. I felt as if I were at my first heist.

A salesgirl came over. "Yes?" she smiled.

Bold as hell, I said, "A dozen of those black lace brassieres you have displayed in the window, size forty, please."

A few girls near me tittered. The sales girl took boxes from under the counter. She said, "They come in A, B, C and D's. Would you care to look at them?"

"She's pretty large there," I said. "Use your judgment." She smiled and nodded.

I tossed a C note on the counter. She examined it carefully before making change. When she gave me the wrapped parcel and my change, she whispered, "If they don't fit the lady, she can exchange them for another size."

I said, "Thank you, Miss."

She said, "Thank you, sir, and call again."

The Hoods

When I got up to my suite, I called the kitchen. I spoke to the chef. I told him, "I want one large thick steak for two, extra large french fries and asparagus."

Chico said, "I'll have it as you like it, medium rare. Coffee and pie?"

I said, "Yeh, apple pie and a slab of cheese."

Chico said, "The champagne came. I put it on ice. What time you want?"

I said, "Thanks. I'll call you when."

I took a shave and a shower. I put on a new pair of covert slacks and a thin corduroy belted jacket to match. I twisted and turned before the mirror. I adjusted my bow tie. It didn't seem to blend with the jacket. I undid it. I chose another. I made the bow over and over. Finally it satisfied me. I put a fresh kerchief in my breast pocket. I stood a full ten minutes before the mirror, taking the kerchief out, refolding it and tucking it back in until I thought it was just right. I kept walking to and from the mirror.

I was disgusted with myself. Boy, am I getting to be a conceited shmuck, I thought. No, it wasn't conceit. I was nervous, nervous as a cat, yeh, a tomcat waiting for his alley pussy. What the hell is the matter with me? For a guy who has laid everything on Broadway that talked, walked or sneezed, this conduct is ridiculous.

I poured myself a double hooker. That helped a little. A little music would help, too. I thumbed through an album. I pulled out a record and put it on the machine without looking at the name. I threw myself in a chair and listened. It was the intermezzo from *La Traviata*. I liked the part where the violins came in. It was sweet, soft and smooth—like a woman's breast.

I laughed to myself. What a goddamn comparison. To liken soft sweet music to a woman's breast. It just goes to show where my mind travels. That's all I've been thinking of lately.

Am I getting to be some sort of sexual queer? I wonder if this quest for a beautiful breast is normal, or am I developing a fetishism of some sort? Nah, ridiculous, it's not a fetish. It's a normal desire, maybe a little strong and primal.

The music stopped. I took the disc off the spindle. I pulled out "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody," set the needle and helped myself to another drink. Of all modern music, I loved this song best. I hummed the lyrics as I played it over and over again.

On the minute of nine there was a knock on the door. I opened it. There she was. What a vision. More alluring than I had anticipated. She was dressed to arouse and impress.

She wore a great big extra wide green lace picture hat and a startling white, bareback, bare-shouldered, sleeveless dress, form fitting and with a plunging neckline. She wore elbow-length green lace gloves and shoes and bag of the same color.

Lightly I kissed the gloved hand she extended. I closed the door and led her into the living room, still holding her hand. I turned her all around.

The hat and you and everything about you is beautiful," I said.

"You like the hat?"

She stood before the mirror pinning it down more securely.

"Seductive," I smiled.

"Designed by Mr. John," she said.

"Mr. John?"

"This is a Mr. John's creation."

"Oh, he's a milliner?"

"No, he's an artist," she smiled.

"And the dress by Mr. John?"

"No, Tootsie, he only creates hats. The dress is a Bergdorf Goodman."

"And the shoes and bag?"

She lifted a shapely foot. "The shoes are Palter De Liso's and the bag by Coblentz."

She turned and smiled. She put one gloved finger under her chin, gave a mischievous grin, curtsied prettily, and said, "The rest of me is Eve McClain."

"That's you," I said.

"That's me. And you?" she asked.

"Tootsie, that's me. You gave that name to me. I like it."

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"I like it, and you, too, Tootsie," she smiled.

Yeh, decidedly, I thought. She resembles Dolores.

I made a grab for her. I held her tight. I kissed her. I pressed my knee between her legs.

"Please," she murmured. "Later."

"A little bit now," I pleaded.

She shrugged and smiled. She walked over to the victrola. She looked at the record on the table of the machine. She smiled and said, "This is my song, the song I dance to."

She put the record in motion. She swayed and hummed, accompanying the song, "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody."

"You were in that show?" I asked.

She shook her head and said, "See if you can guess the show I was in."

She waltzed slowly around the room. She unzipped the side of her dress. She danced around as she unbuttoned the top and exposed her bare shoulders. She dipped her shoulder when she came near me. I kissed the warm pink fragrant skin. She twinkled away.

"Can you guess?" she asked as she slowly continued her provocative dance.

"No," I said, lying.

"This should give you a better hint."

She wriggled her body as she danced. Her dress fell to the floor. She wore no slip. All she had on was a white satin pair of panties, and a white satin brassiere. She still wore her large green hat and green full length gloves and green shoes.

She danced in waltz time as she kicked one shoe off then the other. She hummed, "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody."

She rolled one stocking down and tossed it to me. Then the other. Her legs were shapely, slender and beautiful. It was thrilling, watching a pretty, well-formed woman undress. It's like the slow undraping of a beautiful piece of art.

She raised her eyebrows as she danced close to me again.

"Well, can't you guess, Tootsie? What show?"

"Minsky's Burlesque," I said, smiling. "Continue. I'll play the part of the audience."

I sat down on a chair and beat my hands slowly in time to the music and chanted, "Take it off, take it off, take it off."

But she didn't take anything else off. She danced in her big green hat, in her long green gloves, her white satin panties and her white brassiere. She stopped; the record had come to an end.

"Some more," I begged.

She shrugged and put the record on again. I sat watching her rhythmic tantalizing movements.

"This time take some more off," I pleaded.

"What, this?" she smiled.

"Yes, please," I whispered.

"Shall I?" she teased.

"Please," I whispered.

"Only for you, darling. Only for you," she whispered, "will I."

She stood directly in front of me, swaying her hips. She had a smile on her face, half teasing, half expressing an inner passion.

Her rosebud lips parted. "Darling," she gasped, "I am going to give them to you. Love them tenderly."

She fumbled with the catch behind her back.

In a hot husky voice she whispered, "Here, darling, take them; they are yours."

She dropped them in my lap. Dazedly I picked them up. They were a beautiful flesh color, a perfectly formed pair of rubber falsies. I was speechless. All I could do was look up at her in amazement. She was a defiant figure. There she stood, her legs spread apart, her gloved hands on her hips. She gave me back stare for stare. I looked at her chest. She was flat all right, as flat as a titless broad could ever be.

In a dumb sort of way I picked up the falsies and looked at them again. I tossed them on the table. They bounced.

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“Well?” she challenged.

I shrugged. I was still chagrined and speechless.

I spied the package on the table. Sarcastically I said, “That package is for you. Open it.”

Nonchalantly she opened it. Without comment or any show of emotion, she examined the brassieres, and fitted one on the falsies. She looked at me with the smile of a minx.

“Tootsie,” she said, “thank you, they fit perfectly.”

She held them up for inspection.

“Yeh,” I grunted.

She walked over close to my chair. A smile played on her lips. Affection showed in her eyes. She rumbled my hair.

She said, “My Tootsie is disappointed?”

I looked at her standing there before me. Disappointed? I thought to myself. At what? I looked at her with a feeling of terrific admiration. She was a cute picture with her great big green hat, her long gloves and white satin panties. In spite of her ludicrous attire, she was completely poised. She looked at me speculatively with her large green eyes, trying to understand my mood.

I pulled her down on top of me. Her naked, faintly scented, warm body pressed close to me. She continued running her gloved fingers through my hair. She kissed my cheek. “You are sweet,” she murmured. She kissed me again. “You really aren't angry at your baby for being silly, are you?”

“Angry? I think you're cute and funny.”

I kissed her.

“You know,” she said, “I like you; you're so even-tempered. I'll bet you never get angry.” She continued playing with my hair. “Do you?”

“Never,” I said.

“You're the gentle type that never hurt a fly, aren't you?”

“I couldn't,” I said. “I dislike violence. I'm not the type.”

I was wondering if she mistook the knife in my pocket that she was sitting on for something else.

“You're a gentle person and I know why,” she said smiling.

“Why?” I said.

“Because you're Jewish. Jewish men are so peaceful and even-tempered.”

“Yeh,” I said, “without exception.”

“I like you,” she kissed me. She murmured, “Do you like your shicksa?”

“Yeh, I like you, you're cute and pretty.”

She purred like a kitten, and kept stroking my hair.

She covered my face with warm, moist kisses. Then we looked at each other for a moment and laughed and laughed. She chased me all over the room, bouncing the falsies over my head, until we were both breathless and hysterical.

She picked up her shoes, stockings, bag and dress and went into the bathroom. I heard the shower going. I stretched out on the couch and waited for her. A half hour later she came out smiling. She looked pretty and well groomed. Her face was freshly made up. She was completely dressed except for her hat and her gloves. Her black luxurious hair was piled up on her head in a regal coiffure.

“You look like a beautiful queen,” I murmured.

She extended a soft ungloved warm hand.

“For that, Tootsie, you may kiss my hand,” she said.

I pressed her smooth fingers to my lips.

“Amuse yourself,” I said.

I waved at the victrola, at the books on the shelf and the small bar. “I'll be out in a minute.”

I went into the bathroom. I took a hurried shower. I was dressed and out in fifteen minutes. I went to the phone and spoke to Chico, the chef. I said, “Okay, send it up as soon as it's ready.”

Twenty minutes later two waiters rolled in a table with the dinner and the champagne.

She enjoyed the meal. We made pleasant conversation, and conducted ourselves decorously for the rest of the evening.

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As she went to the door, I opened her bag and slipped a fifty-dollar bill into it.

She smiled, curtsied and said, "Thank you, kind sir."

She stood at the open door. We looked at each other fondly a moment. She came into my arms. I closed the door. I picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. I put the lights out. We undressed and went to bed.

I got up at four-thirty, took a shower and dressed. I was about to leave when she woke.

She smiled and called, "Tootsie." She held up her arms. I bent over and kissed her. She held me for a moment.

She whispered, "I love you, Tootsie."

I looked at the first woman who had ever said that to me in such a matter of fact manner. I sat down on the bed and fondled her hand.

We looked at each other for a long moment. Her hair framed her face. Her rouge, mascara and lipstick were worn and smeared.

She smiled and repeated, "Tootsie, I love you."

"You want to be my steady girl?" I asked.

"Yes, I do," she said.

"You want to move in and live here with me?" I asked.

"Yes, I do," she said solemnly.

I took out my key and slipped it into her hand. I said, "After you rest up, get your things and move in. I'll okay it down in the office."

She nodded. "I'll do that; kiss me," she said.

I did. I walked to the door.

"I don't know your name or anything about you, but I love you, Tootsie," she said.

I had my hand on the knob.

"I know everything about you," I said.

"You do?" she said in surprise. "What do you know about me?"

"Your name is Eve McClain, you're nice and I love you."

I walked out.

A whisper followed me out the door. "Tootsie, I love you. I love you."

CHAPTER 35

I took a walk down to the Automat, had bacon and eggs and coffee, grabbed a cab and rode down to Delancey Street. They were sitting in the Caddy outside Fat Moe's waiting for me. I noticed a package beside Max.

"The spiked stuff?" I asked.

"Yep, two bottles and a dozen glasses," Max said.

"Okay, should I get going?" Cockeye asked.

"Okay, let's go," Max said.

We parked the car in a garage right off Broadway. We walked over to the Thespus Detective Agency. It was a little after six. We were surprised to find the place open. There was a young blond fellow sitting at the desk reading a paper.

Maxie said politely, "We have an appointment with Mr. Thespus."

"You fellows are kind of early, aren't you? He won't be in for quite awhile." He looked us over. "Looking for jobs?"

Max smiled. "Yep, that's what we're here for, Blondie."

"Don't call me Blondie," he said irritably. "You men had any detective work experience on strike breaking? Or any kind of detective work?"

"Yep, Blondie," Maxie said casually. "We just finished our correspondence courses on how to be detectives in one easy lesson." Maxie walked behind the desk while talking. "And you know what we learned, Blondie?"

With the question, Maxie grabbed the startled young guy from behind, one hand over his mouth, the other around his waist. He picked him up, carried him into the inner office and dumped him on the floor.

"This is what we learned—to start from the top. We are taking the joint over. Okay, Blondie? Do you mind?" Maxie asked politely.

"What's the idea?" Blondie asked angrily. He got up from the floor and hurried to the door.

Maxie clipped him a left to the jaw.

He bounced off the wall and slumped to the floor.

He was out like a light.

We left him lying there and looked the place over. It was a three-room office suite consisting of one fairly large waiting room with a reception desk facing the entrance to the place. A few chairs and settees lined against the walls made the waiting room furnishings.

Right behind that room were two medium-sized inner offices with a connecting door. One room had a large storage closet with a broken typewriter on the floor; the other office had a small washroom.

Maxie said to Cockeye, "Tie and gag Blondie and put him out of sight somewheres."

"What with, Max?" Cockeye asked.

"Tsk—tsk," Maxie made reproachful noises. "Cockeye boy, you got no initiative. Use the bastard's tie for his hands. Take the bastard's shirt off. Tear the bastard's shirt in half, and gag the bastard's mouth." Maxie looked at us and smiled. He was pleased with himself. "Simple, ain't it, Cockeye, boy?"

Cockeye went to work, laughing.

Cockeye and I picked Blondie up and put him in the closet alongside the typewriter.

Maxie sat down behind the desk of one of the inner offices. He opened Moe's package containing the spiked bottles of Mt. Vernon and the dozen glasses. He arrayed them neatly on one side of the desk. He put his feet in an open drawer, lit a cigar and leaned back in the swivel chair.

With a broad smile he said, "Let's see now, today we're private detectives. So Cockeye, you be the reception clerk. You sit in the waiting room; you're not so pretty like Blondie, though."

"The blonde I had last night thought I was pretty."

He started out.

"If anybody comes in, what shall I say?"

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“What does any reception clerk say? Tell them to wait; the boss is in conference. Ain't that right, Noodles?”

“Yeh, that's what every reception clerk says.”

“Then what?” Cockeye asked.

“Then what?”

Max threw his hands up in mock despair. “Ad lib as you go along. Say anything.”

“Horseshit,” Cockeye grumbled.

At about seven, we heard the hall door open. Somebody came in. We heard a loud voice talking to Cockeye.

“What do you mean Luke's fired? I'm the manager of this agency. Who fired him? It couldn't be the old man. I drove Thespus home last night. He didn't say anything to me about it.”

Maxie got up out of the swivel chair. Pat and I followed him. We walked out to the waiting room. There was a large, burly guy arguing with Cockeye. He looked at us in surprise.

Maxie said, “Quiet, please. This is a business office.”

“Who are you guys?” the newcomer asked, perplexed.

“Come in. Come in. We'll explain everything.”

I held open the door to the inner office.

“Is Luke in there?” The guy was getting more befuddled by the minute.

“This guy,” he pointed at Cockeye, “said he was fired.”

Maxie smiled. He said, “He's in there.”

He gestured with his thumb.

“Where?” He peered through the open door. “I don't see him,” he said.

“Don't be bashful.” Patsy pushed him in.

The burly guy put his right hand under his left armpit. It froze there. I had the six-inch switch blade cutting through his jacket. The point was already pricking his belly button.

“Put your hand down or I'll cut your liver out, you bastard,” I said.

Patsy extracted a .45 from the guy's holster.

Maxie opened the closet door. Blond Luke, securely tied and gagged, was sitting up and staring at us.

Max asked the big guy, “You join Blondie here willingly? Or you want us to knock your brains out first?”

The guy was alarmed and perplexed. “Who are you? What's up?”

“You'll find out soon enough,” I said.

Maxie said, “Take your shirt off.” The guy hesitated. He looked at our grim faces. He took his tie, jacket and shirt off. Maxie tied his hands with the tie.

As I ripped the shirt to make a gag, the guy whined, “Hey, that's a good shirt.”

“What's a shirt between friends?” I answered pleasantly.

I gagged the guy and set him down beside Blondie and closed the closet door.

About ten minutes later, Cockeye walked in. “I got a couple of shmucks outside. They want to know what building they got to report to.”

Maxie handed Cockeye a bottle of Mt. Vernon and two glasses. “Here. Invite them to have a couple of drinks. Tell them your wife gave birth to a son. You're making a briss or something.”

“They look like two Irishmen,” Cockeye said. “They wouldn't know a briss from a hole in the ground.”

“Hey, Cockeye,” I called after him. “Don't you drink that stuff; don't forget it's spiked.”

“I know better than that. Don't worry. I'll tell them I got ulcers.”

Through the closed door, we heard voices saying, “Mazl-tov.” Then, a minute later, we heard “Mazl-tov” again and then silence.

Cockeye came in grinning.

“Boy, oh, boy! That's sure powerful stuff. The two donkeys are fast asleep already.”

We heard the outer door open. Cockeye ran out into the waiting room. We heard voices in conversation. Cockeye came in. “There are four more outside. What now?”

“Send them in here,” I said.

Maxie leaned back comfortably in his chair. “Yes, send them in. Let's see what a private detective looks

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like.”

Four men walked in. Maxie in a businesslike tone said, “Names, please.” They were a down-at-the-heel group, not too bright looking.

They gave their names. One of them said, “Where's Luke and Walter? You're a new man, aren't you?”

Maxie ignored the question.

Instead he asked, “Where were you fellows working yesterday?”

They gave the addresses of two large buildings on lower Broadway.

Max picked up a pen and jotted down the information.

One of them eyed the bottles. He said, “You fellows celebrating?”

“Yep,” Maxie smiled. “You fellows have a drink?”

“Yeh, we don't mind if we do.”

Maxie filled up four glasses. I said apologetically, “Excuse us for not drinking with you. We just finished a couple.”

“Sure, it's okay. Here's to a long strike.”

Four glasses were lifted and emptied to the smacking of lips.

One of them said, “That Mt. Vernon is sure good stuff.”

“It's the McCoy. It's right off the boat.” Maxie held the bottle invitingly over their empty glasses. “You fellows have another?”

Maxie filled their glasses without waiting for their reply.

“Here's luck.”

They drank up. They stood around for a minute with foolish grins.

They were beginning to look a little shaky already.

I took two of them under the arm. Uncomplaining, they walked into the adjoining office. Patsy escorted the other two in. We sat the four of them on the floor.

We heard more voices in the waiting room. I said, “I'll go out there and give Cockeye a hand. I'll be the assistant reception clerk.”

I walked out into the waiting room. I was amazed. Cockeye was doing all right. Besides the original two, there were four more asleep on chairs, and he was pouring drinks for two more men as he stood by his desk explaining that the sleeping men had been out working all night and were catching a little rest before going to different jobs.

I stood watching Cockeye. I was surprised that so far the men weren't skeptical or suspicious of us. Evidently, these men did not know how this small detective agency operated. It seemed they were extras hired only for the duration of the strike. I discovered by questioning these two that licenses or permits to practice their profession were not necessary.

I was curious about this business, particularly because I remembered my first job as a helper on a laundry truck and the part a detective agency played in the strike. I still had a vivid recollection of the beating I had taken from four men from that agency. Of course, it was a million to one shot. The incident occurred so many years ago, but I tried. I began to question these two men on what strikes they had been working, and for what agency. It would be sweet, I thought to myself, if, by chance, I caught up with them. Boy, would it give me pleasure to put those bastards in a hospital, if I ever found them. But, damn the luck, they fell asleep on me.

I told Cockeye not to hand out any more liquor, to send any other applicants in to me. Anyway, I thought, this whiskey acts too swiftly. Moe put too powerful a soporific in the booze.

I went into the inner office.

I said to Max, “We ought to cut the whiskey. It works too quick. Moe put in too many knockout drops.

“What difference does it make, Noodles?”

“Well, for one thing, in a little while you'll have guys sleeping all over the place. Somebody is bound to get suspicious. It would be better if we cut the stuff down, gave these guys a couple of drinks and they slept it off on the outside.”

“Okay, okay,” Max said. “Hey, Cockeye,” he called. “Run over to Gerhaty's and get four bottles of Mt. Vernon.”

Cockeye went out. Patsy took his place at the front desk.

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Three calls came in for Thespus. Max answered all of them. They would not state their business. Max told them he did not know what time Thespus would be in.

After a while Patsy stuck his head in and whispered, "There's two guys outside. They want Thespus and nobody else."

"Send them in," I said.

Two big, hard-looking men swaggered in. They were cleanly dressed but unshaven. They had their felt hats slouched down well over their foreheads. Their eyes gleamed tough and direct from under their brims. I noticed a slight bulge under their left armpits: long ones, like .45's in the sling holsters under their jackets.

I looked at Maxie. He understood what I understood: to be careful with these guys.

They looked at Max and me in an insolent manner.

"Where's Thespus?" one of them said curtly. The other one lit a cigarette and sat on the desk, eyeing us coldly.

"Not in yet," I said. "What can we do for you?"

The guy grunted in a surly manner, "Nutin."

He lit a cigarette and sat down on the other end of the desk.

"We'll wait for Thespus," he said.

Max raised his eyebrows suggestively. I smiled and shook my head.

"You guys ever work for Thespus?" I asked pleasantly.

"Nope," one of them grunted.

The other one said, "Don't you know us? How long are you guys in this business?"

"Not long," I said.

One of them belched disdainfully.

The other one asked, "You ever hear of Lefty and Eddie?"

I tried to look properly impressed.

"Well, I'm Lefty and this is my partner, Eddie."

He motioned with his head.

Eddie belched in acknowledgment.

I guess these two guys considered themselves ace bully boys in the detective racket. A couple of shmucks with ear laps for my money, I thought to myself. I led them on.

I said, "Yeh, who hasn't heard of you fellows. You men work on laundry strikes years ago, maybe?"

"Laundries?" Eddie said derisively.

"Jesus Christ, what are you doing, insulting us?" Lefty scoffed. "We been working for Red."

"Red?" I questioned.

"Yeh, Red. The Red Demon," Eddie said.

I shrugged apologetically.

"Jesus Christ, you guys are new in this racket. Goddamn, they don't even know who the Red Demon is," Lefty said to Eddie.

Eddie belched in contempt at our ignorance.

"Bergoff—Pearl L. Bergoff is the Red Demon," Lefty said in polite irony.

"Yeh, I heard of him," I said dubiously.

They both laughed uproariously at my naivete.

"Jesus Christ," Lefty said, "wait until I see Red and tell him there's a couple of clerks up in Thespus' office who never heard of him. Jesus Christ, will he be insulted."

"You men worked on big stuff?" My manner was respectful, like a neophyte addressing a professional.

"Big stuff is right. We broke strikes for all big outfits," Lefty said with justifiable pride. "We broke plenty of heads."

"Plenty of heads we broke." Eddie belched with satisfaction at the recollection.

"The American heads that they brag about?" I said.

"Americans? No Americans. They were mostly Irish, Swedes and Wops or something," Lefty said.

"Nah, they weren't American," Eddie belched with certainty.

"Yeh, they couldn't be," I murmured. "They weren't Indians."

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“They don't hire no Indians.” Lefty sneered at my ignorance.

“Maybe they were Americans,” I suggested. I was getting hot. “Americans fighting to raise the American standard of living, the standard that unions have to tear out of the livers of these giant corporations, the standard that these same corporations take the credit for inaugurating. First they fight to the death and spend millions to keep the standard down, then, when they're forced to raise the standard, they bullshit—see what we pay the American working man?”

“If they had a choice, the American standard would be the lowest in the world. Their actions and words prove it.”

I was snarling. My face was getting hot. Lefty and Eddie were startled at my change of manner. I felt righteous; I was making a speech.

“Yeh,” I continued, “didn't J. P. Morgan, the big wheel, testify before a Senatorial committee to the question, ‘What do you think is a fair day's pay for an American workman?’ I'll tell you what he said. He said, ‘I pay as little as I can get away with.’ Yeh, J. P. Morgan, the billionaire boss, said that. True Americans, that's their policy. Frig the little people. Hurrah for me. That's their kind of Americanism, only they spell it Morganism.”

“What? What did you say?” Lefty asked.

Eddie belched in a bewildered sort of way.

Maxie laughed.

He said, “That was some spiel, but you wasted your time on these bastards, Noodles?”

“Noodles?” Lefty questioned. “You, Noodles from Delancey Street?”

There was respect in his voice. He turned to his partner.

“Hey, Eddie,” he said, “you heard of Noodles the Shiv and Maxie? And the guy out there is Patsy?” He looked at me with a new respect.

I nodded.

“Jesus Christ, what do you know?” Lefty said in wonderment. “Here I thought I was talking to a couple of punks.”

Eddie belched in respect and surprise. “What are you guys doing here?” Lefty asked in a worshipful tone.

“Taking the joint over,” I said.

“The Combo taking the union over?” Lefty asked in awe.

“Yep,” Maxie said.

“Yeh,” I said.

Eddie belched.

“What you guys come up here for?” I asked.

“Jobs,” Lefty said.

“Finks, for eight bucks a day?” I mocked.

“Nah, we're no eight buck a day finks, Noodles. We're nobles,” Lefty said.

“Nobles? What the hell is a nobler I asked.

“Well, nobles get sixteen bucks a day. We're like the bosses over the finks,” Lefty replied lamely.

“You guys are tougher than finks?” Maxie asked.

“Yeh, we do the dirty work,” Lefty admitted.

Maxie looked at me. I nodded. We both thought of the same thing.

“Okay, you guys are hired. Sixteen bucks a day,” Max said.

“Who's going to pay us?” Lefty asked surprised.

Max took out his bundle of money. They watched popeyed as he peeled two one-hundred-dollar bills off his roll and tossed them one apiece.

“Okay?” Max asked.

“Sure, it's okay,” Lefty said.

They both smiled their thanks. “What do we do?” he asked.

Maxie looked at me.

Cockeye walked in with the bottles. He laid them on the desk. He looked at Lefty and Eddie questioningly.

I said, “This is a couple of nobles; they're working for us.”

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“They don't look so noble,” Cockeye said.

“They're private detectives,” I said.

“Noble detectives?” Cockeye asked.

“Yeh—noble detectives,” I said.

Max opened one of the bottles from Gerhaty's. He poured.

I said, “Have a drink, Lefty, Ed?”

They both nodded and reached for their glasses. We drank up.

“Good stuff,” Lefty said.

Eddie gave a deep belch of appreciation. I cut the drugged liquor with the whiskey from Gerhaty's. I used some water glasses to mix the stuff up good. I handed Lefty and Eddie a bottle each.

I said, “You recognize a noble when you see one?”

“Yeh, we know them all,” Lefty said.

“You give every noble you see on duty a drink of this stuff. It's spiked—knockout drops,” I said.

Lefty smiled. “Yeh, it's a good idea,” he said, “to put them out of commission.”

“Then chase them,” Maxie said.

“Most of them will take a powder when I tell them the Combo is behind this thing,” Lefty said.

“Okay,” Max said, “but you guys don't take a powder until you do your work. No friggin around,” he cautioned.

“You want the dough back and pay us later?” Lefty asked. He was insulted.

“No, it's okay, we trust you,” I said.

They walked to the door. I called after them, “Come around later in the day.”

Lefty nodded and said, “So long.”

Eddie nodded and belched.

CHAPTER 36

Eventually, there were about fifteen men sprawled around the waiting room, asleep.

I said to Max, “The waiting room is all crapped up with those sleeping bastards. It looks lousy out there.”

“Okay, dump them in there.” Max jerked his thumb toward the adjoining office. “I got to call Ed and tell him to start sending his zulus out on the streets.

He picked up the phone. I heard him talking to Eddie.

Pat and I carried about half of the sleeping crew out of the waiting room. We were bent over, about to pick up another sleeping figure, when we heard the door open and a voice said, “What the hell—”

Rarely have I heard these three words uttered with such stunned bewilderment.

Pat and I turned around. There was a middle-aged, well-built man with a startled expression, standing at the door surveying the scene.

“Who the hell are you guys? What the hell is going on here?”

We didn't answer him.

The man repeated, “Who the hell are you guys? Where's Walter and Luke?”

He walked angrily into the inner office.

He stuttered his “What the hell” again when he saw Maxie with his feet on the desk, smoking a cigar. He stood speechless and flabbergasted.

Maxie looked at him. He flipped the ashes off his cigar. He smiled disarmingly. Quietly he asked, “Mr. Livingstone, I presume?”

The standing man sputtered, “Livingstone, my ass. My name is Thespus and what the hell are you doing at my desk?”

“Don't get your balls in an uproar,” Maxie replied curtly. “It's bad for your blood pressure.”

“Listen,” Thespus said angrily. “What the hell's going on here? Where's my men Luke and Walter?”

“In there.” Maxie stood up. He took Thespus under the arm and opened the closet door.

Thespus stood there dumbfounded, gazing at the couple sitting helpless on the floor.

Maxie led Thespus to the adjoining office, showed him the men asleep on the floor.

In a hushed whisper, Thespus asked, “Are they dead?”

“Not yet,” Maxie replied flippantly. He escorted the subjugated and shaky Thespus to a chair. He sat there panting, mopping his forehead.

Suddenly he grabbed for the phone. Max took it out of his trembling fingers.

“Who are you going to call?” Max snapped.

“The police department.”

Max laughed. “How does it look for the Thespus Detective Agency to call the police department?” Maxie asked.

“Who are you men?” Thespus looked us over. He didn't know how to figure us. “You men from Bergoff's outfit?”

“How did you guess?” I said.

“Yes, where else would you men come from?” he asked.

Now that Thespus thought we were from a rival agency, trying to cut in on his strikebreaking contract, he was on ground that he understood. He seemed a little relieved. He tried flattery.

“You guys are okay. I got to hand it to you, fellows. You certainly are smart cookies.”

With shaky hands Thespus lit a cigar. He tried to speak with friendliness. “What is that cheapskate Bergoff paying you fellows?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, I'll tell you why. Maybe I'll give you fellows a better proposition.”

He leaned back. He assumed the manner of an easygoing guy. He beamed and smiled at us.

Max said, “Bergoff pays us a yard a week.”

“That's pretty good money from a cheap bastard like him. I'll tell you what I'll do for you boys.”

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He cleared his throat. He was about to astound us with his munificence.

"I'll pay you lads a yard and a quarter a week. How's that—how's that, hey?" he beamed.

The old humbug. A hundred and a quarter. I tried to act impressed.

"That's fine," I said.

"We're overcome," Max said drily.

I picked up a bottle of spiked Mt. Vernon. "Let's drink on it," I said.

Thespus downed his with, "Here's mud in your eye." I hurriedly filled his glass again. Thespus looked at our full glasses suspiciously. "Aren't you fellas drinking?"

We lifted our glasses. Maxie said, "Sure, here's mud in your eye."

Thespus downed his drink. He looked at us standing over him with the full glasses in our hands.

He mumbled, "Mud—in—your—eye." He slumped in his chair fast asleep. Cockeye and Patsy carried him into the adjoining office.

We had a lull for awhile. Cockeye sat at the reception desk playing his harmonica. Patsy had found a hammer and was trying to pry the files open. Max and I were examining the contents of the desks.

Then a miracle happened. A detective walked into the waiting room and refused Cockeye's offer to have a drink. Cockeye had come to tell us.

"This bastard claims he don't drink," he said.

"Ask the guy where he lives," I said.

Cockeye came back with his address. It was Washburton Avenue, Yonkers.

I picked up the Staten Island phone book. I thumbed through the pages and picked out a name and address at random and wrote it down on a sheet of paper.

I said to Cockeye, "Let the Yonkers lad come in."

As he walked in, I said, "Just the type I need—a nice, clean living, private detective who don't drink."

The big shmuck stood there smiling self-consciously.

Max asked, "You never drink?"

"As long as it's against the laws of the country, I won't touch the stuff," he said primly.

"Did you ever drink before Prohibition?" I asked.

"No. Truthfully, I don't like the stuff."

"So you're not refusing because liquor is against the law like you first said. You don't drink it because you don't like it. Right?" I asked.

"Yes, that's it," he admitted embarrassed.

"One more question," Maxie said. "Did you ever masturbate on the high seas?"

"I don't understand the question. What does it mean?" the shmuck asked.

"Skip it. Skip that question," I said. "Here's an important assignment. This is the name and address of a party out in Staten Island." I handed him the slip. "Tail him day and night until relieved. Give us a full report of every move he makes. This is important. This is a big case. Now don't miss up."

"Don't worry. I'll be right on his tail," he replied. "I'll bring in a detailed report."

He walked to the door briskly. He turned back. "Excuse me," he asked, "what's the best way to get to this address?"

Maxie said gruffly, "Find out. You're a private detective, aren't you?"

He mumbled something unintelligible and went out.

"Hey, I got the goddamn thing open," Patsy called out.

I walked over to the files. They were crammed full of correspondence, documents and folders of all descriptions.

"What did you expect to find?" I said.

"I don't know—maybe some dough," Pat said.

"Yeh, you'll find dough," I laughed. I walked away.

Pat continued to look through the folders.

A moment later Patsy called out again, "Hey, Noodles."

He laid a bundle of pictures, negatives and letters on the table.

The pictures were pornographic shots of a well-known female Hollywood star. She was in all sorts of

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interesting postures with an unknown nude male companion.

Max said, "Yep, I remember her." He mentioned a name. "She started off at the Silver Slipper, remember, Noodles?" I nodded. "Then she went to Hollywood," Maxie continued. "She did okay. She made a name for herself. She married..."

He mentioned the name of a male movie star. Maxie was reading the letters and smiling to himself.

"Hot stuff," he said.

He handed the letters to me. It was a correspondence between some guy and the girl movie star.

"What's he got this filed away for?" Patsy asked.

"Divorce evidence; maybe blackmail," I said.

Calls began coming over the phone from different real estate companies clamoring for men. It seemed Eddie's boys were doing a thorough job.

All Maxie answered was, "Yup—yup, I'll take care of it. I'll send men around. You should live so long," and he would hang up.

One voice insisted on talking to Thespus. Maxie answered, "Thespus is too busy."

The voice persisted, "Tell him it's Crowning. He'll talk to me."

Max and I exchanged glances.

Maxie hung up on him twice. Men continued coming in with complaints and assignments. We were all busy as hell. We had twenty unconscious men lying around the place. Most of our liquor was gone. Maxie picked names at random out of different phone books. He dispatched men to out of the way parts of the city to trail unknown people. He gave them instructions to bring in detailed reports on their activities.

We had a breather for awhile. Maxie stood up, stretched and walked around.

"Goddamn, I thought a white-collar man in an office had a snap. This is hard work."

He opened and shut his big fists. He did a little shadow boxing. Patsy was still busy at the files.

A big punch-drunk guy came in. I gave him a name and address out in Brooklyn to shadow. The guy squawked.

Max said, "Why, what's the matter with you?"

"I was hired as a noble. I don't do no goddamn shadowing," the big guy said.

Max asked, "Why? What's the difference? It's a day's work."

"I like some goddamn action. I like to smack some of those pickets around."

Maxie stood up smiling. "You like to smack people around?"

"Yeah, I like to practice on them," the punchy moron admitted.

"Did you ever try this?" Maxie asked. He gave him a kick in the groin.

As he bent over gasping in pain, Max hooked him a right to the jaw. He went crashing against the partition.

"Sorry, I was only kidding," Maxie said.

I bent over him with a glass of whiskey.

"Here, drink this." I put it to his lips. He drank it slowly.

He looked at us in a dumb sort of way.

Maxie said solicitously, "How yuh feeling, pally?"

We stood watching as his eyes glazed. Then he fell asleep.

I dragged him by the feet and threw him in with the others.

"There's a little bastard out there who says he wants Thespus," Cockeye announced.

"Give him a drink and let him go to sleep," Maxie said.

"He's smart. The guy looked at those bums sleeping out there. He said he wasn't sleepy. He's a wise one."

"Okay," Maxie said. "Send him in."

A slim good-looking baby-faced guy walked in, smiling.

"Hello, fellas," he said.

He sat down nonchalantly, slung one leg over the arm of the chair, took out a pack of Luckies and offered them around. We refused his smokes. He seemed a cool, natural sort of guy, quite different from the big blustering customers we had had up to now. He sat smiling and dangling his leg, perfectly at ease.

Max said, "Okay, pal, we're busy. What's on your mind?"

"Where's Thespus?"

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“Look, pal, we ask the questions around here,” Max said.

The guy repeated, smiling, “Where's that jerk Thespus?”

If any person can be called typical, this one was. He was an uninhibited guy. A guy of the streets and off the streets. A knockaround guy. A wiseguy. He could be a typical Italian wiseguy from Mulberry Street, a Jewish wiseguy from Delancey Street, or, like this guy, a typical Irish wiseguy from Tenth Avenue.

Maxie was getting irritated. “Come here.” He opened the door of the adjoining office. The guy stuck his head in and whistled under his breath. “Jesus Christ.” The scene impressed him.

The guy went back to his seat. “I got chased out of my building,” he said, “then I took a walk up and down the street and saw what was going on.” He smiled as he continued: “It's murder on the street. Plenty of heads are broken. All the elevators are shut down. There's no guards and no scabs on the job. The union has practically got the strike licked.”

The guy kept smiling, showing all his teeth. He knew they were clean and white. He took a puff on his cigarette.

“I come from Owny's neighborhood. I know who you guys are.”

“Tenth Avenue?” I said.

“No, Eleventh,” he said.

“So?” I prompted.

“So, I figured the organization took over the strike. The Combination,” the guy concluded with his permanent smile.

“You've been around. You know the score,” Maxie said.

“Yeah, I've bounced around,” the guy replied flippantly.

“If I throw you out the window, you think you'll bounce?” Maxie bantered.

“Nah, that won't be necessary. I can help you.”

“You can help us?” Max said. “How?”

The guy shrugged. “Anything.”

“So how the hell can you help us?” Maxie repeated. “We don't need help. We're doing okay. We're breaking the strike.”

“I don't know,” the guy shrugged. “If I can help you, I'd like to.”

Cockeye came in.

“How about a little food? Aren't we eating today?” he asked.

Suddenly we realized we were all hungry.

“You want me to get you fellows some sandwiches from Lindys or something?” the guy volunteered.

“You're not going any place,” Max said.

“Okay by me.” He made himself comfortable.

“I got a yen for some kreplach,” Patsy said.

“Okay we'll have some kreplach. Cockeye, run downtown to Rappaport's and tell him to give you a potful—cheese and potatoes, both kinds.” Maxie handed Cockeye a sawbuck.

I went out to the waiting room, sat down at the desk. After awhile I began feeling annoyed at the sleeping men opposite me. I took one of them by the feet and dragged him into the other room.

“You want these bastards out of the waiting room?” the guy from Eleventh Avenue asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “these bastards annoy me.”

“I'll do it,” the guy said eagerly.

“Okay, mother's little helpmate.”

I watched and admired the ease with which he carried all the drugged men into the outer office. Then the guy found a broom and started sweeping up.

He finished the job and carried the broom into the inner office. It seemed to me he was in there a longer time than necessary. I tiptoed over and quickly opened the door and walked in. There he was, down on his knees, going through their pockets.

He turned around, smiled at me and continued rolling them. My presence didn't feaze him a bit. I stood there smoking a cigar, watching. He finished, brushed his pants and counted the money.

“How'd cha do?” I asked.

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“A hundred and ten dollars and forty cents,” he said. He counted fifty–five dollars and twenty cents and offered it to me.

I said, “There's three more guys out there. How about we split with them?”

He smiled. “What for, pal? This is between you and me. They don't have to know about this,” he said.

“If I didn't catch you rolling these guys, you'd keep it all yourself?”

He smiled. “Sure, wouldn't you?”

I shook my head.

I chuckled, “Okay, keep it all for yourself.”

“You don't want any of it for yourself?”

“Nah, keep it,” I repeated.

He actually said, “Gee, tanks, pal.”

“These guys,” I motioned with my foot, “are friends of yours, aren't they?”

“Nah, I just work with them.”

“This what you guys do all the time, strikebreaking?”

“Most of the time, strikes. Once in awhile a divorce frameup job.”

“Anything for an honest buck,” I said. “Yeah,” he laughed, “in this racket these bastards,” he jerked his thumb in the direction of the unconscious figures, “would frame their own grandmothers.”

“All these agencies work the same way?”

“Yeah, they're all full of crap. I worked for a lot of them. They take any kind of jobs from stealin' to murder. We do a lot of spying for the big companies, too.”

“What kind of spying, for thieves among the employees?”

The guy laughed. “Once in awhile. That kind of spying we like. Then we make a buck when we catch the guy. We clip him for all he stole.”

“Then you turn him in?” I asked.

“These bastards do, yeah. They ain't got a heart. But not me. I just shake the guy down and chase him. We do a lot of labor spying.”

Cockeye came back from Rappaport's with a large pot of kreplach.

Patsy said, “What—no forks?”

“No forks,” Cockeye replied.

Maxie stuck his hand in the pot and said, “The hell with forks.”

“Forks to you,” Cockeye said sticking his hand in.

“This forkin' gag is getting forkin' silly,” I said.

“Okay, okay, let's quit forking around,” Maxie said.

We all laughed with our mouths full of kreplach.

The phone rang. Maxie picked it up. It was Crowning again.

Maxie said, “I'm Thespus' secretary. What can I do for you?”

We could hear Crowning at the other end shouting, “Lousy crooks! I paid you in advance. Where's all them goddamn men?”

Maxie said, “Mr. Thespus wants five grand more, or he won't send any men out.”

We heard him shout on the other end, “I'm coming up, but that'll be the last piece of business you ever get from me, you lousy crook.”

He hung up.

We finished the pot of kreplach.

Maxie called Eddie on the phone. “How's it going, Ed?”

“Okay, everything is copacetic,” Ed said.

“Much action on the street?”

“There was a little in the morning. Now it's quiet. Most of the scabs quit when they saw heads being broken and they didn't have protection.”

The room was quiet; we could distinctly hear Eddie talking.

“Any of your boys get picked up, Ed?” Max said.

“Three out of three hundred. Ain't bad, eh, Max? I got them out on bail.”

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“What's the charge?”

“Simple assault.”

“Did you call the club?”

“Yeah, I called the club. They said call the judge and he'd have it thrown out of court. Otherwise, anything else I can do, Max?”

“No, Ed. Everything's under control. So long.”

Max hung up, a satisfied smile on his face.

I said, “They've got to sign now. The tenants will raise hell with the owners. They can't conduct business for a minute without elevator service.”

“Yep,” Maxie said, “it won't be long now.”

We heard a noise in the adjoining office. I went in to investigate. One big guy was staggering around, tripping over everybody's feet.

He looked at me bleary-eyed.

He said, “Where am I? I got to take a leak.”

He went into the toilet. He came out. He looked at us. We looked at him. He was sullen.

“You want a drink, pal?” I asked.

“Water,” he said.

He went back into the toilet. I watched as he drank directly from the faucet and washed his face. He came out. He looked at us in a dopey sort of way. He started walking to the door.

Max said, “You can't leave; class ain't dismissed yet.”

He kept right on walking. Patsy clipped him a shot flush on the chin. The guy reeled around the room.

“Better take a drink, pal,” I said.

“I don't want a drink,” he grumbled.

“Go ahead, you stupid bastard, take a drink or you'll get your teeth kicked in,” I said.

I poured him a drink. He drank it down. I led him back into the inner office. He sat down on the floor. I watched him fall asleep.

Patsy went back to examine the files. They were very revealing. Every once in awhile he came over and showed us an interesting piece of correspondence. There were dossiers on hundreds of people, some of them quite prominent people. For what purpose I could not understand unless it was for blackmail. They contained such detailed information that Max and I discussed his methods and marveled. This agency had specific knowledge and actual pictures of a number of wealthy and prominent men and women in acts of perversion.

I called the union and asked for Jimmy. The girl said he was out. I asked for Fitz. She said they were both called to a conference by an impartial chairman appointed by City Hall. I told her in case either of them called to phone me right away. I gave her the agency telephone number.

There was a lull for quite awhile. Nobody came in, and no calls came over the wire. Cockeye was out front playing his harmonica. Patsy was examining the files again. Max and I were listening to the slim guy from the West Side. He told us his name was Kelly. He was telling us about some of the work he did for the Thespus agency on one of their railroad accounts.

The phone rang. I picked up the receiver. It was Fitz at City Hall. He was calling from a booth in the lobby. He said the employer group wasn't too militant, but the impartial chairman was acting partial to the bosses. Otherwise things seemed on their way.

I told Fitz, “Don't worry, things will certainly be on their way. These owners are getting terrific pressure from their tenants. No matter how they twist and turn to try and get men to operate their elevators, they'll fail. We can trump any card they play. We'll shove the contract down their throats. And as far as the impartial or partial chairman, as you call him, is concerned, we'll clip that bastard's wings.”

Fitz said, “The bastard acts as if he's on the payroll of the employer group.”

“Okay,” I said, “I'll straighten him right out. You'll see a change in his attitude pretty quick, or you may have a different chairman altogether. Keep me posted at this number. Another thing, Fitz, don't budge an inch. Don't compromise; we got the thing licked.”

Fitz said, “Okay, fine, that's fine.”

We both hung up.

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I called the main office. I told them to contact City Hall, and make that impartial chairman partial to our interests. They laughed and said it would be taken care of right away.

I called Eddie at his hotel. I asked him, "How's things going at your end?"

He answered, "Everything's all right. My zulus are coming back in groups. They say everything on the street is clean. No strikebreakers to bang around."

"Keep them out on the street, Ed," I said. "It's possible the owners may contact a new strikebreaking agency. And if so, we want to know immediately."

"Okay," Eddie said. "I see what you mean. I'll gander around myself. I'll keep you posted."

I didn't have a chance to answer. I heard the front door being kicked open and then slammed shut with a terrific bang. I still had the phone in my hand.

Eddie at the other end was saying, "Hello, Noodles. Hello, you still there?" Outside I heard a voice shouting, "Thespus, where the hell's Thespus?"

I spoke hurriedly into the phone. "Okay, Ed. Anything else? I got to hang up. There's something popping here."

"Nothing important," he answered.

"Okay, Ed," I said.

"Okay, Noodles," he said.

We both hung up. The shouting continued in the outer office. Max was sitting with, his feet on the desk, calmly smoking his cigar.

"It sounds like Crowning outside," he said, smiling.

"Yeh," I said.

"Hey, Cockeye," Maxie shouted, "let the pot-bellied bastard come in."

Like a bull, a colossal infuriated bull, Crowning charged in, bellowing, "Thespus! Where's Thespus?"

He stopped and puffed in amazement when he saw Max and me sitting nonchalantly with our feet up on the desk.

His face was as red as a red face could ever get before popping a blood vessel. His eyes through his thick glasses shot his hate at us as he recognized us.

"What are you doing here? Where's Thespus?" he demanded.

Pat and Cockeye were right behind him. Cockeye held his .45 by the muzzle and was signaling to know whether to smack Crowning over the head with the butt end.

I couldn't help laughing at Cockeye. He was so mad and excited that his eyes were way out of focus. I couldn't tell if he was looking at Max or me for the okay signal to hit Crowning.

I said, "No good, Cockeye, at least not yet."

"Sit down, Crowning," I motioned to a chair. "Let's have a friendly chat."

He didn't. He stood glaring and puffing. He looked around the room.

"Where the hell is Thespus?" he blustered.

"He dropped dead," Max said.

Crowning wheeled around and made for the door. Little Kelly put out his foot. Crowning staggered and almost fell.

"Come here, you big stupid bastard, and sit down," I said.

He wheeled around like a charging bull. He stood above me fuming. I sat there with my feet on the desk.

"Yes?" I said.

"I won't have anybody talking to me like that," he raged, gesticulating with his finger.

"Okay," I said, "I apologize."

I smiled up at him.

"That's more like it. That's different," he said. "Nobody is going to bluff me. If you want to have a chat on a friendly basis, well, all right."

He sat down.

Even Kelly laughed at the four-flusher.

"You're licked, Crowning," I said. "There won't be an elevator running up or down unless a contract is signed."

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“That's what you think,” he snapped. “I'll get men to operate them, and protection, too. This is still the United States of America and you hoodlums aren't running everything with your high-handed gangster methods.”

“You know, Crowning,” I said, “you have the typical businessman's state of mind. You set a precedent, then if anybody follows your example and uses the methods you originated, you berate him, you call him a gangster, high-handed and what not. It's all true, of course. It's just what you call it. But what's goose for the gander is kind of goosie, don't you think?”

Everybody laughed but Crowning.

“Seriously, Crowning,” I continued, “all right, let's start from scratch. We—” I waved my arm around the room, “let's assume we're gangsters. So as a gangster—I speak as a gangster with authority—I can say, you supposedly legitimate businessmen are the ones who brought us gangsters into labor disputes. You follow me? It's you employers that first attracted us and showed us how lucrative these disputes can be. Take this situation as an example. You brought Salvy and his men into this dispute. He was on your payroll. Right? Besides hiring gangsters, you, a legit, straightforward businessman, bribe a union official. Do you know that's committing a felony?”

“I did nothing of the sort, you can't prove it,” Crowning screamed.

“Look, Crowning, don't yell. I'm sitting right here. I'm not proving anything. I'm just telling you what Fitz told me. He told me you've had him on your payroll for years, and I don't doubt it. I know from experience it's the common practice of business associations, and the individual businessmen belonging to these associations, to make it appear they know nothing about it. You and I know these sanctimonious bastards are full of crap. That's part of the reason why they pay dues to you. And I know there are many other illegit functions of your trade associations besides bribing union officials, lobbying at Washington and state capitals. And truthfully just between you and me, isn't lobbying just a polite name for bribing legislative bodies?”

“Nothing of the sort,” Crowning said.

“You're full of crap, Crowning,” I said, “and you know it. You supposedly legit business men taught us how to corrupt the lawmaking and law enforcement bodies from way back. You businessmen conduct your activities with less honesty than we do. I have seen it all around. In that file there is plenty to substantiate what I am saying. There's dope in there on many business firms in this and other cities. Why and how this agency amassed such a load of crap, I don't know. But reading how some of them operate their businesses, let me tell you, it's pretty filthy reading.”

I got an idea. “Hey Pat,” I said, “how far are you? I mean up to what letter in the file did you come to?”

“Up to the letter R,” Patsy said.

“Look in the C files again. C for Crowning,” I said.

“There's no file on me,” Crowning snorted.

“Just for the hell of it,” I said.

Patsy opened the C compartment. He flipped his thumb over a few folders. He pulled one out. He looked inside, then he put it back. He flipped a few more down the line. He stopped, looked intently, and pulled it out. He looked inside. He smiled.

“Yeh, he's got one, all right,” he said.

Max asked, “Any pictures?”

Pat said, “No pictures.”

He tossed the folder on the desk.

I emptied the contents. There were three closely typed pages. One was about his relationships with young men and young girls. This guy had some history. He was picked up by the cops on a few occasions, but never convicted in court. His case was always dismissed for lack of evidence. In every case the boy or girl and arresting officer changed their testimony in court. In parenthesis were notations of how much money the agency paid the cops and the youths in the case. In one case a large sum of money was given. I handed the sheet to Maxie.

I said, “The bastard is a Sodomite.”

Crowning just looked at me, mouth open, breathing heavily, a helpless fear in his eyes.

The second sheet contained a list of his businesses. He was quite a big wheel. He controlled some big real

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estate parcels. He had a woolen mill up in Massachusetts and a big uniform manufacturing plant in Jersey. He was a director of a bank here in New York. He belonged and was a contributor to many large organizations.

He was a member in good standing of the American Association of Manufacturers. He belonged to every flag-waving, anti-Semitic, reactionary group out to make trouble and frigate the little people of this country. They were all self-sacrificing, super-patriotic organizations as long as there was a buck in it. I handed the sheet to Maxie.

I said, "A real hooray-for-America guy. Frigate you; hooray for me."

I looked at Crowning. His eyes were wide and afraid. He was nervously wetting his thin, purple lips.

The third typed sheet pertained to records of his fraudulent dealings with a business partner named Moritz. There were detailed accounts of his collusion with union officials in Jersey, Massachusetts and New York.

There was a case history of deceit and profiteering in contracts with the government for the manufacture of army uniforms during the last war.

There was an item concerning Federal income tax evasion.

I handed the sheet to Crowning. I said nothing. As he read, his eyes blinked. His Adam's apple fluttered as he tried to swallow. He licked his dry lips. His hands and the paper shook. The paper fell out of his nerveless hands.

He croaked hoarsely, "A glass of water, some water, please."

Kelly brought it to him.

"We're not interested in this crap," I said, referring to the sheets on the table. "What we're interested in is to settle the contract that's being negotiated down at City Hall."

"Can I have these papers, then?" Browning asked.

"No," I said, "I'll keep them for the future. We don't need them now, we have you licked. Maybe we'll need them at some later date. We may get into a dispute and these can act as—persuaders."

"Thespus sell me out?" Crowning asked. "Is he in there?" He nodded to the other office. He got up. "I would like to talk to him."

He went for the door of the office. Little Kelly blocked his way.

"Okay, Kelly," I said, "let him see what we got in there."

Kelly swung the door open. Crowning stared with his mouth open.

"Are they all dead?" he gasped.

I got up to look. Jesus, they all looked as if they were dead. I walked in and looked closer. I was relieved; they were all fast asleep.

I winked at Max and said, "Yeh, they're all dead."

He was trembling at the sight. I could imagine how those prostrate bodies must have affected him.

He sat down.

"Can I have some of this whiskey?" he faltered.

"Not now," I said, "let's talk some more first. You're one of the big shots in the association? The real estate association?"

"I'm a member," he replied cautiously.

"Your outfit is licked," Maxie said. "Call your associates and tell them to sign up."

"I can't do anything myself." He was trembling and barely audible. "Can I call my partner and consult with him?"

"Yeh," I said, "but no tricks. Straight talk over the phone or you'll get hurt."

"I understand. I don't want any trouble. I want this settled, so I can leave."

I nodded.

He reached and called a number into the phone. The exchange was the same as this agency's.

He called the man on the other end Moritz. Moritz seemed obstinate. He turned to me. I put my hand over the mouthpiece.

Crowning said, "I can't convince him, what shall I do?"

"Tell him to come here. It ain't far where he is, is it?" Max asked.

"Five minute's walk," Crowning said. "Moritz is a nice fellow," he smiled ingratiatingly. "He's a white Jew."

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I was going to smack the shmuck. But what would be the use, I thought.

Ten minutes later Moritz came in with an automatic smile and a professional handshake. He was tall, medium built, and much too smooth. He had a small gold and diamond insignia in his lapel. It was a Mason button.

“Can Moritz and I have a private discussion?” Crowning asked.

“Sure, go ahead,” I said.

They went into a huddle together in a corner. Crowning pointed me out to Moritz with a gesture of the head. I heard them murmuring the word “Jewish” when he gestured in my direction. Moritz scrutinized Max and me. He nodded his head in understanding.

It was obvious what they were whispering about. Moritz was a “white Jew” all right, a perfect partner to Crowning, the type that uses any means for self gain. He used his Jewishness, his Masonry, anything, like a whore. Yeh, you find guys like this Moritz everywhere.

Us Jews got to stick together. Us Protestants got to stick together. Us Catholics got to stick. Yeh, that kind stick—that kind stick it up the asses of their co-religionists. Sure enough, when they broke up, this guy Moritz came over and spoke in Jewish.

The gist of his spiel was, “We Jews got to stick together. We're an abused minority; we got to do things for each other. Come over on our side of the fence. Well pay you well.”

He said a lot more in the same vein. All in a pretty clear Jewish.

I answered him in English. “Sure, I agree with you. We're in a minority, and we're oppressed. But, you stupid sonofabitch, what has it got to do with this situation? I'll bet fifty percent of the elevator pickets walking in the street are Jewish. But you, as a Jew, don't give a goddamn. Don't hand me that crap. You'll exploit a Jew, a Gentile or your own mother for a charlotte russe.

“In another minute you're apt to start singing 'Yankee Doodle, Hooray America.' You crumb bun big businessmen are a whorey lot. No matter what your nationality is.”

“Don't you talk to me like that. I'm not afraid of you, even though you are gangsters.” Moritz put his arm on his partner's shoulder. “Mr. Crowning has told me all about you men, and Mr. Salvy explained to me all about your powerful criminal organization.”

“So what can you do about it?” I asked.

“It looks like the decent citizen is powerless locally, but I will see my Senator about it.”

“You, a decent citizen, associating with Salvy, and partners in fraud with this chiseler Crowning?”

He opened his mouth to answer me.

The phone rang. I picked it up. It was Fitz at City Hall.

He said, “Everything is fine and dandy. The chairman switched sides; he's with us. He's been hammering the employer group over the head. He's been telling them the mayor doesn't want any nonsense. They know they're hog-tied.” Fitz was laughing. “I think they're waiting to hear from that big mucky muck, Crowning, before they sign up.”

“Crowning is here,” I said.

“He is?” Fitz shouted excitedly.

“Yeh, he is,” I said. “Can you get the spokesman of the employer group to the phone?”

“Yes, sure, he's right upstairs,” Fitz said.

“Go and get him, Fitz,” I said. “I'll have my friend Crowning talk to him.”

Fitz said, “Okay. Hold on.”

I waited, holding on to the phone.

Moritz said, “Mr. Crowning won't talk to anybody on that phone.”

I nodded to Patsy. Patsy poked Moritz in the belly with a left. He doubled up. Patsy straightened him up with a right clip on the jaw. Moritz staggered back and fell up against the partition.

A voice came over the phone. “Is Mr. Crowning there?”

I motioned to Crowning.

Wearily he picked up the phone. To the party on the other end he said, “Can't get any cooperation anywhere. We may as well throw the sponge in. Yes, yes—in my opinion, you may as well sign right up.

He put the phone down resignedly and said, “May we go now? This excitement is too much for me.”

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"Not yet," I said. "It won't be long now."

"That's what the rabbi said to the infant as he picked his knife up," Maxie said.

"A rabbi doesn't circumcise," I said. "A mohel does."

I looked at Crowning. He sat dejectedly by himself. He paid no attention to his partner Moritz who was still sitting dazedly on the floor.

"How about a drink for your partner?" I said to Crowning, motioning to the drugged whiskey. "And have a couple yourself?"

Kelly picked up the bottle and poured two full glasses. He gave one to Crowning, who gulped it right down. Kelly bent over Moritz solicitously and held the glass to his lips. Slowly he sipped it all down. I motioned to Kelly to serve them again. They both said "Thank you" to Kelly as they swallowed their second drink.

We watched. Moritz was the first to fall asleep. Crowning almost fell out of his chair. I grabbed him in time, and eased him to the floor.

We hung around for fifteen minutes. The phone rang. I answered. It was Fitz and he was jubilant.

The goddamn contract is signed," he shouted.

I said, "Fine; that's fine."

He said, "Jimmy wants to speak to you."

Jimmy said, "I want to thank you fellows for what you did for us."

I said, "That's okay, Jim. It was nuthin."

He said, "As soon as we get enough money in our treasury, I'll pay you back for the money you helped us out with."

"It'll be taken care of, Jim," I said. "Don't worry about it. We'll have one of our men as your secretary and treasurer."

"Oh," he said.

There was a world of surprise in his, "Oh."

I said, "Hello, Jim; you still there?"

"Yes," he answered.

"I'm sorry, Jim, but that's it. You got to live in a world of reality."

"Okay," he said, "I understand."

"Let's go," Max said.

We walked to the door. Max said, "How about we throw Kelly a few bucks?"

I shook my head.

"He did all right for himself," I said.

"He did?" Max said.

"Yeh, look how," I said.

We watched as Kelly went through the pockets of the firm of Crowning and Moritz.

CHAPTER 37

It was showbreak on Broadway. We pushed through the matinee crowds streaming out of the theatres. We walked over to Hickory House for some thick steaks.

Maxie called the main office from the restaurant. Over the wire we got our orders to leave immediately for Chicago, “fully equipped.”

We hurried through our meal and rushed down in the Caddy to our downtown garage where we slung our rods and lead sprayer under the chassis.

At seven-thirty p.m., we were on our way. We took turns at the wheel, pushing the Caddy at a fast clip. We were at our rendezvous in Cicero by noon the next day. Mendy, Trigger, Muscles and the other Combination unit that left New York the same time we did, we beat by two hours.

We broke bread with Capone, Fischetti, Ricco, and Little Louie.

We sprayed and left our grisly mementos on a street corner of Chicago.

We did back to New York in seventeen hours and checked in at the Pennsylvania Hotel Baths. We slept there for fifteen hours.

At three a.m. I left Max, Pat and Cockeye at the Baths and took a cab. As I rode up Seventh into Broadway, I tried to figure out how many days I had been away. Four days since I had seen Eve, I thought to myself. I wondered if she had moved into my suite at the hotel. Did I care if she did or not, I asked myself. Yeh, sure I cared. It would be swell if she was there waiting for me. Jesus, I should have gotten her something. I felt like a husband coming home after a business trip.

But what a business trip that was. What a lousy, vicious business. For a fleeting moment I saw a picture of myself in Chicago. It wasn't pretty. Suddenly I was plagued by an awful moral doubt. For the first time my fog of rationalization was lifted. I wasn't the swashbuckling, derring-do figure I thought I was. In one fleeting moment the doubt turned into fear, into hysteria.

I plunged downward into a grotesque nightmare. The nightmare became more and more frenzied. A terrible mirage shimmered before my eyes: a mirage of puppets, dancing and screaming to the monotonous rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat as the lead sprayed up and down the line, until there was a deafening stillness. The stillness was worse than the screaming and the monotonous rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat. The stillness hit me in the stomach. I felt myself on the verge of—something. I felt sick. Deathly sick. I couldn't hold it. I puked all over the floor of the cab. When I got out at the entrance to my hotel, I gave the driver twenty bucks extra for his trouble.

I walked toward the desk for a key.

Sweeney, the house dick, intercepted me. After our exchange of greetings, he said, “That doll moved into your place. She's up there now.”

I said, “Yeh, okay, thanks, Sweeney.”

I picked up the key and went up. Quietly I let myself in. The place was dark. I felt my way into the bathroom. I washed and put on a fresh pair of pajamas.

I crept under the covers. A thrill shot into my heart. She was there. She wriggled close to me. She entwined herself all around me. She whispered, “Hello, Tootsie.”

I was sad and happy. She ran her fingers through my hair. I felt safe in her arms. I felt as if I was in a clean, sacred sanctuary.

She murmured, “Tootsie, say something.”

The only thing I could think of to say was, “Eve, I love you.”

She sighed and asked no other questions.

I had Eve quit her dancing job, and we spent most every day together. I marveled at my attachment. I could not believe I would be satisfied and happy with just her alone. But I was. I delighted in buying clothes and everything she desired for her.

Together we went to theaters, clubs, restaurants, the races. The more I saw of her, the more I genuinely admired and respected her. She had an interesting mind. She was intelligent and matter of fact about

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everything. She had been around. She knew the score. To me she was warm and affectionate. To others she maintained a hauteur that seemed to fit her personality. I admired the way she wore her clothes. Invariably she had a look of impeccable grooming.

I wasn't concerned about her past life. She in turn never pried or was overly curious about mine. I insisted that she discard that ridiculous bosom deceiver. I liked her as she was. She explained that the only reason she wore it was for her dancing career.

For months after that Chicago episode nothing eventful happened. Then we received word that Salvy and his partner, Willie, were getting troublesome to the union. We went over to their hangout at the Eden. They were defiant. They wouldn't listen to reason.

A few days later it happened. Salvy went berserk. He put young Jimmy, the delegate, in the hospital with a superficial ice pick wound. It was "suggested" we "ostracize" him and his partner.

I felt I had to get Eve out of the city, for two reasons: first, I didn't want her implicated in any way in case the Salvy eradication went wrong; second, for the way her presence affected me. Just the thought of her softened me up. Once she had told me about her home and parents in North Carolina. Now, I gave her two thousand dollars and sent her there on a visit.

The same afternoon we went up to the Eden, just to reconnoitre. We didn't expect to find Salvy or Willie. It was closed. There were too many passers-by, otherwise we would have broken the lock. We walked back up the steps and into the corner delicatessen store where we had sandwiches and potato salad.

While we were eating, I suggested, "Cockeye could take a run downtown and have Jake come up here with his keys."

Maxie said, "Yep, I guess he'll be able to open that goddamn door. We'll wait here for you, Cockeye boy."

Cockeye grumbled, gulped his sandwich and left.

A half-hour later, Cockeye came walking in followed by Jake the Goniff. He was grinning from ear to ear.

We followed Jake down to the locked door.

He took out his batch of master keys and went to work.

"The goddamn door is locked from the inside," he whispered. "There must be somebody in the joint."

He took out his pocketknife and opened a long thin blade. He pushed and twisted in the keyhole. We heard a key fall to the floor. Another five minutes' manipulation with his master keys, and the door swung open.

Max whispered after we got inside, "Lock it, Jake."

It was pitch dark. We couldn't see a thing. I felt along the wall for switches or buttons. I found a wall button and whispered my information to Max.

He said, "Okay, get the hardware out."

I pressed the button.

There we were. The five of us in the brilliantly lit room. Five guns facing the dance floor. The place was a shambles. Theodore, the Fairy, was lying on the floor, motionless. Pools of blood were all around him. Willie, the Ape, was lying to the right of the Fairy. His face was all battered in. Big Mike sat on a chair, a short bat in his hand. I looked closely at him. I thought he was in a drunken stupor. I shook him.

He looked at me with glazed eye.

"What happened, Mike?"

Maxie shook him again.

He didn't answer. He was in a cataleptic state from shock.

Maxie slapped him sharply across the face. That brought him around. He dropped the bat. He started to cry; long tears rolled down his cheeks. Then he began to blubber. "How did I ever get into this mess? How did I ever get into this business?" Tears of self-pity were pouring down his face. He stood up. He looked at us. "I was always an honest, law-abiding saloon keeper before Prohibition." Loudly he wailed, "I went to church every Sunday." He wrung his hands in despair. He sobbed violently. "Now I'm mixed up with killings and gangsters."

He finished in a violent burst of fresh tears. His big shoulders shook with grief.

"Enough of that crap," Maxie growled. "Tell us what happened."

Mike didn't answer.

I said, "Look, Mike, get ahold of yourself. Did Salvy do that to the Fairy?"

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Mike sat down and mumbled, "Yes, we were about to close—last night. The Fairy and I were counting our receipts. Salvy and Willie came in demanding five thousand dollars. The Fairy got excited. He scratched Salvy's face and told him to go to hell. Salvy went crazy, like he must have had a shot in the arm or something. He took out his ice pick and kept pushing it into poor Theodore. It was awful."

Mike covered his face as if to shut the picture out of his sight.

"Okay, Mike, what happened to friend Willie here?" Max shook Mike by the shoulder.

"I don't know," he replied vaguely. "I guess I went for the bat and started swinging. Is he dead?"

He looked at us fearfully.

I bent down and looked Willie over. "He's banged up pretty good, but he'll be okay I think."

"Thank the Lord," Mike murmured. "I was sitting here wondering what to do." He looked at us hopefully. "What shall I do? I want to give this business up. I went to go out of this business. I can't stand it no more."

Max and I looked at each other. I nodded and whispered, "Yeh, let's take the joint away from the shmuck."

Max stood in front of Big Mike. "I'll tell you what I'll do for you, Mike. This is very irregular, for us to pay for a joint. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Maxie," Mike answered. He looked at us nervously.

"We'll get rid of the Fairy. Don't worry, we'll give him a nice funeral. We'll take care of Willie here." Maxie jarred him with his foot. "And you get five grand for the joint to boot, okay?"

Big Mike lifted his head sadly. "But—Maxie," he whined. "The place cost us fifty grand."

"Five grand will have to be okay," Max said tersely.

"All right, Max," Mike mumbled listlessly.

Maxie took his roll out and counted five thousand and handed it to Big Mike. I scribbled a rough bill of sale for everything on the premises. Mike signed it.

"Thanks, fellows," he said. "Now I'm retired until Prohibition is over."

For the first time Mike smiled.

"God forbid Prohibition should be over," Cockeye said.

"Don't forget, Mike," I cautioned. "Keep your mouth shut."

"You fellows know I don't talk," Mike said.

"Yeh, you're okay, Mike," I said.

"Can I go now?" Mike asked.

"Yep, you can go now," Max said.

Big Mike, with a sigh of relief, went lumbering to the exit.

At the door he waved, "Thanks, fellas. So long."

Jake unlocked the door for him.

Later that afternoon, we wrapped the Fairy up in a rug. Cockeye went for Klemy's truck and took him to the funeral parlors. Pete, the printer, made out the necessary forms, and we gave Theodore, the Fairy, a nice funeral.

We revived Willie and took him to Eddie's Hotel. There a doctor fixed him up.

"Why bother with the bastard?" Cockeye asked. "I thought we were going to dump him."

"We may need him for bait," I explained. "Well treat the Ape real friendly for awhile."

The Eden opened as usual that night. We informed the entertainers and the help that we had bought the place, and everything would continue as before.

I told Fat Moe to relay all messages to the Eden, which would be our temporary hangout.

A week later, when Willie, the Ape, was able to move around, we invited him to make himself at home at the Eden, providing he behaved himself.

Maxie assured him, "We have no hard feelings against you or Salvy. We're businessmen; we let bygones be bygones."

At first Willie was a little skeptical. He kept away. Then he came in for an occasional free meal or drink. Finally he overcame his caution and became an all day frequenter.

The district "Fix" came in one night and looked us over suspiciously. He asked for Mike and the Fairy. Maxie told him we had taken the place over legit. I showed him the piece of paper Big Mike had signed. He didn't like the looks of it.

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"This ain't legal," he said.

"But this is," Max said. He slipped him five hundred and added, "Once a month, O.K.?"

The "Fix" grinned. "Yep, this makes it legal," he chuckled. "Thanks, I'll see you next month."

It was that simple. The landlord was less of a problem.

For weeks there was no sign of Salvy. We knew Willie was in contact with him, but we didn't follow or question him for fear of arousing suspicion.

The thought of unfinished business annoyed me, not that our new headquarters was unpleasant or unprofitable. Our net profit was better than three thousand a week. Besides, I should have been relaxed what with the convenient bar and everything else there was for my personal enjoyment. But I was on edge, I guess because we had a "job" to do and we wanted to get it over with. I wanted it over with. I wanted Eve back.

After all these years I was getting jumpy and nervous. The idea of quitting entered my mind. Why not? I had plenty of dough salted away, more than 100 grand in the vaults.

Yeh, I was thinking of quitting soon. Maybe it was nerves, or maybe it was Eve. Something was bothering me. Maybe it was this cat-and-mouse game with Salvy. Who the hell knows? I watched Max, Pat and Cockeye. Goddamn, now that I thought of it, they seemed to be on edge, too. Patsy and Cockeye had a little argument over that singer, Rose, the other night. How could they go for a tomato like that? Nobody is like Eve. I wonder what she's doing with herself down there?

Another week went by, then one night the Ape sat down at our table.

"You on the level, Max, with Salvy?" he asked.

"What do you mean on the level?" Max asked. "If you mean, we have no hard feelings against the Snake, sure. Why?"

"Salvy contacted me last night. He's broke."

"He can come down here; he can have the run of the joint. The same as you if he wants to."

"I don't know what to do," the Ape said.

"Why?" I asked. "What now?"

"Because he's hitting the needle again, and when he takes a shot in the arm, the sonofabitch likes to use his goddamn ice pick."

I said, "Well, that's up to him. If he behaves himself, he can come around for a meal, a drink, and a few bucks."

Max smiled wryly. "You're his friend, aren't you?" The dumb Ape nodded. "So you got to overlook his little faults with the ice pick."

"So the proposition still stands, Max?"

The Ape was cautious. There was still a glimmer of suspicion in his eye.

"It's okay by me one way or the other." Maxie acted unconcerned. "We have a little business out of town for the next week or so. We're going to put a man in complete charge to run the place." Max smiled. "If you want the job, it's up to you. Take it or leave it. We would rather have you run it. You know the joint, the customers, everything about this place."

The Ape was hesitant, but there was a gleam of delight in his eyes. He considered it for quite a while. Finally, he fell for it. We left him in charge. He was in his glory when we said, "So long, see you in two or three weeks."

We went downtown to Jake's place. We had a talk with Jake, Pipy and Goo-Goo. We told them to watch the Eden day and night. We gave them the phone number of Solly's place in Jersey, to call us every night and keep us informed when Salvy appeared.

We spent four miserable days on the other side of the river, until one morning Jake over the phone said excitedly, "He came around, but stay there. I got to talk to you guys."

We met Jake at four o'clock that morning in the back room of Longy's speakeasy in Newark.

He was agitated. He said, "No good, don't do it. Salvy's around, but he smells something. He isn't as dumb as the Ape. He planted two or three letters with different people saying if anything happens to him or Willie, to give those letters to the D. A. and the cops."

Max and I exchanged disgusted glances.

"You guys better lay off. That Snake is hotter than a firecracker."

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Jake said.

“Now we really got to do something, but fast,” I said.

“Why?” Max looked at me puzzled.

“Did you happen to think how many people Salvy has had a run-in with through the years?”

“So?” Max said.

“So, if one of them takes it in his head to give him the 'business,' where will we be?”

“Yep, you're right, Noodles,” Maxie said.

“Sure. If one of his enemies was smart, he wouldn't hesitate, he would give him the business and be in the clear. Those letters would fix us up fine,” I snorted.

Max frowned. “Yep, yep, you're absolutely right. What a lousy fix.”

“Well, let's sleep on it, Jake,” I said.

“Keep watching the joint. Keep us posted.”

“You guys watch yourselves.”

Jake was really worried.

I gave an uneasy laugh. “Don't worry, Jake. We'll think of something.”

“Pipy was watching the joint when I left,” Jake said.

“Okay, Jake, you and Pip keep tailing him,” Max said.

We played klabiash very uneasily the next day in the back room of Longy's waiting to hear from Jake. Finally Jake and Pip came in with their report.

Pipy said, “Salvy has got himself a second-hand Chrysler.”

“And?” Maxie said impatiently as Pipy and Jake helped themselves from the bottle.

Pipy gulped his drink down and continued: “Nothing much more. He came into the Eden the other night about nine. He went into a huddle with Willie the Ape. I saw him pat the Ape on the back and laugh. Then he walked around the Eden like he owned the joint.”

Maxie smiled ruefully. “Okay,” he said, “what else, Pip?”

“Nothing much more. He bossed the entertainers and the help around quite a lot for one thing.” Pipy scratched his head in thought. “Yeh, then after a while he had an argument with that broad Rose on account of she began acting sweet to one of the customers.” Pipy smiled to himself at the thought. “You know that sister tap-dancing team you got down there, Maxie?” Max nodded. “It must be nice laying up with twins,” Pipy observed incidentally.

“To hell with that,” Max said impatiently. “What else?”

“Well, anyway, after the Snake and the Ape closed the joint at the usual time, four-thirty, they rode down to the hotel on Fifty-Sixth Street. They got rooms on the eighth floor. That's the same floor the twins are on.” Pipy had an envious look on his face.

“How did you get the dope about them and the twins being on the eighth floor?” I asked admiringly.

“I gave the elevator kid a pound note. He told me.” Pipy smiled modestly. “It wasn't so hard.”

“Okay, Pipy, thanks, this'll cover the expense you had.”

Maxie tossed him a C note.

“Thanks, Max. Shall we tail him again tonight?”

Maxie frowned. He looked at me.

I said, “Yeh, keep tailing him.”

We had a round of drinks. Jake and Pipy left.

Max said to me, “What do you think?”

“Well, for one thing we can't turn the contract back to the office and say give it to somebody else because we can't handle it, can we?”

“Nah, of course we can't do that,” Max corrected himself. “I don't mean we can't if we wanted to. But we don't want to. We got to go through with it.”

“Sure we got to go through with it,” Patsy said.

“Jesus, we got to,” Cockeye said.

I leaned over the table.

“There's no question. We got to get it over with, and the sooner the better. So far we maneuvered them two

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on the 'spot' and we can 'take' them easy enough when we want to.”

“Yep, like rabbits in a barrel,” Max grunted.

“Yeh, that we did, we got them in a barrel. Now the thing is, them goddamn letters of Salvy's,” I said.

“That bastard Salvy; he's just like a Snake,” Patsy said.

“Can't we find out who he gave those letters to and clip them?” Cockeye suggested.

“No good,” Maxie said, “it would take too long.”

“Yeh, no good,” I said, “we got to get it over with fast. But first we got to establish an ironclad alibi.”

“Jesus Christ, with those letters floating around, it's got to be goddamn ironclad,” Patsy said.

CHAPTER 38

We sat around the table in the back room of Longy's for hours discussing it. We finished two quart bottles of Mt. Vernon. The bartender brought a third, all with Longy's compliments. I opened the barred window for a breath of fresh air. Day was breaking.

For some unaccountable reason my mind centered on the bars. Yeh, that's it, I said to myself. If we were behind bars, that would be a perfect alibi. Yeh, Solly can fix it. He runs the police department and just about everything in his town. I walked back to the table. We got into a huddle. I whispered my plan.

"Yep, that's it, Noodles," Max agreed.

Pat and Cockeye nodded.

"I'll call Solly at his house," I said.

I put a coin in the wall phone and called, "Hasbrouck Heights."

Solly's sleepy voice answered.

"This is Noodles, Solly," I said. "Sorry to wake you up."

"That's okay, Noodles," Solly said. "What's cookin'?"

"We want to cut some business up; we're coming right over."

"Okay," Solly said.

Over cups of black coffee and anisette, I explained to Solly what I wanted him to do.

"Don't forget the silencers and Jersey plates for the car."

He nodded all through the conversation. "Sure, sure, yeh, I'll take care of everything," he said. "It'll take me three—four hours. Meet me in town at my place, three in the afternoon."

I called Jake. In guarded language I told him what we intended to do and told him to meet us.

We went back to Newark and had a few hours sleep.

At three o'clock we walked into Solly's place. We left all our hardware and money in his safe.

Solly brought us to a small loft building in the middle of town.

"Okay, fellas, here's the keys. The joint's on the first floor." He grinned. "You're in business now." Solly drove away in our Caddy.

We walked up one flight. Maxie unlocked the door. We looked around. It was a nice set-up, cheap but fully equipped. There was the big blackboard covering an entire wall. The telephones, the birdcages, the dice table and a few slot machines around the sides.

"No wheel?" Cockeye asked.

"This ain't a casino," I said. "This is just a horse room."

We wandered around the room playing the slots for about twenty minutes.

Suddenly we heard a terrific bang. The door crashed in. Five big men came in.

"Who's the boss of this joint?" one of the big guys inquired. He was a good actor.

"We're all bosses," Maxie smiled easily. He included all of us with a sweep of his arm.

"Okay, you guys are pinched for operating a horseroom." He motioned to one of his men. "Ronnie, stay here until the wagon comes to pick up this equipment as evidence. You guys come along," he motioned to us.

"What the hell do you guys think, you can just walk into town and open a horseroom? We don't tolerate gambling or vice in Jersey."

Meekly we followed him downstairs into a police car.

At the police station, they searched and booked us. The Sergeant asked, "You guys want a bondsman?"

Maxie said, "No, sergeant."

The sergeant looked curiously at us. "It's all right with me, but you guys will be locked up over night until the Magistrate's Court opens tomorrow morning. We have no night court in this town."

Maxie shrugged his shoulders, unconcernedly.

They led us downstairs to a cell in the basement. It was a little cramped but we made the best of it. We took turns lying on two cots.

We smoked and talked in the pitch dark. Every so often Maxie would strike a match and look at his watch.

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It was a tedious night. At about three-thirty a.m. we heard footsteps in the hall. We listened tensely.

The footsteps paused at our cell. A key turned in the lock.

A voice whispered through the door, "Down the hall to your left."

The steps hurried away.

We waited a moment, then quietly we walked to the left, down the hall to an iron door with a key in it. Maxie turned it. The creaking door opened slowly. We walked down a dark alley. It led us into a side street.

Solly was sitting in our Caddy.

"The silencers and the rest of your stuff is under the back seat." He got out and said, "So long. Good luck."

He walked down the street to a waiting car. I picked up the back seat. Our four rods were there, with the silencers already attached. I distributed them. We put them under our coats. We drove slowly to New York. It was four a.m. when Cockeye parked half a block from the Eden.

A figure slouched over to the Caddy. I had my rod aimed at his head. It was Jake the Goniff.

"They're both down there, with another guy," Jake whispered.

"Who's the other guy?" I murmured.

"I don't know, I never saw him before," Jake whispered.

"The hell with him; he's got to go, too," Max said coldly. I looked at Max. Max shook his head. His face was stony.

"The three got to go." His voice was acid.

"Here's the key; they got the door locked," Jake said.

Max took it. "Okay, Jake, scram," Max said.

Jake scurried down the street.

Cockeye remained behind the wheel with the motor purring.

We filed down the steps, holding our rods.

Max noiselessly unlocked the door.

I slowly and quietly closed it.

We saw the three of them. Their backs were turned. Salvy and Willie were counting money on the bar.

The stranger was watching them.

We tiptoed on the rug.

They were too engrossed with the money.

We were right behind them.

Max was behind the Snake.

I was behind the Ape.

Patsy was behind the stranger.

We had our rods an inch behind their heads.

They saw us in the mirror, three pairs of horrified eyes.

We blasted the three together.

It was one muffled bang.

Three big holes appeared in the backs of three heads.

Three pairs of hands clutched the bar for support.

"Once more," Maxie said.

Three arms with guns were raised.

There was another muffled bang.

Three pairs of hands let go of the bar.

Three writhing bodies sank to the floor.

"To make sure," Maxie said.

Three arms with guns were raised again.

There was one more muffled bang.

Three dead, dead, dead, motionless bodies lay on the floor.

We walked upstairs with the smoking rods under our coats.

"Back to Jersey," Maxie said.

Cockeye put the Caddy into first. She rolled smoothly down the street. Cockeye put the Caddy into second.

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She shot faster down the street. Cockeye put the Caddy into third. She flew away from murder into the night.

On the boat, at about the middle of the river, we edged over to the rail and threw our guns into the middle of the Hudson River.

We parked the car a block away from the station house.

Solly was waiting for us.

“Okay?” Solly said as he got into the Caddy.

“Okay,” Maxie answered.

Solly drove away.

Singly, keeping in the shadows, we walked down the street into the alley.

CHAPTER 39

Quietly we walked down the steps to the iron door and into the building, feeling our way to our cell in the dark.

The cell door was unlocked. We walked in. A few minutes later, we heard footsteps. They stopped at our cell. We heard a key lock our door. Then the sound of the steps disappeared down the hallway. The four of us sighed deep sighs. I lay down on a cot. None of us spoke a word.

At seven a.m., a cop brought us some lousy coffee and dry toast.

At nine-thirty we were standing before the Magistrate.

“How do you plead, guilty or not guilty to operating a horseroom?” he droned.

“Guilty, your Honor,” I said.

“A hundred dollar fine for each one of you or ten days in jail.”

Solly stepped up to pay our fines.

I said to the clerk, “We want receipts.”

“Income tax?” the clerk asked, smiling.

“Yeh, that's it,” I said. “Please put the time and date on.”

Outside, Solly was waiting with our Caddy.

He handed us our money. I returned the money he had laid out for our fines.

We drove back to New York.

Maxie opened the door to the back room of Fat Moe's.

We walked right into the waiting arms of the Four Horsemen. They were sitting around our table drinking double hookers. “We were waiting for you lads,” one of the big guys at the table said.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, lieutenant. What's this, social or business?” I asked, trying to act unconcerned.

“Strictly business.” The lieutenant gave me a sharp look.

Maxie glanced at the bottle of Mt. Vernon they had on the table.

The police lieutenant caught his glance.

“Oh this?” He picked up the bottle. “I know you got the McCoy here. You don't mind if we indulge, do you?”

“No, go ahead, lieutenant. All you want,” I said.

The lieutenant said sarcastically, “Thanks,” refilled his glass, gulped it down and commented, “This is okay stuff. Now—” he hesitated, smiling. “How do you say it in Yiddish, Max? Tachlas, yeah, yeah. Let's get down to tachlas.”

It sounded odd coming from an Irish police lieutenant. His manner changed. His pleasantness and smile were purely superficial. He handed Max a letter.

“I finally got you bastards,” he said. “This just came in by carrier pigeon.”

These four police officers were known from the Bronx to the Battery. They were nicknamed the Four Horsemen. They were vicious bastards in the sense of being rough to law-abiding citizens and hoodlums both. They glorified in brutality for brutality's sake. They tried to give the impression that they were honest and zealous police officers. We knew them to be phonies.

They were bag men for themselves and higher-ups. They shook down speakeasies and bookmakers, allowing their cousins and brothers-in-law to operate illegal enterprises under their protection. They operated as we did, on the muscle, only they had the advantage: they had the law on their side. They had a crime syndicate all their own. We didn't hold them in too high regard, because anybody, as a last resort, could buy them with a charlotte russe.

If they had thought for a moment they could get away with lumping us up without a fight, they would have tried it long ago, but they were chary. They knew it would be a battle royal. Therefore they had kept their hands off us. Of course, there were some honest police officers during that era, but this group definitely was not in that category.

“We've been in every joint on the East Side looking for you guys. We knew you'd wind up in this joint

The Hoods

eventually.” The lieutenant added with a pugnacious sneer, “Where the hell were you?”

“You know you can always contact us here,” I said quietly. “What's this, a pinch? What's that letter Maxie's reading?”

“I'll ask the questions,” the lieutenant snapped back.

Max finished reading. He lit a cigar. He took a step closer and stared insolently at the lieutenant.

“This letter, you know what you can do with it? I don't have to answer your questions if I don't want to. All you can do is pinch us, and that's all you can do, I assure you. Nothing else, and you know what I mean, pally.”

Maxie gave him back stare for stare. Max handed me the letter. I read it.

“Lieutenant,” I said, “I guarantee we get out of the jug quicker than you can get us in. Evidently you are implying this Salvy is dead. If so, it's too bad. In spite of the letter he was a friend of ours. Another thing, wherever it happened, we weren't there. Let's face it, lieutenant, we have connections and you know those connections reach to the top.

The lieutenant changed his tactics somewhat. He smiled. “Yes, I know you got connections, but they can't help you on this. This ain't a small rap. You'll need a goddamn good alibi to get out of this one.”

“As far as I'm concerned, I don't know what you're talking about, lieutenant.”

Max smiled easily and sat down. He helped himself to a drink.

“Look, Max, shit me easy. You're not going to act surprised, I hope, and say you don't know Salvy and that punk Willie and another guy were shot and killed in your new joint, the Eden Garden, this morning?”

“Nothing surprises me, lieutenant,” Maxie said. “Besides, how could we know about anything? We were in a Jersey lock-up since yesterday.”

Maxie started looking through his pockets. Carelessly he laid his roll of money on the table and kept searching.

“I have the proof.” I acted indignant and dramatic. “Here it is.” I handed him the receipt for the fine. “Or call up the desk sergeant over at this town,” I added with a smile, “or call up the judge and verify.”

The lieutenant was trying to read the receipt with one eye; the other was watching Max peel a thousand-dollar bill off his roll. Maxie put his roll away leaving the grand lying on the table. The four bulls had their eyes glued on Max like a burlesque audience watching Gypsy Rose Lee do a strip.

The lieutenant smiled. Then he chuckled. He knew the score. He shook his head in admiration. “Goddamn.” He went over to the table for a drink, still chuckling to himself. “You sure got yourself an iron alibi. I was sure I had you with your pants down today.”

Nonchalantly he picked up the thousand and put it in his pocket. “Okay, boys.” The lieutenant nodded to his men. “I guess we'll be on our way.”

They walked to the door. The lieutenant turned. “Meanwhile, my report will show we couldn't find you men. Get your lawyer to contact the D. A. and convince him he has no case against you, so those goddamn 'wanted' cards at headquarters can be removed from the files.”

He hesitated. “Thanks—for the drinks.”

He walked out, chuckling to himself.

Moe came in with a tray of doubles. He smiled, “Them bastards finally went? How's things?”

“All right,” Maxie said.

Without another word, we drank up. The whiskey didn't taste right. It didn't do anything for me. Ordinarily, after a period of tension, one or two double hookers relaxed my taut nerves. This time it was flat. It did nothing.

I looked at Max. He, too, seemed on edge. He caught my eye. I wondered if he guessed how I felt. He gave me a sympathetic smile.

I said, “I'd like to get away for awhile, a little trip.”

“Eve?” Max asked.

“Yeh, she's down in North Carolina.”

“I'll find out. Maybe we'll all take a break for a couple of weeks.”

“That's a good idea,” Patsy said.

“That's a goddamn good idea. Monticello for me,” Cockeye said.

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Max nodded. "Tomorrow I'll find out."

We were disappointed. The office told us to hang around town for a couple of weeks. There were too many units taking vacations at the same time.

I called Eve down in North Carolina. I spoke to her for about an hour. She was lonesome. She wanted to come up. I told her not to. I would pick her up, and we would go to Florida from there. She was delighted.

Days passed. We couldn't get away even though there was nothing much to do. Two weeks later we re-opened the Eden Garden. We spent most of our time there. It was a lot of fun, what with the entertainers, good food and plenty to drink.

We had a skilled bartender who knew his business. He had tended bar at some of the finest hotels in the city before Prohibition. I was beginning to acquire a taste for mixed drinks, so, after most of the patrons had gone, I would linger with my foot on the rail, sampling all sorts of concoctions of his.

One night at about three a.m., as I stood at the bar facing the entrance, I saw Eddie come bursting through the door. He stopped and looked around. I waved. He came rushing over, excited and out of breath. This was out of character for the usually phlegmatic Eddie.

I said, "What's the matter, Ed, your hotel on fire?"

"Where's Max?" Eddie panted. "Both of you come along with me. I got my car outside."

We hurried down to the other end of the room where Max was sitting with one of the showgirls. I motioned with my head. He stood up and came toward us.

"What's cookin'?" he asked.

"Come on," Eddie said briskly. "I'll tell you guys all about it in the car.

Eddie shot west on Fifty-Ninth Street, up West End Avenue, then left into Riverside Drive.

"What the hell's it all about?" Max asked.

"You guys got to get rid of a stiff. But quick," Eddie said.

"Jesus," Max said, "is that all?"

"Yeh," I said, "what's all the rush and secrecy about?"

"The stiff ain't going to get up and beat it before we get there, is he?" Max said.

"What's it all about, Ed?" I said.

"Well, I'm not supposed to talk. It's strictly a hush-hush affair. That's why I was given the contract. If it leaked out, it would blow City Hall and state politics wide open. The stiff is a big shot."

"Okay, Ed," I said, "big shot or little shot is all the same to us."

"The worms don't know the difference either," Max said.

We arrived. Eddie parked his car. We walked into the newly built apartment house. The doorman hesitated about letting us go up. He called the apartment on the house phone. When he received the okay, he apologized to us.

"You understand, gentlemen—this unusual hour."

We went upstairs. The door was ajar, and a tall man was standing guard in the doorway. He gave Max and me a sharp look as we entered, the characteristic once-over of a trained police officer.

Sure enough, Eddie said, "How are you, inspector?"

The inspector answered, "How are you, Ed?"

Then I recognized him. I had seen him around.

Max and I glanced at each other; we didn't like to be involved with a police inspector on a job of this sort. Even though he was in the know and on the payroll, it was too risky. We believed in the axiom: never trust a cop.

The inspector led us into the living room, which was large and luxuriously furnished. There were two or three steps leading down. I spied the stiff lying on the floor at the far end, covered with a white bedsheet.

I motioned Eddie into a bedroom. There was a man sitting on a chair. He turned his terrified face away as we entered. I recognized him. He was a prominent lawyer and a big Tammany politician.

I whispered to Eddie, "Get that goddamned inspector the hell out of here."

"He's okay," Eddie said. "He's in on this."

"I don't care how okay the bastard is, get him out of here," I insisted. "We don't want any part of him."

Eddie shrugged. "I'll see what I can do," he said.

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We walked back into the living room. The inspector was standing guard over the covered body. The stiff's right hand had slipped out from under the sheet. I noticed the index finger was smashed, as if it had been caught in a door, years back. The finger next to it was circled with a yellow metal Masonic ring. The inspector noticed it at the same time I did. He bent down on one knee and twisted it off. The inspector's hands shook as he put it in his pocket.

He said nervously, "I want you fellows to remove this body immediately. I have to go along to see—"

Maxie interrupted him. "We'll pick the time when to remove the stiff, and you can't come along."

"You can't wait, it's dangerous to have him around. He has to be done away with immediately."

The inspector took off his hat and wiped his forehead. He continued putting his hat on and taking it off with trembling hands. He looked at us, ill at ease.

"We're not removing him now," I said.

"That man's wife—" the inspector jerked a fluttering thumb toward the bedroom, "is coming in from the country this morning."

I shrugged.

The inspector floundered in a quavering voice. "You have to—you have to—get him out quick. This is dynamite. It will break things wide open, all the way to the top."

Eddie, Max and I went into a huddle in a corner.

"We're doing this our way, in our own sweet time," I said to Eddie.

Max said, "Get the goddamned inspector the hell out of here!"

"I can't," Eddie said. "I don't know how. That guy is in the middle of it, and he's supposed to go along with the body to make sure everything's okay."

"Well, he's not going along, Ed. That's definite," I said.

"We don't need him around. Everything will be okay without him."

"I can't help it, Noodles," Eddie said. "He's got to tag along. That's orders."

I looked at Maxie. We agreed.

I said, "I don't care what your orders are. The sonofabitch doesn't come along."

Max said, "Who gave you this contract?"

Eddie hesitated. "The office," he said.

"Who, specifically?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to say."

"Whoever gave you the orders should know we do things our way," I said.

"Yep, and you can tell 'em so," Max said.

Eddie shrugged.

"Tell the inspector to take a powder," Max said.

"Okay, okay," Eddie grunted.

Eddie walked over to the inspector. The inspector stood his ground.

"No—no," he murmured.

He came over to us. "I'm sorry, fellows," he said, "I can't leave. I'm here to see that nobody gets a look at his face."

"We're not interested who he is. We don't care if he's Jimmy Walker or the President of the United States. To us he's just a stiff. Don't worry," I continued. "We won't look at the guy. Nobody will."

"I gotta go along," he insisted.

"Well, we don't handle it then," I said.

Eddie came over.

"Don't worry, inspector, they'll handle it okay," he said.

He gave us a long look. He walked out of the apartment in anger.

"He's sore," Eddie said.

"So let him use vaseline," Max said.

Max and I walked over to the stiff. I uncovered him. He was a distinguished looking guy even in death. He was middle-aged and about six feet tall. He looked familiar.

I said to Max, "I seen this guy around." I looked closer.

The Hoods

“Yeh,” I said, “I seen him all over Broadway. He likes the girls. He's a chippie chaser.”

I turned to Eddie. “This guy is a judge or something?”

Eddie nodded. “This guy was a Supreme Court judge,” he said.

I looked at his wound. It was a bullet hole in the abdomen. Blood was still trickling to the floor.

I said to Eddie, “See if there is any adhesive tape in the bathroom and get me some rags.”

Eddie came back with a towel and a quarter-inch tape. I tore up the towel and plugged up the hole. The guy was still warm to the touch as I taped all around to hold the bit of towel from falling out.

Eddie whispered, “Can you get him right out?”

“No, not at this hour,” I said.

“That guy's wife—” Eddie jerked his thumb towards the bedroom, “is coming in from the country this morning.”

“Find out what time she's coming in,” Max said. “We'll try to get him out before she arrives.”

Eddie went into the bedroom. He came back. “The guy said you got to get the stiff right out,” he said. “His wife is coming back early.”

“The hell with him,” I said. “How does it look for a rug cleaner to pick up a rug at four in the morning?”

“Yeh,” Eddie said, “it would look suspicious. But you got to get rid of him fast.”

“Don't worry, Ed,” Max said. “We'll get rid of him.”

“Even his disappearance will be dynamite,” I said. “He isn't like the ordinary unknown guys we handled. The cops and papers will never let up. He's too prominent.”

“Well, we can't do anything before eight o'clock,” Max said, “so we may as well take a powder.”

Eddie stayed in the house with the attorney. Max and I left.

CHAPTER 40

We drove directly to Thompson Street. Pete was in his shop busy with his new enterprise, printing United States postage stamps. They were stacked in regulation sheets, on a large table.

“Right off the presses,” Pete chuckled. “How do they look to you?”

I took a sheet in my hands.

“Here’s the McCoy.” Pete handed me a sheet of stamps from his desk. “Can you tell the difference?”

I compared the sheets.

“They look alike to me.”

I handed the sheets to Maxie.

“Perfect,” Max said.

“I got me some of the best engravers,” Pete chuckled, “direct from the Italian Mint.”

He took us into his little storeroom. There were little bins all along the walls. He was proud of his stock. One wall of bins was completely filled with phony labels for every domestic and foreign whiskey and beer on the market. Other bins were filled with United States revenue stamps, bogus Mexican currency and counterfeit United States bills of every denomination.

“Some day,” Pete boasted, “I will put out a batch of dough that the T men themselves won’t be able to tell the difference.”

“Has it ever happened?” I asked.

“No, but some day it will. That’s the dream of every guy in this racket: to print the perfect bill.”

“When that happens, call us up,” Max chuckled.

“Yeh, I will,” Pete laughed.

He took a death and burial certificate out of a bin and sat down at his desk.

“Male or female?” he asked.

“Male,” Max said.

Pete filled them out and stamped them.

We said, “So long,” and left.

We drove up to the Eden. Patsy and Cockeye were alone in the place with the twin dancing team. We interrupted something. We closed the place, and the twins took a cab.

We went to Lutkee’s Baths, had a few hours sleep, a quick rubdown and a cold plunge in the pool.

We were in the funeral parlors at seven–thirty. Cockeye and Pat left to pick up Klemey’s rug cleaning truck, with instructions to meet us at the Riverside Drive address.

Max and I put a large burlap rug cover in the Caddy. I put a long needle and a ball of heavy twine in my pocket.

Eddie opened the door of the apartment. He looked tired and wan.

“That bastard made me more nervous than the stiff did,” Eddie said.

We looked at the lawyer. He was a disheveled, terror–stricken sight.

He watched as we rolled the stiff into the rug.

In a plaintive, dazed sort of way he murmured, “That’s a five–thousand–dollar Chinese rug.”

We ignored him. We wrapped the burlap all around. I sewed the ends securely together. We found a cut glass decanter half full of whiskey. Max and I helped ourselves to a drink. We sat around smoking for about twenty minutes until Pat and Cockeye showed up. They were dressed in the uniform of a rug cleaning company.

The freight elevator wasn’t high enough. The operator had to lift the wire top of the car to get the rug in.

Max and I stood a distance away and watched Patsy and Cockeye struggle to put the awkward, bulky object into the truck. They finally succeeded and were about to drive away when a cop walked over. Max and I hurried to see what he wanted.

The cop was arguing with Cockeye that the bundle extended beyond the rear of the truck.

“You got to get a red flag on the end of that thing. That’s the traffic regulation,” he insisted.

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I sent Cockeye back up to the apartment to get a piece of red cloth from a dress or coat. He came down with a piece of red silk from a dress. He tied it to the projecting end. We followed the truck downtown.

Rosenberg was all alone in the parlors. There was a funeral scheduled for later in the day. The body was ready in the chapel.

Max told Rosenberg to take off part of the day.

I didn't like the way Rosenberg said, "Okay, if you want me to," as if he suspected something. I decided to have a talk with Max about him later on.

Max was busy calling the cemetery. Patsy went around the corner to get the hearse out of the garage while Cockeye backed Klemy's truck to the back door. He and I carried the burlap covered roll inside. I cut the outer covering. We unrolled the rug and put the stiff in a pine box.

A half-hour later the body was on its way, with Patsy driving the hearse. It was followed by Cockeye in the Caddy with a few old men, paid mourners, solicited from the schul around the corner.

We sat in the office waiting for Rosenberg's return.

Max said, "So the stiff looked familiar?"

"Yeh, I've seen him in restaurants on Broadway. They whispered that he was a judge or something. I never met the guy."

"Yep, he was a Supreme Court judge," Max said. "That's what Eddie thought. I don't know," Max continued. "Somehow he don't look like a Federal Supreme judge."

"He probably wasn't a Federal. He seems too young. Most likely he was on the State bench."

"Who dunnit? Do you think that lawyer?"

"It looked like it," I said. "They were probably both involved in some kind of big swindle."

"Some Supreme Court judge," Max said sarcastically.

"A married guy and a chippie chaser," I said.

"Some Supreme Court judge," Max repeated.

"You and I know what judges are today, Max. Any lawyer with twenty-five grand to pay Tammany can get on the bench."

"Yep, and when they get on, they try to get their dough back fast. You can buy 'em with a charlotte russe. I wonder if they'll raise a fuss about his disappearance?"

I shrugged.

"What's the stiff's name?" Max asked.

I shrugged.

"Judge—Mater—no, let's see." I thought a moment. "He was a well known chippie chaser on Broadway."

"Like you, hey, Noodles?" Max laughed.

"Yeh, like me," I said.

Max chuckled.

I looked at him questioningly.

He said, "Look who we got as partners in this thing: some upstanding examples." His sarcasm dripped with acid. "Yep, some examples: a police inspector, a big shot lawyer and this Supreme Court judge—Mater—Bater—Shmater—what the hell ever his name is."

We sat silently smoking. I was thinking. Did that big shot lawyer do it? Why? Maybe on account of his wife? Or some other tomato they had a battle over? Yeh, they were both notorious on Broadway for their adulteries. Maybe it was somebody else the judge had double-crossed. A fixer? Yeh, it could be one of the many who hang around courts. Maybe it was a blackmail something or other? Yeh, the inspector and the shise must know all about it.

How come the "office" is mixed up in this deal? Nobody will ever be able to get the real story. They say murder will out. Some horseshit, plenty never do.

The cops are too dumb, at least the honest cops are. The crooked cops know plenty about unsolved murders, because they're in on most of them one way or another.

Rosenberg strolled in. I wanted to find out what he suspected.

I said, "Patsy's out with the hearse."

"Oh, all right," he said. "What time will he be back? I got a funeral scheduled for two p.m."

The Hoods

“He'll be back in time,” I said. I lit my cigar. Carelessly I said, “What do you think Patsy's carting in the hearse?”

Max and I looked at him.

“It's none of my business. It's your hearse,” he said.

“Yeh, but what do you think?” I said.

“Booze. I guess you transport booze with it,” Rosenberg said.

“Yeh, keep it to yourself,” I said.

“Naturally,” he said.

CHAPTER 41

Maxie came in one day with a pocket full of mechanical lighters. They were interesting gadgets made by Ronson. They had been on the market a short time. I had seen them, but had never owned one. Maxie gave one to me. It intrigued me.

I stood against the far end of the bar lighting my cigar and playing with it. I was watching the sparks as they flew to the wick, igniting it.

I glanced up. I caught a pair of large sparkling eyes shooting at me over a cocktail glass. They traveled over my body. It was as if a delicious hot spark had hit me. I pressed the lighter again. It attracted those beautiful eyes once more. They moved over me again as she sipped her cocktail. It was too much. I was on fire. I smiled at her. She seemed to smile back. She was slim, pretty, petite and deeply tanned. I walked over to her.

I said, "Pardon me, Miss, your eyes affect me as much as this spark." I pressed the button to demonstrate.

"Burns you up?" She smiled, showing her bright, white, even teeth.

"No, puts me on fire," I said.

"Oh, how very interesting." She laughed.

Her voice was kind of sad and husky, but melodious and vibrant. Even when she laughed it seemed sad, as if it had an ache in it.

"Do you sing?" I asked. "You a blues singer?"

"Yes." She showed her beautiful teeth. "That's why I'm here. I'm looking for a job."

"Did you see the boss of this place about it?" I asked.

"I'm seeing him now." She laughed. "You were pointed out to me."

"I'm disappointed," I said.

"Why?"

"I thought you smiled—well, now I see you have an ulterior motive."

She laughed. "And what was the motive that made you speak to me? Don't tell me. I know."

We both laughed.

The orchestra played a soporific waltz. The lights over the dance floor went out. The revolving globe in the ceiling was going round and round. The air throbbed with the sensual tune, "What'll I Do."

"Shall we discuss it while dancing?" I suggested.

"I'd love to," she said.

I led her to the floor. She slid into my arms. She put her left arm around my shoulder. Her eyes held mine. She had nothing on underneath her thin silk dress. Her body was hot and yielding. We did not talk. We could not. The moment was too thrilling and spontaneous.

She laid her head against my chest, and drooped her eyes in rapture. She squeezed my hand, and pressed hard into me with her slim hot body. In my embrace I could feel every curve, every smoothness, everything.

She was breathing in gasps from parted lips. Her arm around me tightened. She pressed her body tighter into mine as we slowly danced around. She raised her lips. Her eyes were closed.

She moaned a low "Ohhh" as I kissed her mouth. Her body began to tremble.

"Oh," she moaned again. "Squeeze me hard. Hurt me, please," she whispered.

I squeezed her hard. She trembled.

"Please, please," she whispered, "dig your fingers in my back."

She was feverish. I dug into her with my nails, just a bit.

She gasped, "Please, please, harder, harder."

She looked at me with blazing, rabid eyes. I couldn't help it; her crazy passion was contagious. I dug my nails into her body harder. She shuddered, moaned and writhed. She gave me one sudden fierce hug. I kissed her panting mouth as we flowed into each other. I lost track of time, place, everything. It was terrific, but all too short.

I don't remember leading her off the floor. But I do remember easing her down on a chair at a far table.

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A man was seated at the table. He seemed a bit familiar. He stood up when we came over. He bowed and smiled. He waved to a chair. The girl sat between us. He wore a white flower in his lapel. I looked at him closely. I tried to place him, but could not.

There was a mischievous glint in the girl's eyes as she said to me, "Honey, this is my husband, John."

I looked from her to him. They were both smiling.

He said, "I was watching you on the dance floor. You had a good time, didn't you?" He laughed.

I guess it was the knowing way he said it. The three of us burst into laughter. I caught myself in the middle. What the hell am I laughing about? This cuckold is the husband.

I looked at him. He was middle-aged, tanned, well dressed and not bad-looking. I couldn't understand his friendliness under the circumstances.

"Didn't you mind?" I said.

"No of course not, why should I?" He smiled. His teeth showed up a startling white just like hers. That's because they both are deeply tanned, I reasoned. Contrast.

I said, "You had nice weather in Florida?"

"Yes, splendid," she said.

"Yes, fine boating and fishing," he said.

Now I had a funny feeling about both these two. It seemed I had met them somewhere. She bent over and whispered something to her husband. They looked at me and burst into laughter.

"I seem to be the topic of conversation," I said.

"My wife Betty remembered a particularly interesting part of the dance." The man laughed.

"It appeared to me your wife Betty wasn't aware of dancing at all," I said sharply. "What part was particularly interesting?"

They both tittered. A couple of queer characters, I thought to myself.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before, John?"

"Yes," he smiled, "and you also have met my wife. Guess where?"

"I give up. You tell me," I said to the shmuck.

"Well, all right," he said. "I am John, your friend Maxie's dear friend."

I looked at him, puzzled.

"From the insurance company," he said.

"I'll be goddamned," I exclaimed. I looked closely at him. Yeh, it was the John Doe, the "finger" on that insurance job we did a good many years ago.

Instead of appearing older, he seemed younger. And his wife, I remembered her. Yeh—the masochist. She was a washed-out and dried-up piece then. I looked closely at her. Yeh, false eyelashes, and she had had her nose fixed. I guess plenty of beauty parlors, too, rouge and heavy make up. Yeh, and no glasses. She don't look bad at all. In fact, she looked like a good piece, a lively piece.

I said, "You both look different. You look well, very well. What's your secret?"

"Rest, complete rest and plenty of sunshine. Florida, as you have guessed," John said.

"Retired?"

"Something like that," he said.

"Must have made a killing in the stock market," I suggested.

"No," she said. "A dear friend of John's passed away and left me his insurance."

"Did you charming people push him off a cliff or something?" I laughed. "And here I thought you were a blues singer in need of a job."

She laughed with me. But John didn't. He gave me a cold look. I did not like the bastard. I remembered one time I felt like cutting his throat.

I taunted the shmuck. "John, old lad, don't you mind your wife getting familiar with other men?"

I was curious how a cuckold's mind works.

"As long as she enjoys it, why should I mind? I love her," he said simply.

"Yes, of course, John doesn't mind." She smiled up at him. "Do you, dear?"

"No, of course not, dear." He patted the back of her hand. "Have all the wonderful times you wish."

"See, honey?" she said to me. "Besides, I tell him all about it afterwards. He enjoys hearing all about it."

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Every detail. Don't you, dearest?"

She kissed him.

I almost puked, remembering I had kissed her on the mouth while dancing.

I persisted in my probing. "Don't you mind your wife having sex relations with other men, John?"

"No, not at all," the dope said. "I'm not the provincial type."

The guy was proud of it. He gave me a supercilious smile.

"What do you think love is? Sex? Sex has nothing to do with pure love. Anything Betty does and has pleasure in, gives me pleasure. Can you understand that?"

"Yeh, it's just a new approach to me." I laughed.

"I'm afraid you can't understand true deep feeling. Let me try to explain it to you this way. I love my wife. For example, she craves a mink coat. I buy it for her because she wants it very much and enjoys wearing it. I don't wear it. But I enjoy it if she enjoys it because I love her very much, understand?"

He looked at me with his silly smile.

He continued. "It doesn't matter what she has pleasure in. If she has pleasure, I have a pleasure because she has a pleasure. Do you follow me?" I shrugged. I was getting a little dizzy, trying to follow his line of reasoning.

Betty patted my hand. "I feel the same way about John. Exactly as he does," she said.

"Now then, if she enjoys having relations with some nice decent person like you, even sex relations, I don't mind her having it, because she wishes it. If she enjoys it, I enjoy it. In the same sense of her enjoying a mink coat."

"But a man ain't a mink coat," I argued weakly. "Then again, sometimes that's all he symbolizes to women."

"Possibly to a lot of women. That's all their husbands mean to them, a mink coat. That type of woman is shallow—she's devoid of the feeling of true love—and all decency." Betty gave a snort to emphasize her contempt for that type of indecent womanhood.

I looked at her. She really meant what she said. She was serious, goddamn serious.

I laughed. "Well, I guess everybody to his own definition of the meaning of decency. I guess mine must appear just as ridiculous to a lot of people."

"Oh, let's stop discussing unimportant things, honey."

Betty moved her chair closer to me and caressed my thigh. "Why not come up to our apartment tonight? You won't be sorry."

Her saucy smile implied everything and anything.

"How about friend husband, John?" I said.

"Oh, he won't be home, will you, dear?"

"No, dear, I have an appointment."

"With that sweet little blonde of yours, dear?" Betty teased.

"Yes, with that lovely little girl," John said.

Max walked by. He gave me a look of curiosity.

I motioned him over.

"Remember these people, Max?" I said.

John jumped up, his hand extended. "How are you, Max?" he exclaimed.

Max took the proffered hand, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Don't you remember me, and Betty here?" John said.

A smile of recognition broke over Maxie's face.

"Why, yes," he said. "How are you, John? And you, Betty?"

Betty jumped up and kissed Max full on the lips. "Honeybunch," she exclaimed.

"I didn't recognize you two. You both look swell. What are you doing in here?"

"Oh, we made inquiries, and we were told we could find you in here."

"Swell," Max said. "I'm glad you did."

John offered Max his chair. Betty moved away from me, practically on top of Max. She sat with one hand around his neck and the other playing with his thigh.

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“Mmmm, you handsome big thing.” She kissed Max on the cheek. “I love you.”

I chuckled.

“How many big things can you love in one night, Betty?” I asked.

Maxie gave me a reproachful look. I was surprised. I raised my eyebrows and shrugged my indifference.

Max turned to John. “Haven't seen you for years,” he said. “What have you been doing with yourself?”

John told him about his friend who passed away, making Betty the beneficiary, their sojourn to Europe and their final stay in Florida.

“The money is practically gone.” He smiled ruefully. “But I'm back in the office, and—” He leaned over to whisper, “I have something real big, tremendous, all planned for you boys.”

I tried to catch Maxie's eyes, but couldn't. Betty obstructed his vision. She was whispering to him. She practically had her tongue in his ear.

John continued. “We were looking for you all week.”

“We're much too busy for any commitments,” I said. “In fact, we're planning a little vacation down in Florida for a month or so.”

“Business before pleasure, Noodles,” Max snapped.

I was surprised at his tone and mechanical smile. This bitch Betty was affecting him.

John began whispering details about the job. A weekly two hundred thousand dollar shipyard payroll that his office insured or knew all about in some way.

I thought of Eve and how this thing would interfere with our vacation together. This heist sounded like a good thing. It was pretty large, but what the hell did we need it for? Money for money's sake did not mean too much to us. I was annoyed that Max was even listening.

These two, this couple, weren't mentally stable. They couldn't be relied on to stand up under any kind of pressure. They were a couple of queers in every sense. Yeh, we made dough with these two Judases years ago, but now? The hell with them.

Max was all attention. He was listening and nodding his head. What the hell is the matter with his good judgment? I was getting annoyed.

I blurted out, “Look, John, no use discussing it. We're not interested. We won't have anything to do with it. We're too busy. Besides, we're going on a vacation.”

Maxie's face turned crimson.

“When the hell are you giving final orders around here? Since when?”

He leaned across Betty, his face thrust toward me glaring pugnaciously.

I was dumbfounded at the unexpectedness of his answer and behavior.

“You're getting a little too big for your britches, Noodles. Just because you got a good idea once in awhile and I listen to it doesn't mean what you say goes around here.”

Betty gave Maxie a pat on the thigh. Her laugh was what did it. Right in my face, the bitch.

I stood up. I leaned across the table with a more pugnacious manner than Maxie's and snarled, “Okay, you're the boss. You go through with it. But not with me.” I repeated it in his face. “Alone, with the other two morons,” meaning Patsy and Cockeye, “but not with me.”

We faced each other like two fighting roosters.

John broke the tension. “It's a big piece of business to cut up. Enough for everybody.”

I turned on him. I hissed in his face, “Look, you lousy, miserable, friggin bastard, I wanted to cut your throat years ago. One more friggin word out of your mouth, and I'll do it. You and your goddamn friggin whoring wife, the both of you.”

I had the presence of mind to realize in another minute I would be in too wild a state to act sensibly or to speak coherently. I turned around and walked out of the joint.

CHAPTER 42

The same night I packed two bags and barely made the last plane for Miami. I called Eve in North Carolina. She took a plane the following day. I spent the happiest weeks of my life there, two weeks of bathing, sunshine, bliss and a quiet contentment. On the way back North I dropped Eve at her home. I gave her five thousand dollars and instructions to wait until she heard from me. I was in a state of indecision. I didn't know what to do: make a break and quit, or what.

When I arrived in New York, I sent my bags to the hotel, and took a cab directly to the Eden Garden. Shmulie was at the bar.

I asked, "Where's Max?"

He was surprised.

"Didn't you know, Noodles? Maxie sold the joint to me."

I said, "No, I was in Miami."

"Yeh, you look all tanned up," he said.

We had a few drinks, and I took a cab to Fat Moe's.

I dismissed the cab at Delancey and the Bowery. I still wasn't decided what to do. I walked quickly east on Delancey Street, brooding and arguing with myself. I had just come from a land of peace, sunshine and cleanliness where everything smelled good and fresh, with a companion who was sweet, understanding and beautiful, with whom I was completely relaxed.

Now I was back on Delancey Street. Instinctively I tensed. I fingered the button of the shiv in my pocket. I glanced sharply at all passers-by. I was alert and taut. The brim of my hat was pulled low over my forehead. My coat collar was turned up. I assumed my habitual scowl and swagger. Yeh, I was Noodles the Shiv of Delancey Street.

It was no use. This was me, Noodles. It was my life, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was like a beast of prey who suddenly has the urge to be a lamb and gambol on the green grass in the sunshine.

I laughed to myself. What a shmuck I was. Yeh, a shmuck with ear-laps. To think I could live a life in which one day was the same as the next. This was my life. Why kid myself? This was the East Side; this was Delancey Street of swarming life and stenches. Not for me the golden warm sunshine, the lingering on the white clean sand, and tenderness. Here's where I belong.

And even if I could, would people accept me? Never. I'm tainted. We're all tainted. Look at these people as I pass by. They shy to one side. They give me a wide berth. They're afraid. They distrust me. They whisper behind my back.

He was a bad kid; he is bad; he will always be bad; bad, bad, bad. He's Noodles the Shiv of Delancey Street. Look out for him. He's immoral. He's a thief. He's a murderer.

Yeh, what's the good? The hell with it. This is for me. A shiv in my pocket, a gun under my armpit, and a contempt for everybody, everything legit.

I walked into Fat Moe's. They were playing cards. Max barely raised his head.

He grunted, "So you had your vacation."

His tone was sarcastic. I didn't answer him. Cockeye gave me a brief nod.

Patsy said, "Hello," and smiled.

I sat down and poured myself a double hooker. I took the carbon stone out of the drawer, and sat sharpening my shiv. Nobody spoke to me.

I looked at Max. Jesus, did he look lousy! I never saw him look that bad. His hands were unsteady as he dealt the cards. His face was sallow. There were pouches under his eyes. And his eyes, Jesus, how bloodshot! What a change in a guy in three weeks! Boy, does he look dissipated and shot to hell.

Max finally broke up the game by throwing his cards across the room in a fit of temper.

"Friggin cards," he exclaimed.

He poured himself two double hookers one after another.

"There's been plenty of trouble," he muttered to me. "Where the hell you been?"

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"Yeh?" I continued, sharpening my shiv. We had one goddamn contract after another." What kind?" I asked.

"Hi-jacking; there's an epidemic. We're going out on another as soon as we get the dope from the driver."

I nodded.

Max continued. "The Combine is losing plenty of boats, too."

"Hi-jacking?" I asked.

"Hi-jacking and customs," Max grunted.

"Well, let the Brooklyn Navy worry about that," I said.

"That Anastasia has got his hands full," Patsy said.

He motioned to me. I followed Pat with my eyes. He stood up and started walloping the punching bag. I sauntered over.

"That Maxie," Patsy whispered between wallops.

"Yeh?" I said.

"He's with that Betty bitch, that masochist wife of John, the Finger, every night."

"Yeh, he looks it," I said.

"She knocks hell out of him," Patsy said.

"That bitch can wear out ten men a week," I said.

"It drains the brains," Patsy said.

"Yeh, it drains everything out of a man," I said.

Moe stuck his head in at the door. He saw me.

He said, "Hello, Noodles."

I said, "Hello, Moe."

"Nice vacation?"

"Very nice vacation."

"The driver, Hogan, is out here," Moe said. "Let him in?"

Max growled. "What the hell you think the office sent him for? Sure, let him in."

Moe looked at Max for a moment. He shrugged.

He called, "Okay, Hogan, in here."

Hogan walked in. He was a squat, broken-nosed, bald-headed Irishman.

Maxie questioned him hurriedly. "You think you could recognize the two punks who hi-jacked you?"

"Yeh, Max, I think I know the two guys who heisted the truck from me. I saw them around somewhere, but where, I don't remember.

Max puffed on his cigar, looking sharply at Hogan. "What were they, Italian, Jewish or what?"

"No, they were Irish, I'm pretty sure. They looked like half-ass heist guys from Hell's Kitchen. A couple of them wild Hudson Duster kids," he added.

"Did these punks realize they were hi-jacking a valuable load of booze belonging to the Combination?"

"I don't know," Hogan said. "Them goddamn Irish kids from Hell's Kitchen don't respect the Combination or anybody else."

There was a faint tinge of pride in Hogan's voice.

"How come the warehouse manager let you ride without a guard?" Maxie asked.

Hogan screwed up his face in a puzzled expression.

"You got me there."

He lit a cigarette nervously.

"All I know is I got the drop-off address and the okay sign. I shot down West Street on the button. I didn't get far. A car cut me off; two guys jumped out with rods in their hands and took the load away, leaving me standing there like a mope in the middle of the street with my banana in my hands."

"Who is the manager of the warehouse now?" I asked.

"They still got the same guy, Herring, Mr. Herring," Hogan said.

"Yeh, I remember him," I said. "He's a little nervous guy, always coughing and spitting."

"Yeh, he coughs and spits," Hogan said.

Nobody had anything else to say. We just sat around quietly.

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Hogan looked at our expressionless faces and asked plaintively: "I hope you fellows don't think I was in on this deal? Honest, fellas, that's all I know about it."

I reassured him, "Not at all, Hogan. We don't accuse you or blame you for anything. All we want is for you to tell us what you know, where we can grab those two punk kids and teach them respect, and get that load back. We don't blame anybody."

"I know I saw them two guys somewhere," Hogan said.

He scratched his unshaven jaw. He shrugged his shoulders in a self-disparaging manner.

"God am I a shmuck!" he said. "I can't place them, but it must of been in some 'speak' over on the West Side."

I asked, "How many 'speaks' have you been to the last few months?"

Hogan kept scratching his blue-black heavy jaw. "Five... six or seven... I guess," he said.

Maxie stood up impatiently. "Okay, no use talking. Let's get going. We'll mope around here all day and get nowhere. That load was too valuable to lose."

Patsy added, "And if we catch them, we'll put those boonyets six feet under."

We piled into the Caddy and shot up to the West Side.

In two hours Hogan led us in and out of fifteen different "speaks."

The Caddy was humming down darkened Hudson Street, when Hogan pointed excitedly out of the window.

"Yeh, that looks familiar," he exclaimed. "Pull over! I think that's the joint I seen them in—Fitzgerald's place. That's where some of the Hudson Dusters hang out."

Cockeye Hymie kicked the car out of gear and shot for the curb like Ty Cobb swooping for home plate.

With Hogan leading, we walked into the speak.

Fitzgerald's was a typical Hell's Kitchen speakeasy. It was a large place, furnished with just the bare necessities: a long bar and a few tables and chairs scattered about in the rear. It had a tough-looking waterfront atmosphere. The clientele consisted of about twenty assorted longshoremen, truck drivers and minor hoodlums, predominantly Irish. They looked us over with insolent casualness as we made for a vacant table in the rear. Hogan looked around.

He said, "Nope they're not here, but this might be the place I seen them in."

We ordered double hookers.

Hogan commented confidently as he sipped his: "Yep, this is the joint I seen them in. I'm pretty sure now."

Wearily Maxie said, "Okay, we hang around awhile. Maybe you know what you're talking about and them two sons of bitches will show up."

We sat around drinking and making desultory conversation for what seemed hours. Every so often, a few new guests arrived. Our patience was finally rewarded. Two young men, slightly intoxicated, swaggered into the room and up to the bar.

Hogan whispered tensely, "That's them—they two young punks coming in."

He pointed excitedly.

Maxie cautioned, "Okay, okay, Hogan, take it easy; don't get your balls in an uproar."

We walked to the bar and surrounded the two newcomers. One of them whirled around. He sensed the danger closing around him. He had alarm and a questioning look in his eyes. He recognized Hogan. He knew what we were there for. I watched his hands. His right hand crept stealthily toward his hip pocket. I had my thumb ready on the button of my switch knife. His hand came out halfway, tugging at a gun. I clicked the button. The six-inch blade swished open. I dug it deep into the back of his hand. He screamed once in pain. The gun dropped to the floor.

Everybody looked dumbly at the guy's bleeding hand, as if they were mesmerized. The room was deathly still. Then we heard two sounds—Maxie's fist rapping the other guy's jaw, and the guy's head banging on the floor.

"Outside, you two bastards," Maxie growled.

The guy with the cut hand hesitated. Max grabbed him by the back of the neck and flung him the entire length of the room towards the door. It reminded me of a bartender sliding a mug of beer to the far end of the bar.

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The other guy lay on the floor, sullenly refusing to get up.

“Upsy daisy, you lousy mensabunet.”

Patsy kicked him in the belly. He groaned and struggled up to a standing position, holding his abdomen. Cockeye and Patsy dragged him out.

We threw them both in the back of the Caddy and piled in after them. For the entire trip down to Fat Moe's they lay motionless under our feet. They were a couple of frightened kids when we got them into the back room.

The guy with the bleeding hand whimpered, “Give us a break, fellows, we're friends of Owney Madden's.”

“You know Owney is a member of the Combine and still you show disrespect,” Maxie said. He smacked the kid across the mouth.

He crouched fearfully on the floor.

“We were drunk,” he started to snivel.

“We got a bum steer,” the other guy sobbed. They were both begging, unashamed.

“Give us a break, fellows. We swear we'll show respect,” one kid pleaded.

“Okay, kid, then you're ready to give us the lowdown?” I asked.

The guy nodded eagerly.

“Yeh, yeh, I'll give you guys the lowdown. Just give me a break.”

They gave us the name of the guy who had fingered the truck, a Mr. Gordon, and the address of the place where they delivered the load.

“We'll teach the guy who fingered the job a lesson in manners,” Maxie said drily.

“You guys didn't tamper with the stuff before you delivered it?” I asked.

“No, we didn't touch the stuff, honest.”

The other one cut in, “How could we? We delivered it a half hour after we heisted it from the driver, I swear. May God strike us dead, honest.”

“Who tipped you guys off?” I asked.

“We gave you his name, a guy calling himself Gordon. We met him in a speakeasy. He told us it was a pushover. Honest, we didn't know the load belonged to the Combination. If we did, we wouldn't of touched the job with a ten-foot pole.”

“Yeh, we know it's unhealthy,” the other one added, “to mess around with the Combination.”

“Was this guy a small skinny guy with a moustache?” I asked. It was a shot in the dark.

“Yeh, yeh, that's him,” he retorted quickly.

“He clears his throat before he starts talking?” I asked. “Like he's nervous?”

“Yeh, that's the guy, and he's always spittin'.”

With sardonic politeness I said, “Shall we pay our friend Mr. Herring a visit over at the warehouse?”

Max nodded grimly.

“Eventually we'll let you two guys go. Will you mind your own business and keep your mouths shut when we do?” I asked.

“Yeh, honest, we promise.”

“Honest to God,” the other one nodded vehemently.

“Okay, scram!” Maxie growled.

I said, “Just a minute.”

I leaned over and whispered in Maxie's ear. “Okay, okay,” he said impatiently.

I turned to the two guys. “Well take about another hour of your time, then we'll let you take a powder. We want you to take a little ride with us.”

“Come on, let's go,” Max said sharply. “What the hell you so polite to these bastards?”

The guy with the cut in his hand cringed.

I smiled reassuringly. “Don't worry, kid, it ain't a one-way ride.”

He looked distrustfully at us.

I continued, “All we want is for you to identify this Gordon guy.”

Maxie prodded him and said, “You come along like a nice boy anyway, or else...”

We crowded into the Caddy. When we reached the warehouse I said to Cockeye, “You sit with these guys

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until we call you.”

Patsy gave two hard and three soft knocks on the door of the gloomy warehouse on West Street. Maxie took a coin out of his pocket and made a singular scratching noise with it on the side of the building and impatiently said, “Okay, open up, open up.”

The massive door creaked open inwardly, letting out a mephitic odor. Our eyes could not penetrate the blackness of the warehouse.

Maxie growled, “Why the hell don't you put on a light?”

We made out a short, slim form faintly, at the door. He cleared his throat nervously.

He gasped, “Is that you, Maxie?”

“Yep, Herring, who did you expect? The Mad Mick's ghost?” Maxie taunted maliciously.

“We got to be careful. You know, Maxie, we got valuable stuff here,” Herring whined meekly.

“You got guards here, ain't you?” Maxie snapped at him. “Where the hell are they?”

“Here we are, Max,” a voice called out behind the closing massive door.

Herring snapped on his flashlight. He shot the beam in a semicircle, disclosing five figures scattered around the entrance, two of them holding tommy guns.

“Where the hell were you guys the other night that Hogan had to ride without a guard?” Maxie snapped sarcastically.

“Ask Herring, Max,” a peevish voice said. “He's in charge. He gives us orders. We were around. We didn't even know the truck was ready to leave.”

“Okay, okay,” Max said tersely. “Is that you, Chicken Flicker?”

“Yeh, Max,” the peevish voice answered.

“Okay, let's go to the office,” Max said.

With Herring in the lead carrying the flashlight, we made our precarious way around all sorts of obstructions. I recognized the piled-up commodities as we passed them, all of it the property of the gigantic national Combine: thousands of crated slot machines, keg upon keg and box upon box of domestic and imported beers and liquors. They were stacked as high as the ceiling. There were hundreds of steel drums, each containing fifty gallons of high-proof alcohol which were recently distilled from sugar, at the Combination Jersey bootleg stills.

We groped our way around huge pyramids of barrels containing molasses which was to be used in distilling a cheap rum.

There were surplus stocks of all conceivable wares essential to the smooth functioning of the Combination's diversified businesses.

Behind me, Patsy remarked, “A million bucks' worth of crap lying around. Hey, Noodles?”

“Closer to two million bucks' worth of crap, Patsy boy,” I replied.

Herring opened the door and switched on the lights in the office. After the intense darkness of the warehouse, it was like walking from a dark bathhouse at the beach into the glaring sunlight. We blinked and looked at each other for a moment.

Maxie sat down behind Herring's big desk. With a grandiose wave of his arm and in a gravely judicial tone, he said: “Be seated, gentlemen, and let's have the truth and nothing but the truth,” he added emphatically. “No horseshit.” He glared truculently at Herring and the guards.

Herring stood up with a hapless expression and timorously cleared his throat as a prelude to saying something. Maxie cut him off.

In a bitingly polite tone he said: “My dear Mr. Herring, you will have your say, but in due time. Please sit down. First I shall hear the witnesses.”

Herring stuttered something inaudible. Maxie banged the desk with his big fist. Herring collapsed back into his chair, mumbling weakly, “I'm entitled to a fair trial. It wasn't my fault.”

“You're entitled, my dear Mr. Herring, and if it wasn't your fault, it wasn't your fault.”

Maxie smiled maliciously. He acted like a cat playing with a mouse. I did not like it.

“Okay, Chicken Flicker,” Maxie was addressing the peevish guard holding a tommy gun. “Hand over that lead sprayer to Noodles, and let's hear what you have to say.”

Chicken Flicker obediently passed the machine gun to me and said, “To tell you the truth, Maxie, we don't

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know nothin'..."

"Okay, Chicken Flicker," Maxie continued interrogating the witness, "what were you guys doing that day?"

Chicken Flicker appeared a shy and shamefaced witness as he admitted, "We were playing pinochle behind the stack of beer boxes."

"And drinking beer?" Maxie prompted.

Chicken Flicker nodded guiltily.

One of the other guards cut in, "Herring gave us the O.K., Max. I remember he said, 'Go ahead and cop a sneak. The truck won't be ready for quite a while.' Herring said that."

"Yeh," another one cut in, "now I remember—a couple of hours later I came in the office to take a leak. I asked Herring, is the truck ready? He said, it left already."

Maxie questioned, "Didn't you think it was funny, the truck leaving without a couple of you guys trailing it?"

The guard appeared crestfallen. "To tell you the truth, Max, we were *farcharret* with the beer."

"*Farcharret*, balls," Maxie said angrily. "If you guys drink and don't know what's going on and get *farcharret*, don't drink on the job!"

"Okay, Max," he mumbled, "we were drinking that goddamn Holland beer."

"Powerful stuff," another guard commented.

"Then stick to domestic stuff hereafter," Maxie said drily.

I was watching Herring as the incriminating evidence piled up. He knew he was on the spot and that Maxie was holding kangaroo court. He made a pitiful figure slumped in his chair. The right side of his face twitched nervously. His eyes traveled around the room in helpless terror, seeking an out. He reminded me of a cornered rat. Yeh, the guy knew he was doomed. He knew what we were here for. I felt sorry for the guy, but why the hell did he do it? He was getting three hundred bucks a week from the Combine. Why did he do it? Spendthrift wife? Did he need the dough for an expensive piece of chippy? Maybe horses? The hell with him. No use wasting sympathy. We got a job to do. The shmuck dug his own grave. We'll turn him over. Let the big guys do what they want with him.

Maxie was trying to get my attention. "Hey, Noodles, day dreaming? I was talking to you."

I did not like his tone.

I said wearily, "Yeh, Max."

"Get Cockeye in here and the surprise witnesses."

Maxie was enjoying his role of judge and prosecutor.

I took Herring's searchlight and walked out of the office. I trudged through the warehouse, opened the door and called Cockeye. He came in with the two young guys. I escorted them back to the office.

When Herring saw who came through the door, I thought he would drop dead, then and there. He stared at them, petrified with dread. He coughed, spit and almost puked.

Maxie's voice was like acid.

He asked, "Okay, punks, is that the guy who fingered the job?"

"Yeh, that's the guy."

The answer struck Herring like a bull whip lashing across the face.

He cried hysterically, covering his face. "No, no. I didn't, I didn't..."

"You didn't? You rat bastard, they say you did," Maxie goaded him.

"I didn't, I didn't," he moaned.

CHAPTER 43

Abruptly, a bell rang out in the warehouse, sharp and commanding. It was so unexpected that we remained quiet for a few moments with our mouths open. Somehow it had the same tone and it reminded me of the clanging bell in the sixth round of the Dempsey–Willard fight which we had seen a few years ago out in Ohio. There was the same thankful look on Herring's face as I saw on Willard's on that hot Fourth of July day.

“What the hell was that?” Max said to nobody in particular.

“That was the bell on the side street where the loading platform is,” Chicken Flicker said.

“Pat, you go with Chicken Flicker and see who the hell it is.”

Patsy picked up the searchlight. They went out.

I said, “I better go along with that lead sprayer just in case.” I caught up with Patsy and the Chicken Flicker just as they were unlatching the side door. A strange burly truck driver was standing on the platform. He had his big over-the-road truck backed up to the door.

Patsy said, “What's on your mind, Pally?”

“Where's Mr. Herring?”

“What d'you want with him?”

“He said for me to pick up ten barrels of stuff for Baltimore.”

“Ten barrels for Baltimore?” Chicken Flicker said. “We don't ship to Baltimore, we got trouble there.”

“Come in, come in,” I said. “Who's the stuff to be delivered to in Baltimore?”

He showed me a card.

If anything spelled curtains for Herring, this was it. He was shipping to a little mob the Combine was having trouble with.

We walked back to the office with the driver.

“So the stupid bastard didn't get rid of the stuff yet. It's still somewhere in the joint,” Patsy whispered.

“Yeh, some shmuck, that Herring,” I said.

“Will he drop dead when he sees the truck driver,” Patsy chuckled quietly.

That was practically what he did as we entered.

Max asked, “Who is this guy?”

Patsy whispered in his ear. Maxie nodded his head grimly.

“Okay, driver, do you know who you are supposed to deliver to in Baltimore?”

“Yes, sure, Mr. Herring already gave me the name and address.”

Innocently the driver dropped the bombshell. He mentioned the rival outlaw mob.

“What!” Maxie exploded. He jumped out of his chair. He clipped Herring on the jaw.

“Okay, okay,” he snapped his fingers impatiently at the driver. “You beat it. We got nothing for you to deliver in Baltimore.”

Patsy escorted the driver outside. Maxie barked out his orders with the staccato snap of a top sergeant.

“Chicken Flicker and the rest of you guys, outside.” He turned to the guards. “All of you take the night off. Noodles, you show these two punks the hell out.” He snapped his fingers for their immediate dismissal. Max had a queer look on his face. I did not like it, but I did as he ordered.

When I came back into the office, Pat, Cockeye and Maxie were standing over Herring. He was rocking himself back and forth in a numb horror–stricken manner. Maxie hit him. He fell. He started slobbering, sniveling and moaning piteously. He pleaded for mercy. Maxie cursed and hit him again.

Finally he admitted, “I... hid the ten... barrels... under the bags of... sugar on the south end... of the warehouse.” Max and Patsy dragged the fear–stricken, half–conscious Herring out of the office into the warehouse proper.

Cockeye walked ahead with the searchlight casting a thin, feeble, wavering light in front of us. I heard the slithering of rats scurrying among the huge, silent piles of merchandise. They loomed dark and immense all around us. Everything seemed unreal—as if we were making our way in some vague portentous dream.

It was a bizarre and doleful procession. I was wondering what Maxie was going to do with Herring after he

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found where the whiskey was hidden. According to prescribed Combination procedure he could not or dared not do anything on his own. He had to follow the “code.” In an instance of this sort he delivered all evidence and the culprit to those higher up. I was getting a feeling, a vague feeling that Max was acting odd, that something was happening to him.

Maxie roused me out of my reverie by his curt statement: “Here’s the sugar, let’s get going.”

We had to handle fifty–one hundred pound bags before we uncovered the barrels. This unaccustomed exertion made Max wilder than before.

“You miserable bastard. Take the staves off the head of that barrel,” Maxie addressed Herring.

“I need a hammer and crowbar,” he whined hopelessly.

“Where d’you keep your goddamned tools?” Maxie rasped viciously.

“Over there in that shed.” He pointed with a shaking hand.

“Cockeye,” Maxie screamed, “get them.”

Herring could barely stand on his feet. I had to support him. He was trembling violently. He felt ice cold to my touch.

Cockeye came back with the tools. He handed them to Herring. He tried, but they fell out of his nerveless hands. Cockeye held the light while Patsy took the job over. He started tapping on the top hoop to ease the staves on the head of the barrel. It made eerie echoes which resounded from wall to wall of the cavernous warehouse. After the hoop slid down a bit, the staves spread. Whiskey trickled out of the cracks. Patsy pried the remaining staves off the head of the barrel.

Suddenly Max grabbed and began undressing the moaning and stupefied Herring. He stripped him naked. For a moment I was puzzled at Maxie’s peculiar actions. Then I realized what he was up to. The thought chilled my blood. Cockeye put the spotlight on Maxie and his victim. It was like a grisly scene in a slow motion horror picture. With deliberate, unhurried movements, Maxie put one big hand on his victim’s thin, hairy leg. With the other hand he forced Herring’s moaning head forward. Then slowly, oh, so slowly, he pushed the top of his head into the barrel of whiskey. I could see his wild, staring eyes disappear under the amber liquid. Maxie pushed some more. The nose was covered. A little more pressure. Whiskey rushed into the gasping mouth. I heard an awful choking gurgle. I saw the stiffly upright skinny legs jerking violently.

It was too much even for me. I lunged and knocked Max and the barrel over. Herring lay gasping with his mouth wide open. He floundered and groveled on the floor like a fish out of water. Then he jumped in the air, and ran naked and screaming, as if the devil was pursuing him.

Maxie sat on the floor in a puddle, splashing his hands in the whiskey like a kid. He was laughing and shouting hysterically. “I wanted to pickle him. I wanted to pickle him.” He repeated over and over, “I wanted to pickle him, I wanted to pickle him. I wanted to pickle Herring.”

Patsy, Cockeye and I stood in a semi–circle watching Maxie in amazement as he continued repeating, “I wanted to pickle Herring.”

I swung back, and slapped him hard across the face. The sound bounced and echoed. My hand stung. Max barely grunted, but it stopped that crazy refrain, “I wanted to pickle Herring.” We picked him up and carried him into the office. I wiped him with the towel.

Max looked at us as if he had just awakened from a deep sleep. He looked down on his filthy clothes, and in a normal quiet voice said, “Jesus, am I dirty. I got to get cleaned up. I got a date with Betty.”

We heard a crash out in the warehouse. I whispered to Patsy, “Go ahead, you and Cockeye take care of Maxie. Take him home.”

“What about Herring? Out there?”

“I’ll see,” I said. “I’ll take care of him.” I watched as Maxie, between Patsy and Cockeye, walked out of the warehouse.

I found Herring shivering and almost out of his mind with fear. I told him to get dressed and to get out of town.

I called the main office and gave them the story in brief. I omitted the part that I found Herring, and just mentioned casually that Maxie suddenly got ill and left with Patsy and Cockeye.

“Well, we can’t have that guy Herring wandering around. He knows too much,” the office answered.

I said, “Send somebody down to relieve me.”

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I waited about three hours. I had a hell of a time getting a cab on West Street. It was raining.

I went straight to the hotel. I was tired and miserable. I threw myself into bed, without supper, without bathing, without anything. Alone.

CHAPTER 44

For weeks I watched Maxie's conduct. He became more and more unpredictable. Most of the time he acted completely normal, but, at other times, Patsy and I would watch his eccentric behavior with fear and amazement. Peculiar thing about Cockeye: he was absolutely unconscious of the fact that Maxie had changed. At least he acted that way. Sometimes, when Maxie was at the peak of one of his tantrums, Cockeye behaved in a slightly irrational manner himself.

As far as I could understand, Maxie appeared to be at the beginning of some form of megalomania, in the first excitable stage. Everything he planned to do or was doing was big. Nothing but great enterprises were in his mind.

He was terrifically lucky one day. Out of a clear sky he bet twenty thousand on a horse. He won about forty. Then he began frequenting big crap games. From the stories he told us he won a fortune every day.

If I differed with him on anything, no matter how trivial, he would fly into a rage. Cockeye's actions at these times were just as amazing. He would take his harmonica out and play some wild crazy tune to fit Maxie's mood. Pat and I would sit and watch them both and it was really something to watch. Maxie would talk big, pacing the floor, a raving wild man, and there was Cockeye, alongside of him, playing a tune to fit his fit.

One thing I observed: the more he associated with that masochist bitch, Betty, the more deranged he seemed to act. I discussed it with Patsy. I suggested we might try to get Max to visit a doctor. Patsy thought it would be futile. Maxie would never bother with doctors. I mentioned to Max that he seemed to spend a lot of time with Betty. He flew into a rage and accused me of being jealous.

Finally the time drew near for a payroll heist: a two hundred thousand dollar one that John had "fingered." Max never discussed it with me. Patsy did. A week before it was to take place, I wished them all luck, and left for Eve and North Carolina. I was gone three weeks.

My first day back, I stayed away from Delancey Street. I wandered around town by myself. The next day I went downtown with a feeling of apprehension. I wondered how they had made out on the heist. I speculated on what sort of welcome I would receive. This was the first time I had ever gone down to Fat Moe's feeling uncomfortable, as if I didn't belong. I felt I had let them down because I hadn't taken part in the heist. Would Max carry a grudge? Well, what the hell, what will be, will be.

I entered the back door of Fat Moe's.

The first thing I was aware of was the welcome sound of Cockeye's harmonica, then Maxie's not so reassuring, cold stare.

Then my eyes fell on it. It was a chair. Yeh, Max was sitting in a strange, immense, richly carved chair, at the head of the table. Cockeye and Patsy were in ordinary chairs on either side of him. By comparison they appeared to be sitting on the floor. I stood there speechless, looking at the incongruous sight. Cockeye's eyes above his harmonica were following my every movement. He continued his playing.

Patsy smiled and said, "Hello."

Maxie in a deep frigid tone asked, "How you like it?"

Evidently he referred to the chair. I walked all around it, feeling and looking at the ornate carving that covered every inch of the tremendous chair. It was like a throne, a royal relic of some sort. I examined it more closely. The keynote of the carved design was the royal flag of Rumania which appeared among icons and all sorts of royal insignia and armorial bearings.

It looked absurd in the back room of Fat Moe's with an East Side hood slouched deep in its seat.

I couldn't help asking, "How did you get it? Where did you get it?"

Maxie asked a question of his own. "Do you know whose it is?"

I shrugged. "How should I know?"

"It used to belong to a baron, an old time Rumanian baron, hundreds of years ago."

I repeated, "How did you get it?"

"How I got it?" Max asked with a superior smile. "How do I get everything I want? By the muscle. How

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does everybody get big dough? By stealing. How did the old time nobility get theirs? This bastard of a baron who owned this chair, for example? I'll bet you anything he got his millions the same way. By stealing. And that's what I'm going out for—for millions, and all in one grab, too. To hell with this petty racket crap, a few grand here and a few grand there. I'll show them how a real robber baron operates.”

I guessed the heist came out okay from the general air of success.

I wondered what else he had in mind. Max gave a peculiar laugh.

“Ain't I the boss of the East Side?” he demanded. “Ain't the East Side my baronial domain? Ain't my word law down here?”

While Max was delivering his angry tirade, Cockeye continued playing. There was the same odd relationship between his music and Maxie's jabbering. Was Cockeye putting Max deeper into these strange moods with his music? I wondered. It was hard to believe this was the same Maxie. Was it possible that excesses with a degenerate woman could weaken a man mentally? I had heard a man could develop softening of the brain by that sort of perversion. And was this thronelike chair one of the manifestations of his delusions of grandeur?

I looked at Patsy. He was quietly smoking a cigar. He answered my look with a shrug and a raise of his shaggy eyebrows.

Max took a sheet of paper out of his pocket and held it out to me.

He said with pride, “What do you think of this?”

I took it and tried to figure out the meaning of the diagram. It was a rough, penciled sketch of the Wall Street area showing the streets, the entrance and inside of what appeared to be a large building.

I handed it back to Max.

“What is it?” I asked.

He said sarcastically, “A smart guy like you can't figure it out?”

Cockeye stopped playing and looked speculatively at me.

I shrugged and repeated, “What is it?”

“This is it,” Max pounded the arm of the chair dramatically.

“This is it?” I repeated vaguely.

“Yep, this is it—the biggest heist in history. Ten times bigger than the Rubel heist. Instead of heisting one armored truck we take ten at one clip.” Maxie was all excited. “There's millions in it. I got it all figured out. This is the plan for the Federal Reserve heist.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “You still got that bug in your head? To clip the Federal Reserve bank?”

“Why, you got any doubts about it?” Maxie raged. “Wise guy? Know-it-all guy?”

I said dubiously, “That Federal Reserve building? It's supposed to be heist proof; it's a tough nut to crack.”

“Not the way I see it, maybe you ain't got the—”

Max looked at me. He knew better than to finish saying, I didn't have the balls.

“I'll step into anything you will,” I snapped at him.

Patsy gave me an approving wink.

“Okay, okay,” Max waved his hand, “I just thought you were getting a little careful. That payroll job came off okay, only there was 130 gees in it, not 200, like we figured.”

“Good for you, Max. I'm glad it came off okay.”

“I got your cut just the same, Noodles,” Max grunted.

“Forget it. I don't want it.”

He looked at me. He saw I meant it.

He said, “Okay. Are you interested in this Federal job?”

I thought it ridiculous, but out of curiosity I said, “Let's hear about it.”

“We use ten more men besides us four.”

“Who?”

“Jake, Goo-Goo, Pip, and the Chicken Flicker will get his crew. That will make enough.”

“Did you tell them who we're going to heist?”

Max shook his head.

“All I told them that it was a big and tough job, and we all carry lead sprayers.”

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"Where are we going to get ten tommy guns?"

"Where? Out of the warehouse, where did you think?"

"Frank wouldn't like it, using all that Combine equipment on a private job."

"I'll be the judge of that," Max was curt. "Since when do you question my decisions?"

We glared at each other for a moment.

"I just thought you were supposed to get the okay first."

"I don't need an okay from anybody," he barked.

I didn't like it. What the hell's come over the guy? He was getting worse and worse. It was a sure sign. He was due for a crash, a terrific crash. He would pull us all down with him. I didn't like the whole thing. Just the same I better look into it for their sakes.

Aloud I said, "How you going to get into the joint?"

"Now you're asking a sensible question." Max had a satisfied smile on his face. "There's a big wholesale grocery truck that makes a delivery into the building every other day. I have made connections to take it over. All of us hide in the body of the truck until it goes through the gate and backs up to the platform, where the armored trucks are unloading their dough. We step out and take over. Outside I'll have three cars waiting for the getaway. This is the route we take to the river." Max showed me the diagram. "There I'll have a speed boat waiting for us: the fastest boat in the Combination fleet, maybe the big one, the 'California.' We shoot over to Long Island Sound." Max traced the route on the sketch with his finger. "Here's where we hole up." Maxie stopped his finger at this point.

I leaned over, "Where is that?" I asked.

"Connecticut." He laughed at me as he watched my astonishment at the details. On paper it looked good. Goddamn good, but I didn't like it. I had an uneasy feeling. There were too many holes in it, and too many people were involved. We never pulled a job with so many before. I paced up and down the room. His eyes followed me. Cockeye continued playing softly on his harmonica. I could see that the entire job stank. It definitely was impossible. But I didn't have the balls to say so.

Instead I said falteringly, "You fixing an alibi in case we get questioned about it? Afterwards?"

"To hell with alibis," Maxie said disdainfully.

I stopped pacing and stood in front of him. Big Max eyed me coldly. He sat regally back in the large chair. Both his hands rested on the side arms. It gave him an air, some kind of psychological advantage over me. He was sitting so high up, as if he really was royalty on a throne, listening to some peasant petitioner. I felt small and insignificant.

Lamely I said, "You remember our formula for a successful heist? An alibi to cover up?"

He repeated, "The hell with an alibi. The thing is perfect. I have rehearsed the getaway, and timed everything perfectly. Anything else you have in mind?"

Max was sneering at me.

"I don't know, Max," I said doubtfully.

I walked up and down, stalling for time. I thought, maybe it's possible, and the job can be pulled off with the proper breaks and proper timing? I'd like to see the inside of the building. Suddenly I got an idea, how to stall it off indefinitely.

I stopped pacing and said, "How about me 'casing' the joint? Can you arrange it?"

Before he could answer, Patsy cut it, "Yeh, that's a good idea, Max, let Noodles give the joint the elzoo."

"Okay, okay," Max said impatiently. "I'll call up the union and get you on as a helper on the truck."

The rest of the day was spent uncomfortably. The old time comradeship was gone. Max sat most of the time in that big chair, brooding and drinking. That homey, relaxed feeling was gone. We were tense. The room was charged with friction. We were sullen and resentful of one another.

Max called the union and made arrangements for me to go out as a helper on the truck.

He barked over the phone, "I want this guy on that truck. Yep, he wants to go sightseeing downtown, or he needs the day's pay. Don't ask so goddamn many questions. Just do it."

He gave me the address where I was to meet the truck the next day at 8 a.m. The next day, dammit. I thought it would take weeks to arrange. I left early to get ready. I went down to Bayard Street and bought some used work clothes and a cap to use in my masquerade as a truck driver's helper.

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I set the alarm for six. I spent a lousy restless night, and I was up before the alarm rang. I put on the shabby work clothes, pulled the sloppy cap over my eyes, and looked at myself in the mirror. I laughed ruefully. This is the way I dressed and looked years ago as a kid, when we roamed the streets of the East Side and attended soup school.

I looked shabby and I felt shabby. I thought, clothes certainly change a person's entire outlook. I walked to the back of the hall and took the self-service freight car, through to the freight exit. I walked over to a Tenth Avenue diner and had a ham and egg sandwich and coffee. Then I took a cab to the garage where I was to meet the truck.

I gave the garage supervisor the number of the truck I was assigned to. He told me the driver had not shown up yet, but he was due in a few minutes. I got up on the seat and waited. When the driver arrived I introduced myself. "I'm Jack, your new helper."

He seemed displeased with me. He looked at me sideways and muttered, "The goddamn union has got some nerve putting you on. Where's my regular man?"

"I got to eat, too, pal," I answered. "I didn't get a day's work in years."

"You look like you eat regular," he grunted.

"I got friends that feed me once in a while," I said jauntily. "What's your name, pal?"

"What's my name, pal?" he mimicked. "Listen, feller," he jabbed a finger in my chest, "let's keep the social formalities out of this. You and I ain't going steady; we got a day's work to do and let's go and do it."

He stepped on the starter and pulled the truck out of the garage. He rolled the truck at a fast pace down West Street. He backed the big truck dexterously up to the loading platform of the wholesale grocery house. A checker came out of his office and began checking the cases of canned goods, bags of flour, sugar and rice the warehousemen were wheeling out to the truck. The driver and I started loading. I was pretty clumsy handling the packages.

The driver kept muttering at me, "You're some cluck; you don't even know how to stack a truck. The goddamn union sending me a shmuck like you as a helper."

I was peeved and in a sweat from my unaccustomed exertion, but I kept my temper. I thought to myself, boy, oh boy, would it be a pleasure to give this guy a going-over. It took us an hour and a half to load about ten tons of assorted groceries. He drew the canvas curtain and tied up. He left the tailboard of the truck down.

Maliciously he said, "By me, you're going to ride the tail all day."

I stood in the back holding on to the ropes as he purposely shot over holes and bumps and swung recklessly around corners. Finally he stopped at a Market Diner. He jumped off his seat and walked to the back of the truck. There was a big grin on his face.

"You still there? I thought I knocked you off. This is a sample of what you're going to get the rest of the day. Maybe you want to quit now?"

Shakily, I climbed off the truck. I sized him up. He was a big heavy guy. I better be sure. It don't pay to take a chance. I bent down and adjusted my pants' cuff. I came up with a left hook on the point of his chin. He staggered back. I kicked him with the point of my right shoe in the belly. He lay writhing in pain in the gutter. A group of longshoremen came over.

One of them asked, "What happened?"

I said, "My friend here is got a bellyache or something."

I solicitously bent over and asked, "How're you feeling, pal? A little better, I hope?"

He was dazed as I helped him to his feet.

I whispered, "Did you have enough, bastard? Or do I dump you in the river?"

He looked at me and nodded. I smiled at him. I took him under the arm and walked him into the diner.

The counterman said to the driver, "What'sa matter, Butch? You don' looka so good?"

I said, "Butch, he don't feela so good."

The counterman said, "That'sa too bad, what's you gents have?"

I ordered, "Bacon, eggs, toast and coffee for me and Butch."

"Okay." He smiled.

We ate in silence. I took a handful of cigars off the counter and paid the bill. We walked out.

As the driver climbed into his seat he turned and rubbed his chin. There was a silly grin on his face.

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"I guess I acted like a shmuck," he said. "Sit in the front with me. What did you say your name was?"

"Jack," I answered shortly.

"Mine is Butch."

I nodded.

"You sure can handle yourself, Jack."

I smiled modestly, and handed him a cigar. He lit mine first.

He took his delivery tickets out. "Our first stop is the Beekman Hospital. Do you know how to make up grocery orders?"

"No."

"Nothin to it. I'll show you when we get there."

I said, "Fine, I'd like to learn the business."

He stepped on the starter, and drove to the hospital. He untied the rope, took his hand truck and piled it full of canned goods.

"You stay by the truck, Jack, while I cart the stuff in."

Ten minutes later he came out, threw the hand truck in the back and tied up.

He looked at his tickets and said, "The next stop is the Seaman's Bank."

He drove there, went through the same routine as at the Beekman Hospital. I accompanied him into the building. We took the elevator upstairs and delivered the groceries into the bank cafeteria.

"All these joints have their own cafeterias for their employees," Butch observed. "First time you worked on a grocery truck?"

I nodded.

"How you like it?"

"A pretty tough racket, handling cases and bags all day."

"Not bad after you get used to it."

"I guess I could get used to it after awhile," I agreed. "Pretty large tins, these number tens, these the largest in the trade?"

"Yeh, these are what they call the institutional size, these number tens. Our house is one of the largest institutional grocery supply houses in the east." He seemed proud of his firm's distinction. "You notice we don't handle much of the number ones or number two tins. They're for the small-time retail grocery trade."

Butch seemed to think very little of the retail grocery trade.

We made a delivery to the swank Railroad Machinery Club.

"This stop is a real ball breaker," Butch commented. "But the next one is a push-over, a platform delivery."

"Oh yeh?" I asked disinterestedly.

"Yeh, on the next one you'll see bags of money and gold bullion being unloaded and lying around like horseshit. More dough than you've ever seen in all your life."

"Yeh? Where's that?"

My heart started pounding. I tried to curb the excitement in my voice.

"The next delivery is the Federal Reserve Bank," Butch said importantly.

We stopped at its heavy steel door. From the outside the building looked like an inviolable fortress. There was an armed guard on the street.

He waved, "Hiyah, Butch? You got yourself a new helper, I see."

I made a mental note that this guard was plenty alert.

Butch returned the greeting, "How're yah, Mack? Yeh, I got a new man today."

I didn't notice, but evidently the outside guard gave some sort of signal to the men inside. The steel doors slowly opened. There were four guards with .45s strapped around their waists, standing right inside the door. Their close scrutiny gave me an uneasy feeling. They gave Butch the go-ahead signal. He drove in. The heavy doors closed behind us. We were in a ceilinged enclosure half the size of a city block. A guard gave Butch the signal to park his truck out of the way. There was no room to back into the unloading platform at the other end. I got out and stood by the side of the truck. There were about fifteen guards strolling around. They all had big .45s in holsters strapped onto their Sam Brown belts.

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Backed up to the platform were many armored trucks unloading money bags on little wooden platforms. One armored truck was unloading bars of dull yellow gold on wooden skids. By the effort they put into lifting a bar of gold, I estimated the weight of a bar to be about fifty pounds. About three skids were full, waiting to be pulled away to the vaults downstairs. I walked a few steps closer to the platform to get a better view. A guard was beside me immediately. He tapped me on the shoulder.

He said politely, "You have to stand by your truck, mister. No walking around permitted."

Butch laughed.

He called out to the guard, "He's a new helper, Mack; let him go over and take a few samples for himself."

The guard smiled drily, "Today ain't sample day."

Butch got off his seat and sat down on his running board. I joined him.

"I'll bet there's about ten million bucks on that platform today," he said.

I whistled my amazement.

Butch whispered importantly, "That's nothing. The other day a guard told me they had handled fifty million bucks."

"That's a lot of cabbage," I agreed.

"Yeh, and they got that cabbage well guarded." Butch nodded toward the walls. "You notice all them peepholes?"

I looked around the walls of the indoor yard. There were about fifty peepholes all around.

"There are twenty guards with machine guns on a platform up there. Besides, there's a guy up there taking moving pictures all day."

"Moving pictures?" I said in dismay.

"Yeh, yours and mine, right now, and everybody else's in the joint."

"Boy," I exclaimed as I tried to hide my face.

An armored car had finished unloading. The driver slammed the doors of his truck and pulled away.

"Okay, Butch, back in," a guard called out.

He backed in. We unloaded the grocery order of ten bags of flour and about twenty cases of assorted groceries.

I stood on the platform watching the money trucks unloading as an employee of the downstairs cafeteria checked and signed our delivery receipt. We drove slowly outside. Right then I knew it would be absolute suicide to attempt to heist this place.

I made one more delivery with Butch. Then I said, "I got an awful headache. You'll have to go it alone, pal."

I jumped off.

"You got four hours pay coming to you, Jack," he called after me.

"You collect it and keep it," I said.

"Thanks, Jack," he waved.

I took a cab to Fat Moe's.

As I walked in, two expressmen were walking out, carrying little flat-wheel trucks. They had just delivered four safes and four big trunks which were standing right in the middle of the room. Pat and Cockeye were examining them.

Maxie saw me. He pointed to the safes.

"Fine, this is just fine, Noodles."

"What's it for?" I asked.

"To put our dough in," Max said. "We got to hide it."

"Hide it? Why?" I asked.

"Yes, yes," Max said impatiently. "We got to hide it. Frank got it direct from his source in the Bureau of Internal Revenue. There's going to be a thorough national income tax investigation." He threw his chewed-up stub on the floor, lit a fresh Corona and continued. "They already got the case prepared against Capone. It looks like the bastard may have to ride."

Capone's trouble seemed to give Max satisfaction.

"You think the income tax people will bother with us?" I asked.

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"I'm no fortuneteller. I don't know. And the main office don't know for sure. The instructions are to get our dough out of our bank accounts and safety deposit boxes, and be on the safe side."

"And put them in trunks?" I asked.

"What the hell, we can't carry our dough around all day in valises," Cockeye said sharply.

"You need a big trunk for your bundle, Cockeye," Patsy jibed.

"Talk for yourself, Patsy, you ain't exactly broke either," Cockeye answered.

"Yeh, I made all you guys paupers with a lousy two hundred grand or better salted away," Maxie said boastfully.

Patsy and I exchanged glances. So Maxie took personal credit for our success in the rackets. This was a new quirk.

I said, "Kind of risky leaving so much dough in a trunk, up in a hotel room or anywhere else."

"Yep, you're right, Noodles," Maxie agreed.

Then he continued in a churlish, superior manner.

"This is the general idea, the way the big guy sent the word around to do it. And that's the way it's going to be done. We each got a small safe. Then we put our dough in the safe."

He stopped. Slowly, and with an air, he flipped his ashes to the floor.

He went on, "Then we put the safe in a trunk." Maxie took a sip of his hooker. I waited. "Then we put the trunk in a vault in one of the big fireproof and burglarproof storage warehouses. The four trunks all in one warehouse?" I asked.

"Yep. I don't see why not," Max snapped at me. "All in the same warehouse is okay, but a private storage room for each trunk, how about it, okay with you, Noodles?"

Max was just a shade sarcastic. He looked arrogantly at me.

I said, "We each have a different safe combination, and a different key to our own storage room?"

"Yep, don't worry, Noodles," Maxie said drily.

"Hey, Noodles," Maxie scoffed, "ain't you ever been in a Warehouse where they store valuable paintings, silver and stuff?"

I shook my head.

"Tish, tish." Maxie made chiding noises with his tongue. "A smart guy like you. Let me describe it. In the first place, the buildings are made out of concrete and steel. They're fireproof. They have watchmen day and night. Besides, electric alarms are connected to the outside, like the Holmes protective service. Each room is a vault in itself. Solid concrete, with a heavy steel door and burglarproof lock that I think even Jake couldn't open."

I smiled weakly. "It sounds okay."

"Yeah, it is okay," Max said with finality.

"Can't the Feds check the warehouse and uncover our hidden dough?" Patsy asked.

"I guess the general idea is to put the trunk in storage under assumed names, right?" I asked.

"Yep, you're right, Noodles," Max said with a condescending air, "that's the general idea, and the sooner we get our dough stashed away, the better."

"It's that urgent?" I inquired.

"Yep, the quicker the better. The Feds are checking."

"Yeh, a pretty good setup, this trunk and safe combination," Cockeye said.

He had opened a safe and was fiddling with the combination.

Max said, "You look like a helper on a truck all right." He slowly lit a cigar and spit on the floor. "Well, what did you find out?"

I said, "The heist is no good, Max. You got to get the Federal Reserve Bank out of your head. It's a job for lunatics, not us."

The minute I said it, I knew I had made a mistake. It was the wrong approach. It sounded as if I was calling Max crazy.

"Who's a lunatic, you bastard?" he blurted out angrily.

"Take it easy, Max." Patsy was holding his right arm. "Noodles didn't mean it that way, did you, Noodles?"

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“Yeh, he did, Max. He always thought he was the smartest guy in the world.” That Cockeye bastard was trying to steam Max up more.

I said, “No offense, Max, all I meant that it was too tough a job for us or any other mob to undertake.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, and I don’t need your goddamn advice on anything,” he shouted angrily, “and its going through as planned.” He was working himself into a maniacal rage.

Soothingly I said, “Okay, okay, Max, you’re the doctor.”

He sat there red-faced and white-lipped, muttering to himself.

Moe came in with a tray of doubles.

Max barked at him. “Goddamn you, don’t come in here unless you’re told.”

Moe put the tray on the table with a look of hurt surprise. He went out quickly. Pat and I sat down at the table.

He whispered, and it was barely audible, “That Maxie, he’s cracking up.”

I nodded over my drink.

Cockeye played a couple of tunes on his harmonica. Max sat quietly smoking for awhile. Then he got up and walked over to the trunks. He opened one and twirled the combination. He sat down at the table with a sigh and reached for a drink.

After he drank it down, he smiled at me. “I’m sorry I flew off the handle, Noodles.”

I nodded and said, “That’s okay, Max.”

He rubbed his head.

“I don’t know what the hell’s the matter with me,” he smiled weakly. “I guess I need a vacation. I’m a little on edge.”

“I think we can all do with a vacation,” Patsy said.

“Yeh, after this job, we’ll let up a bit.”

Pat and I looked at each other significantly.

“Hey, Cockeye,” Max called out, “come here and have your drink.”

Cockeye obediently stopped playing and went over. He sat down and sipped his whiskey slowly.

“Well, we may as well get through with stashing our dough away, like the office advised us to,” Max said.

“You picked out a storagehouse, Max?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” he answered listlessly. “We’ll decide tomorrow. There are quite a few good places I had in mind. Well, anyway, the quicker we get the dough out of the banks, the less we got to worry about the income tax people. You guys bring your dough down tomorrow morning and we get it over with, okay?” Max sounded a little like his old pleasant self. We nodded in agreement. “The dough will be in a safe place. At least we’ll have that out of our minds,” Max puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. “That’ll give me a clear head to concentrate on the Reserve job. We only got a couple of days to smooth a few angles out.”

“We going to heist the joint so soon?” I made a last try. “Listen, Max, it’s foolish for guys in our position to go out on a heist.”

“Why? What makes you think it’s foolish? Originally we were heist men, weren’t we?” He looked at me coldly. “We were the best in the business, no?”

“Yeh, but now it’s different,” I pleaded. “We’re making a good buck, aren’t we? For years we’ve been on the payroll of the Combine for five hundred bucks a week apiece.” I took my little notebook out and counted up, “And between the ‘speaks,’ slots, the funeral parlor and a few odds and ends we net close to a hundred grand a year apiece. That ain’t tin, you know. Why take chances? That ain’t being a good businessman, Max.”

“Who the hell said I was a businessman? If I wanted to play it safe all the time, where the hell would I be? And the rest of you guys? Helpers on laundry trucks,” he snapped angrily at me.

He stood up and paced up and down the room. Then he sat down on his thronelike chair. Immediately, it gave him a feeling of confidence and superiority. He expanded in the big chair. He leaned back and crossed his legs. He looked up at the ceiling, blowing smoke into the air. He looked down on us.

“As far as I’m concerned, the two hundred grand I’m going to stash away in my trunk tomorrow is horseshit, and besides, it took us too many years to get.” He leaned forward and pointed a finger at me. “And we took chances, don’t forget that.” He pounded his chest, “And don’t forget that I, and nobody else, planned everything successfully, just as I’m planning this. Goddamn it, since when the hell do I have to explain or

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apologize to you for anything I want to undertake?”

He glared wildly at me. I swear, or did I imagine it, that he snapped his fingers at Cockeye as a signal to begin playing? Anyway Cockeye took his harmonica out and began playing crazily.

He fidgeted furiously in his chair, then he pointed at me. “You— you, Noodles—are getting too damn cocky with me. You take orders from me—”

I stood up; I was uncertain how to act. I felt small in my shabby truck driver's clothing. The goddamndest idea came over me, as if Maxie expected me to kneel in front of the chair and apologize. What gave me that idea I wondered? Was it the effect of the chair? Or was it Maxie's imperial air? I shrugged off that ridiculous idea, but I caught myself standing before him with bowed head and apologetically mumbling, “Okay, okay, you're the doctor, Max. I'd like to go up to my place and change out of these dirty work clothes.”

He waved me away with a princely air. “Okay, but I expect you here before eleven tomorrow morning. I want to get these damn trunks shipped out of here; they louse the room up.”

I murmured, “Okay, Max,” and left, feeling all screwed up inside.

CHAPTER 45

After my shower I lay on the bed in my pajamas thinking about the heist. Maybe Max knows what he's doing? Maybe he knows of a gimmick, and it could be pulled off successfully? There's always a gimmick to everything. Why not the Federal Reserve Bank? Boy, oh boy, if we could pull that trick, it would really be something. It would be the record heist for all time. It would be at least a million bucks for my share. Boy, a million bucks for me. I'd quit and retire. What wouldn't I do with a million bucks? I'd travel all over the world. I'd lay all the beautiful women in every country. I'd do it systematically, so as not to miss any race or nationality. I'd sample every color and type of female on the face of the globe. I'd be truly unbigoted, give them all a break. I'd stop at all the best hotels. I'd stay a while in Turkey. I hear Turkish women are really something. I wonder if they can teach me anything new? I smiled to myself confidently; I doubted it. Yeh, they kick the gong around a great deal over there, too. I'd like that, plenty of good opium, that's for me. Jesus, I forgot all about Eve. When I got back from the trip, I'd settle down with her. We'd get married.

What the hell am I doing? Lying here dreaming about spending a million bucks that I'll never get. That Federal Reserve Bank heist is suicide. That Maxie is bugs. We ain't got a chance in ten million to get out of there alive. Them twenty machine guns in them walls will cut us up into cold hamburgers before we can even pick up one bag. But that goddamn Maxie. Nothing can change his mind. That Federal heist has been an obsession with him ever since he was a kid. The idea entered his head so many years ago, I thought he forgot it. It's just like some incurable disease with him, like a cancer, that grows and grows and it'll finally kill him, and us with him.

He won't listen to anybody. Anybody? Goddamn it, why didn't I think of it before? That son of a bitch will listen to Frank. He'll take orders from him, all right. There's no question about that. I'll take it to Frank; hell straighten him out. That man can straighten out anybody. Why the hell didn't I think of it before? I gave a sigh of relief. I went to the phone: I called the main office. My heart sank. Damn the lousy luck. Frank was out of town. They didn't know where. Phil was away also. Anything anyone else could do? No, no—one else could do a damn thing. I sat there undecided, down in the dumps, thinking what to do next? Should I pull out? Skip town; go to Eve? No good. They'd think I was yellow. Besides, if I ran away, I'd be through for good. No more of the big, quick dough; I'd have to disappear. Where? No, it's no good, I'm too accustomed to this easy life and New York and the good old East Side.

Maybe Frank's down in New Orleans? He must be around somewhere. I'd stay by the phone all night if necessary until I reached him. I put my call in to New Orleans. I paced the floor nervously waiting for the operator to call me back. It was an uneasy ten minutes. In New Orleans Dudley said, "He isn't here; try Hot Springs."

I called Arkansas. I was unjustly angry with the operator for the few minutes delay that seemed so much longer. He wasn't there. They said, "Try Chicago."

Try Chicago? I was getting panicky. It was a matter of life and death to me, and these people talked in an ordinary tone of voice. They took it slow, as if it had no importance whether I reached the guy or not. Where the hell was that guy? He was the only solution. I got to get through to him. I jiggled the hook frantically and with senseless bitterness I browbeat the long distance operator to connect me faster with Chicago.

I winced when Fischetti in Chicago told me, "He isn't here. Try Detroit."

I was drenched with sweat before that damned operator got me Detroit. An agonizing twinge shot through me as the report came over, "He isn't in Detroit."

I shrieked over the wire, "Where the hell is he? It's urgent; it's important. I got to get to him."

The calm Detroit voice answered, "Who knows where 'that man' is? He's got business all over the country. Did you try Chicago?"

I furiously enumerated the cities I had called, "New Orleans, Chicago, Hot Springs and Detroit."

The calm voice said, "Why don't you call Jersey?"

Yeh, why didn't I think of Jersey? Boy, am I dumb! He could be right across the river.

With uncontrolled violence I jiggled the operator and shouted the Jersey phone number into the

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mouthpiece. Solly reported he wasn't there. What was this, a conspiracy? Nobody wanted to let me know where Frank was. He was somewhere within reach of a phone, somebody knew where he was. Miami? One chance in a thousand for him to be there this time of year. I called Miami.

A laughing voice answered, "What would that man be doing here? The track is closed."

My desperation kept me on the phone all night. I called up and down the West coast. I called Mexico. I called Canada.

No use. It was daylight, and I had no more numbers to call. I was exhausted. My throat was sore; my voice was hoarse, yeh, just like Frank's. Bells were ringing in my ears. I felt sick when I had to reach for the phone again to tell the switchboard to call me at 8 a.m.

The hotel operator said, "Did you know you made \$400 worth of calls during the night?"

"Who asked you?" I growled impatiently. "Put it on the bill."

I slammed down the receiver. I drank a third of a quart of whiskey and fell into an exhausted and uneasy sleep.

The telephone woke me. The girl at the switchboard announced, "Good morning, it's 8 o'clock." I hung up after I grumbled, "Yeh, thanks."

I felt jittery, and I had an awful headache. I took a long swallow from the bottle on the table. It took me a few minutes to collect my thoughts. What was on the schedule for today? Yeh, I got to go to the bank, close out my savings account, and take the dough out of the vaults.

I dressed quickly, took a large empty valise out of the closet and went out. I looked at my watch: it was twenty after eight, too early for the bank. I walked over to the Automat and sat there nervously drinking cup after cup of black coffee.

I jumped a cab and went down to the Public National. The bank wasn't open yet. I walked up and down the street for five minutes. What the hell was I so nervous about? I was the first customer of the day. I felt very conspicuous as I made out the withdrawal slip to close out my account.

I muttered inanely to the teller, "I'm leaving town on important business."

He smiled. "What denominations?"

I answered, "Hundreds."

I threw the bundles in my valise hurriedly, without counting. A customer beside me watched bug-eyed.

I snapped at him, "What the hell you staring at?"

He turned away, embarrassed.

I went downstairs to the vaults. The guard nodded a greeting and unlocked the gate. I went in swiftly, emptied the contents of my boxes into the valise and walked upstairs and out to the street.

I felt self-conscious as I walked with all that money through the streets. It seemed as if all the passers-by were staring at me, and they knew what I was carrying in the valise. It would be ironic if a couple of heist guys would take me over, now, with all this dough on me. Boy, it would be a good heist for anybody—two hundred grand.

Would I plead professional immunity, and say, "Lay off, pal, I'm in the same racket you are?"

Boy, am I getting silly. Nobody knows what I got in this valise. Or does someone?

A large man fell in step beside me. I shifted the heavy valise to my left hand away from him and put my right in my pants pocket. I clenched my knife. As I met his gaze, I watched his hands. A tremor went up my spine and froze the hair on the back of my head. He put his left hand in his coat pocket. He had a bulge there. It looked like the outline of a rod. We walked in step down the street. He began yanking the object out of his pocket. I took the offensive.

I pressed close to him and hissed in his ear, "One move out of you, bastard, and your head rolls in the gutter."

With a startled expression he stopped in his tracks and murmured, "There's all kinds crazy lunatics on Delancey Street."

I looked back at him, he was standing there munching a banana.

He waved his peeled banana and shouted after me in Yiddish, "Me-shuggeneh merder."

The valise seemed to be getting heavier by the minute. I speculated on the weight I was carrying. It seemed to be a hundred pounds at least. It was silly of me not to have taken a cab, but it seemed to be such a short

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walk.

I thought, why the hell should I put all my eggs in one basket? Yeh, that's right. I'll split it. I passed the Bank of the United States. Yeh, that's a good safe bank. I walked in. Yeh, best thing is to put it under an assumed name. Yeh, I'll make two accounts. I'll put fifty thousand under Eve McClain, fifty under John McClain, and one hundred grand I'll put in storage. Everybody from the bank president down shook hands with me before I left.

I was glad when I finally made Fat Moe's.

Patsy was sitting alone at the table drinking.

He waved his glass at me. "Have an eye opener, Noodles."

He glanced at my valise. "I see you got all your gelt. There's mine." He pointed to his valise under the table. I nodded and poured myself a drink.

Patsy said casually, "So you don't like that Federal Reserve heist, Noodles?"

I countered, "Do you?"

Patsy shrugged. "Maxie usually knows what he's doing. That last payroll job went off smooth as silk. You'll see this one will, too."

I gestured hopelessly. "I hope so."

Patsy rubbed his hands together, a happy smile on his face. "A million bucks is a million bucks, no matter what. That Maxie, he knows what he's doing. He's always got a gimmick up his sleeve."

"I hope so," I repeated. I felt justified in my pessimism. What kind of gimmick could Max have to trump those machine guns planted all around the walls? We will be like ducks in a barrel. The thought gave me the shakes. It reminded me of the time in Chicago, of how we poured bullets into those guys. I poured myself another double hooker. The side door opened. Max and Cockeye strode in carrying valises. Max was in a genial mood.

He greeted us. "How yuh douchin?" He reached for the bottle and poured for himself and Cockeye.

He saluted with his glass, "Le' chayim."

"Le' chayim," we answered.

He smacked his lips. "That hit the spot."

He picked up the bottle and poured for all of us. He raised his glass in the air with a smug smile.

"Tomorrow is the big day, it will go down in history," he said.

"You got the job all set up for tomorrow?" Patsy asked with admiration.

"Yep, everything will go off as scheduled. I'll give you guys all the low-down. First, let's get these trunks out of the way."

Maxie walked from trunk to trunk, opening them up.

"Okay, you guys take your choice," he said.

He strode to the door leading to the bar and called, "Hey, Moe. Keep this door locked, we don't want to be disturbed by anyone."

Moe answered, "Okay, Max."

Each of us picked up his valise and walked toward a safe. Cockeye appeared to be going for the same one I was.

I said, "Go ahead, take it. I'll take the other."

He walked away to the remaining one, muttering, "Don't do me no favors."

I slit open the envelope which was tied to the handle of the safe, and took out the typewritten combination. I twirled the knob to the proper number and yanked the door open. I opened my valise and began stuffing in the dough. From the corner of my eye I could see the rest of them doing the same. It was an odd sight, the four of us busily piling bundles of money from valises into safes.

Just then the phone rang. Maxie uttered a loud disgusted, "Damn" and answered it.

I continued stacking my money in the safe.

Max came away from the phone and said, "It was from the main office. We got to escort a big load of the Combine's whiskey up to Westchester this afternoon."

Immediately I thought, boy, if only we could get pinched doing it. About five minutes later the thought flashed through my mind: this is luck. I hate to do it, but it's better to do eighteen months on a Prohibition rap

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than face certain death in that goddamn stupid Federal Reserve heist. Yep, I hate to do it, but I'm going to blow the whistle on all of us, to the Prohibition Agents. Yeh, I'll blow the whistle and turn informer. I'll go up to their office and tell them where to pick us up with the load.

All we would actually have to do with time off for good behavior would be twelve months, and that we can do standing on our heads. At least we'll be alive, and maybe, by that time, Maxie will get some sense in his head and forget all about that damn heist. That's the only way out. If the Combine ever found out I blew the whistle on them and made them lose a fifty-grand load of Scotch, it would be bye-bye for me, in a cement kimona. Yeh, but how the hell would they find out? They'll never suspect I blew the whistle on myself. I'll cop a sneak the first chance I get and give the Prohibition Department all the dope.

I wondered what time the storage people would come to pick up the trunks, and what company Max had made arrangements with?

I called out to him, "Hey, Max, what outfit we storing with?"

He looked up. "I didn't make any definite arrangements yet. Most of them are pretty reliable. I thought maybe, when we're ready, we'll decide on one."

"We going to get these trunks stored before we go out to Westchester, ain't we?" Cockeye asked anxiously.

"Yep, what did you think," Maxie snorted, "we go out and leave all this dough laying around?"

We were startled by a sharp knocking on the door leading to the bar. We stood still listening for a moment. Max walked over to the door and said, "Yes?" He put his ear to the crack of the door and listened.

He called to me. "Moe says your kid brother is outside, Noodles. It's important, he wants to see you right away."

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An uneasy feeling shot through me. If my kid brother condescended to come down here to see me, something was wrong.

I said, "Tell him to wait a few minutes. I'll be right out."

I hurriedly finished stacking my money away. I had difficulty locking the safe door because I was nervous and shaky.

I was in a state all right. I tried to hide my distress. I was in a fog of uncertainty. I didn't want to leave here before I was sure my dough was in a safe place. At the same time I had to get outside and get in touch with the Prohibition Department. That was the only way out of that Federal Bank heist. Now, my kid brother, of all the goddamn inopportune moments. What the hell could he want that was so important? I'd bet it was Mamma. Boy, was I in a spot. The more I thought of what I had decided to do, the more agitated and distraught I became. It took me fifteen minutes more to lock the safe and put it in the trunk.

I walked out to the front. My brother was at the bar with a glass in his hand and a bottle in front of him. I felt uneasy. If the kid deigned to come down and see me, there must be something terribly wrong. Yeh, it must be Mamma. I steadied myself and put my hand on his shoulder.

"How are you, kid?"

He shrugged my arm off angrily. "Where the hell have you been? Why did you keep me waiting?"

"Why? What's up?"

The uneasy feeling increased.

He turned and glared at me.

"What's up?" he repeated. There was scorn and anger in his voice. "You never come around to find out, you bastard."

I looked at him. "Why, what's wrong? Mamma?" I asked.

His anger went out of his eyes, tears were forming.

He turned his head away and blubbered, "Mamma's in the hospital. She's going fast. She wants to see you."

A shiver went down my back. My heart dropped into my belly.

I said, "Wait a minute."

On shaky legs, I walked into the back room. I tried to control my breaking voice. "Max," I said, "I got to go. My mother's in the hospital."

I turned. Max followed me. He put his arm around my shoulder.

"If you need anything, let me know."

I mumbled, "Yeh, Max, thanks."

I said to my brother, "Come on, kid."

We walked outside. The kid hailed a cab. Everything seemed black to me. My heart was pounding. Then the pounding went to my head. I had a terrific headache. I broke into a sweat.

The kid was quiet for awhile, then he muttered, "You lousy bastard. For years you didn't come around. Mamma was eating her heart out."

"I sent dough," I mumbled.

"Who the hell needs your goddamn stinking dough? I take care of Mamma."

I was too sick at heart to argue. I was in a haze of misery.

I hardly realized we had arrived. The kid paid the cab. I walked up the steps of the hospital in a stupor. I followed the kid into a private room.

She opened her eyes and gave me her wonderful sweet smile.

"My sonny," she murmured.

She felt for my hand. I was shaking as if in a violent fever. Everything was dark and awful. I held on tightly to my Mamma's hand.

She managed to gasp, "How—are—you—my sonny? Are you working? Like a good—boy?" She barely whispered, "You behaving? My sonny?"

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“Yes, Mamma, I got a job out of town.”

That's all Mamma could say. She went into a coma. In a panic, I went looking for a doctor. I barged into his office. Incoherently I spoke to him.

He said, “There is nothing anybody can do.” He shook his head sadly. “It's a matter of hours.”

I fell apart. I cried out. My kid brother took me under the arm.

“Get hold of yourself, you stupid bastard,” he said.

He led me to a speakeasy around the corner.

We sat at a back table, drinking. I tried to drown my fear and anguish with booze. The kid went back to the hospital.

Suddenly I remembered, I had to get in touch with the Prohibition Department. I went outside, into a drug store and looked up the phone number of the New York office. I called; I gave the party on the other end all the information: where we were to pick up the trucks and the route we would take.

The voice was skeptical. It said, “How do we know it isn't some wild goose chase and you're just wasting our time? What's your motive in calling? What's your name?”

I was so befuddled that I shouted my name, and that I was one of the mob guarding the booze. I cursed him for five minutes, then I hung up and went back to the speakeasy.

The kid came back mumbling, “Mamma is still in a coma.” I sat blubbering in my glass. The kid walked out in disgust. After awhile, I went back to the hospital. I sat looking at Mamma. She was breathing hard, gasping.

Suddenly Mamma opened her beautiful eyes. She felt for my hand.

“I'm going, my son.”

I was holding her hand.

Like a small boy trying to pull her back out of danger, I was crying, “Mamma, Mamma.”

Her face was sad and sweet.

“I'll meet you in the next world, sonny,” she said.

“I won't be allowed to go there to see you, Mamma.”

I was sobbing violently, “I'm bad, bad.”

“I'll talk to God for you, sonny.”

She stopped breathing.

My kid brother blubbered; he was standing beside me.

“You killed Mamma. You ate her heart out, you bastard.”

I staggered away from him, and went back into the “speak.” I blubbered into the whiskey.

I don't know how long I sat there crying before I realized it was getting late, and I had things to do. I had to see about storing the trunk and safe for at least two years, then that escort job up in Westchester. Yeh, I hope the Feds will let me off to attend Momma's funeral. Yeh, they always do.

I took a cab to Fat Moe's. The place was empty and everybody was gone. I stood there dazed.

“Where are the safes?” I murmured.

Moe gave me a message. It was from Max. It said he had shipped the trunks to a storagehouse and when they got back from Westchester, he would give me my check, keys and other particulars. Not to worry, they could handle this Westchester job without me.

A wonderful feeling of relief shot through me. Jesus, what luck, I thought. I'm in the clear. Yeh, but how about Max, Patsy and Cockeye? They'll get picked up, and face an eighteen-month rap.

What the hell. I didn't plan it that way. If it wasn't for that crazy Maxie and his megalomaniac idea to heist the Federal Reserve Bank, I never would have blown the whistle.

I got in touch with my brother. He had already made arrangements for the burial. Under no condition would he have it in our parlors. He gave me the address. The time was for the next morning.

I went up to my rooms. I took a bottle to bed with me. I drank and I drank until I fell into a stupor, a melancholy stupor.

Way off above me, faintly I heard a choir chanting the El Mole, the sing-song prayer for the Jewish dead. Then I heard the great cantor, Yossele Rosenblatt, join in with Cockeye Hymie's sorrowful playing on his harmonica. I was sad. My heart was crying for my mamma.

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I couldn't sleep. I went out. I staggered out of one speakeasy into another.

I didn't know how it happened. I was reeling into Joey, the Chinaman's place.

He said, "What's the matter, Noodles, sick?"

I mumbled, "Fix me a pipe, Joey."

I fell down on a cot. Joey held the pipe for me. I was shaking. He dipped the pill in the water, held it over the open flame, and pressed the opium into the pipe.

Joey whispered, "Puff, this will give you peace."

I don't remember falling asleep or having my usual fantastic dreams. I know I awoke feeling despondent. I lay there in a fog of melancholia. Joey, the Chinaman, came in. His usually impassive face was ghastly white and screwed up with grief. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. He held a newspaper in his trembling hands.

He sat down on the bed sobbing, "Awful, awful, this is awful, Noodles."

I sat up in surprise. How could calm, serene Joey get so broken up about my mamma's death?

I patted him on the back. "Well, it was inevitable. She was a pretty sick woman."

He looked at me strangely, and handed me the morning papers. I looked at the pictures and tried to read the story. Devils began beating me over the head with crowbars and forcing them through my heart and belly. The lights in the room went on and off. The ceiling came down on my head. The floor came up and hit me in the face. It was the end of the world.

Twice the paper fell out of my nerveless hands, and seemed to fly around the room. I sat on the floor staring at the pictures. There they were on the front page, sprawled all over that Westchester road, in pools of blood.

Good God, it was them, the three of them. My three brothers. They were better than brothers. Maxie, Patsy and Cockeye—dead, dead, dead the three of them. I loved them. I loved them. They were better than brothers. I killed them. God, I killed them. Through eyes swimming in tears I read the story. Two carloads of Prohibition agents were about to make a seizure of a van full of liquor. The bootleg guard put up a fight and shot it out.

The casualties in the battle, besides the three dead hoodlums, were one dead and four critically wounded Prohibition agents.

I sat there on the floor stunned, crying to myself over and over, "It was my fault. All my fault. I killed them. I killed them."

Finally, I was able to compose myself. A thought hit me. I ran wildly out of the room like one possessed, as if something was chasing me. I grabbed a cab. "Delancey Street," I shouted.

The thought of all that money lying in the trunks was pursuing me. It's all mine, close to a million bucks in beautiful cash. A crazy itch was burning in the pit of my stomach. In my head roaring motors went wide open.

I kept repeating to myself, "I got to grab it quick. I got to grab it quick. Before somebody else does. It's my brothers'. It belongs to me."

I jumped out of the cab blocks too soon. I banged and pushed the startled pedestrians out of my way as I went tearing drunkenly through busy Delancey Street. Like a maniac I crashed through the front door of Fat Moe's, hitting and throwing the alarmed patrons out of my way. I plunged into the back room. It was empty! The trunks were gone! Yeh, now I remembered. Maxie had shipped them to a storagehouse.

I shouted for Moe. He came from behind the bar. Fear and grief were on his face. I grabbed him by the throat and shook him violently and shouted into his face, "Where are they? What happened to them?"

He misunderstood me.

He said, "They're dead; they're all dead."

He began to blubber. "Max, Patsy and Cockeye are dead."

Tears streamed down his fat face.

I backed him against the wall and held the knife to his throat.

I shouted frantically at him. "Not them, you fat bastard, I'm talking about the trunks, the four trunks. Where did you put them? Where are they?"

"Trunks?" he said dumbly.

"Yeh, trunks," I shouted, "you bastard."

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"Moving men came for them," he cried. "Maxie gave them to some moving men yesterday. I gave you a note from Maxie explaining it. Don't you remember?"

Yeh, now I remembered. How did I happen to forget?

"To what moving men?" I asked. "Do you know?"

"Honest, I don't know, Noodles, but we can find out. Take it easy, Noodles, control yourself," he pleaded.

"Yeh, I can find out," I muttered as I released him and slumped into a chair.

It was Maxie's big chair. When I realized where I was sitting, I began to laugh and shout hysterically.

"Maxie's chair, the baron's chair." I laughed and cried and repeatedly shouted, "Maxie's chair," until a feeling of nausea came over me.

I puked all over the floor. Moe came over with a wet towel. Tears poured down his fat puffed face. He wiped my face and clothes and murmured soothingly. "Take it easy, Noodles, take it easy, you'll break down."

I began to cry. I embraced him. I broke down and sobbed on his shoulder. We both sobbed brokenly on each other's shoulders for Maxie, Patsy and Cockeye, our dear departed brothers.

I felt terribly empty, lost, forlorn. We cried and we cried. Sobbing openly, I staggered out to the front bar and told all the patrons to please go home. I locked the door after they had left.

Moe and I each took a bottle off the shelf and began drinking. We took our shoes off and sat on the floor.

I said, "You and I, Moe, are going to sit shiva for my mother, Maxie, Patsy and Cockeye, right here, all week on the floor, in the orthodox Hebrew fashion."

Then I realized I had missed my mother's funeral. I wailed the louder and vowed to sit shiva all week right here.

Drunkenly Moe murmured, "Yeh, Noodles, me and you will fast and pray and sit shiva here on the floor all week."

We sat there on the floor in the back room, crying and rocking back and forth in the age-old fashion, beating our breasts and giving full sway to our emotions, pouring out our deep grief in loud wails of anguish. When the two quart bottles were empty, we fell into a fitful slumber.

It must have been hours later, I sat up. Day was breaking. Moe was lying on his back snoring loudly. I was numb all over. I was in a confused state. My head was pounding away. Gigantic generator wheels were whirling inside and screeching the monotonous refrain, "Money, money, money, where's the money? Money, money, money, a million dollars, cash money. Four trunks of money. Where's all that money?"

I staggered to my feet. That burning, driving itch in the pit of my stomach renewed itself, and spread fiercely through every part of me. Every nerve in my body shouted, "Money, money, money, a million dollars' worth of money," until the refrain poured out of my lips, and I started shouting that sing-song chorus, "Money, money, money. A million dollars' worth of money. I got to look for my money. My million dollars' worth of money, my four trunks full of money."

Like a madman I dashed out into Delancey Street again. An astonished milkman and his startled horse both stared at me as I stood in the middle of the gutter shouting, "Money, money, money. Where's my four trunks full of money?"

Abruptly I came to. I realized I was acting crazy. I said to myself, What the hell am I doing? I got to get hold of myself. Nobody knows about the money, about them trunks, only I. I got to go looking for them, sensibly and systematically. If I keep acting crazy, everybody will go looking for my money.

I kept repeating to myself, keep calm, Noodles, take it easy, old boy, as if I were two persons. I did a silly thing. I walked over to the milk wagon; the alarmed driver backed away. I took a quart bottle of milk out of the wagon and poured half of it down my burning throat. The milkman kept staring at me. It irritated me. I flung the bottle at him. It missed him by inches. With a frightened yell he ran down the street. The horse neighed, and trotted after him. They disappeared down the street.

I felt a little better. I walked down deserted Delancey Street. I walked, not caring or knowing where. The morning air cleared my head a bit. I went into a small coffee pot and drank three cups of steaming black coffee. I took a cab and went to my hotel. I had a cold shower and changed into fresh clothes and went out on my search.

First I canvassed every truckman and moving man in the East Side. I asked the same questions over and over again. "Did you haul four large trunks recently? Did you know of anybody that did?"

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I offered a thousand-dollar reward for any information. I wanted to make the reward larger, but then I thought it would arouse too much talk and interest.

Then systematically I took a small area at a time and ferreted out the local storagehouses. To no avail. For a week I trudged on foot. Then I hired a cab by the day, and went frantically from one part of the city to the other, following every meager clew. I lost valuable days by that method of search.

Then the shocking thought came to me. I had not attended my mother's funeral, or Maxie's, Patsy's or Cockeye's. Were they already buried? I made inquiries. I was too late. I cursed myself for my heartlessness and neglect. I almost got myself arrested by trying to claim Maxie's clothing and personal belongings. I thought I might find a clue among his remains.

I continued my anxious search. I scoured the back room of Fat Moe's from top to bottom, seeking keys or receipts with unavailing thoroughness.

Fat Moe warned me to stay away. Tough-looking strangers had asked for me.

"To hell with them," I said.

In my despair, I hit on what I thought was a good idea. I went to a small Broadway detective agency. They asked me too many pertinent questions. Many too many. What did they contain and so forth.

I felt I could not trust my questioner. I told him to forget the matter. He said, "Glad to." I guess he took me for some kind of a crackpot. In fact, I went to so many places and asked so many silly questions I began to feel like a crackpot. I found myself haunting the same warehouses over and over again, making a nuisance of myself. I went into one big warehouse flashing a New York police detective badge and demanded to inspect the books and premises. The manager refused me, insisting on a court order. I was getting desperate. I went into a place one night, and hit the watchman over the head and searched the warehouse.

Weeks and weeks went by. Finally I felt beaten. I went into Fat Moe's and stayed there all day. I drank heavily to overcome my miserable hopelessness. The ghosts and familiar objects about the place drove me crazy. I chased all the customers out and locked the door. I paced up and down. I began to rave and think again, "A million bucks lying around somewhere, goddamn it, but where? Where could Maxie have shipped those trunks? There are hundreds and hundreds of warehouses in the five boroughs. To an out-of-town warehouse maybe? Maybe in a flat or a basement of an apartment building? God almighty, where could they be? Is this going to be my punishment? To spend the rest of my life wearily looking for those trunks? That bastard Maxie, to do this to me. May his soul bum in hell and be tortured the way I am being tortured. I cursed Maxie with every foul epithet I could think of.

CHAPTER 47

A loud banging on the door interrupted me.

I said to Moe, “Who the hell is that? Chase the bastards. It bothers me.”

“Somebody has been knocking on that door for some time,” Moe grumbled. “I told them we're closed. They won't stop.”

“I'll chase the bastard quick,” I growled.

I staggered to the door.

I opened it and shouted into the darkness. “You guys don't get the hell away, I'll—”

That was as far as I got with my threat. From behind a pair of arms grabbed me like a vise. I knew who it was. Only one person had that herculean strength. I was helpless; my chest and arms were about to crack in that awful grip. I forced myself to gasp out, “Muscles, for Christ sake—Muscles, let up.”

Muscles laughed out. “You recognized my strong grip, hey, Noodles?”

“Your strong breath, you stinking bastard,” I panted.

He tightened his grip. I couldn't say another word. I was paralyzed from head to foot. I cried out in pain. I felt as if I was being broken in half. Hands went through my pockets and took my knife and gun away. Muscles picked me up as if I were without weight and carried me to the back room. He dumped me on the floor.

The lights were switched on. For a moment I was blinded by the brightness. Then, from my prone position on the floor, I looked up. My heart sank into my belly. In a complete circle, surrounding me, were Muscles, Trigger Mike, and Mendy, leering down at me. I knew I was doomed. This was it. This was the ace Combination killer squad that operated all over the country. The super police force for the upper echelon in the Combination. I knew what they wanted with me. I was sick with fear. This was the end, but I vowed I would never show it.

I got to my feet, looked around at them defiantly. I snarled at Muscles, “Some day I'll cut your goddamn arms off.” He lunged at me.

Mendy barked, “Lay off, Muscles.” Muscles muttered, “I'll break him in half, the rat.”

“I'll cut your tongue out for that, you friggin bastard.” I spit on him; my venom seemed to impress him. He backed away.

“All right, Noodles, cut that out, we know you're a 'man,' and we'll treat you like one, if you'll come along quietly,” Trigger said.

“What's up?” I bluffed.

“Oh, the regular 'business,’” Mendy smiled benignly at me.

My feet almost collapsed under me.

“Why am I to get 'the business?’”

I tried to sound angry.

“We hate to say it, Noodles,” Mendy said, “but they got the proof you're the guy that blew the whistle on Maxie and the rest of your friends.”

My heart stopped. I said weakly, “Who said so, Mendy?”

“Well, the board discussed it pro and con; they figured it was queer you wasn't with Max—”

“Why explain it to the rat?” Muscles cut in.

“Look, Muscles, if I want to explain it to Noodles, I'm not asking you. Okay?” Mendy growled surlily.

“Go ahead and waste time. I got a date with a broad.”

“You and your dates,” Mendy snapped sarcastically. “What tomato is going to be seen with you? Besides, we got a job to do, and if a guy wants to ask a few questions before he gets 'the business,' especially a guy like Noodles, I'm going to answer him.”

“Okay, okay, go ahead and waste time,” Muscles grumbled.

“Thanks, Mendy,” I said. I tried to keep the tremor out of my voice. “Just because I wasn't there doesn't prove anything. Why didn't they call me for the hearing? I could prove I had to go to the hospital, my mother

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was dying.”

“Too bad,” Mendy said sadly. He shrugged.

“I guess they figured there was no use of your appearing; they had the goods on you.”

“Yeh, Noodles, they had you dead to rights,” Trigger Mike added. “You know with their connections all over, they found out you called the Feds on the phone.”

“And you gave them your name. You told them who you were, Noodles,” Trigger said with wonder in his voice. “You must have been nuts to do a thing like that.”

“It could have been somebody else who called and used my name.” I sounded unconvincing.

“Yeh, it could have been somebody who had a hard on for you,” Mendy agreed. He shrugged. “What the hell, I guess they don’t want to take a chance. They’re pretty sure you blew the whistle. Well, anyway we take orders. We got the contract to give you the business.” He faced me. He threw up his hands in a resigned gesture. “You know, Noodles, orders is orders. Let’s get moving.”

He started to walk out.

I had one more hope. I could appeal to the highest authority.

I blurted out eagerly, “I want to see Frank. I want to tell him my story.”

Mendy shook his head negatively.

“Why?” I asked anxiously. “I rate a hearing before him? I’m entitled, ain’t I? He listens to both sides of a story.”

“Yeh, you’re entitled, but that man is out of the country.”

I felt as if I didn’t have a bone to hold my body upright. I was like a mass of weak, spineless, quivering flesh. I don’t know how I kept myself from sinking to the ground.

Through the fog of shock and the ringing in my ears I heard Trigger say, “Yeh, Frank went on a visit to his hometown. With a gift. A big clock for the town square with his name on it.”

Mendy echoed, “Yeh, a big clock with his name on it.”

With Muscles holding my arm in a bone-crushing grip, and the other two, one in front and the other behind me, we walked outside and into a shiny black, straight-eight Packard. I was being taken for a ride—a one-way ride. Then I thought: no it couldn’t be. They wouldn’t give it to me like that. No, the one-way ride is taboo with the Combination. No, they won’t stand for it that way any more, to plug a guy in the head and dump the body out into the street. Dead bodies lying around in the gutter make too much noise, too much publicity in the newspapers. That was the old way. No, I’m not going to get it like that. How are they going to give it to me? God, ain’t there a way out? I began to tremble. I couldn’t breathe. I felt faint. I was going to pass out. Me, Noodles, I can’t, I can’t. I grabbed hold of myself.

But it all seemed so unreal. I couldn’t believe it was happening to me. Me, Noodles, was going to get it. I was out to get the business. Instead of me being at the giving end, for the first time I was at the receiving end. Was it real? Or was this one of my pipe dreams? No, Muscles’ stinking breath in my face was too real. I sank into a funk. I cringed back into my seat. I shivered, thinking again how were they going to go about giving me the business? Would Mendy allow Muscles to twist my neck like a chicken until I was dead? Or let him strangle me? No, not Mendy. He’s a guy with a heart, not like Muscles. Terror-stricken at the thought, I rubbed my neck. I winced when I recognized the place we stopped. We were on West Street outside of the Combination warehouse. Yeh, here’s where I’m going to get the business.

How could anybody do such a thing? Such an awful thing for one human being to kill another. I was horrified. It shouldn’t be. Suddenly I laughed. I was brave when I did it to others. Now, look at me—chickenhearted. How was I going to react before I died? Paralyzed with fear? Like the others? Pleading and shrieking in a frenzy of terror? No, not me. I better get hold of myself. I’m Noodles, the East Side tough chick. I better shake out of it. Into a mood. Yeh, a tough angry mood. So when these bastards talk about me later, they’ll say, “Yeh that Noodles was a man with plenty of balls.” Yeh, they’ll speak with respect. They’ll say, “Yeh that Noodles, he had plenty of balls.”

Muscles almost yanked my arm out of my socket. He leered, “How you feel, Noodles? Like shitten in your pants?”

“You muff, divin, stinkin bitch.” I burst into a furious rage. “If I had my shiv, I’d cut you in a million pieces, piece by piece.”

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I spit on him.

Muscles wiped his face and came at me. Mendy got in his way.

He snapped at him. "You deserve it. Didn't I tell you Noodles is a man?" He added admiringly, "And to a man you show respect."

Mendy gave the customary knocking and scratching signal on the warehouse door. The big door opened. We walked in. The only one of the four inside guards I recognized was the Chicken Flicker. He stood there looking me over curiously. He had a Tommy gun in his hand. I nodded to him.

He said, "Hello, Noodles."

Muscles chuckled, "Hey, Chicken Flicker, you shoulda said 'Goodbye Noodles.'"

"Who asked you?" Mendy barked at Muscles. He turned to the guards. "Go ahead, you guys, take a powder."

Chicken Flicker and the rest walked away.

"All right, let's get it over with." He gestured for us to follow.

"We stepped over and around the piles of merchandise. He seemed to have a specific part of the warehouse in mind. We walked around a pyramid of steel drums. I almost dropped dead. Yeh, there it was, in the regulation wooden square: a fresh mixture of cement. Alongside of it stood a large steel barrel. There was the answer to the question, the sixty-four dollar question. I knew how I was to get the business. They were going to put me to sleep with a bullet in the brain, then a cement kimono, at the bottom of the Hudson River.

Those two items, the cement mixture and the steel drum stifled my air of bravado. I felt hopeless. What to do? What to do? Should I plead? No, there wasn't a chance with this hard-boiled crew. I watched as Mendy bent down and ran his hand through the cement mixture with the air of an expert, and said to Muscles, "Two more shovels of sand."

I watched with fascinated awe as Muscles added two shovels of fine sand and stirred the mixture.

Muscles smiled. "The last guy we gave a cement kimono to was Bow Legs. Bow Legs Wineberg."

"Who asked you?" Mendy said curtly. "Just keep mixing that stuff, good. Goddamn good. I don't want a half-assed job."

The strain was getting too much for me. I felt I was going to break any moment. Now I knew how people feel before they die. They die a hundred times over before they're dead. It's better to die unexpectedly than to know when you're about to die. It's fearful, ghastly. Why don't they get it over with? Please God, do something.

Mendy signaled Trigger. Trigger took his .45 out and attached a Maxim silencer.

There was a gentleness in Mendy's voice as he asked, "Where do you want it, Noodles? The belly, the heart, or in the brains?"

"Yeh, that Noodles is supposed to have a big brain," Muscles sneered.

"None of that. Show respect." Mendy glared at Muscles.

There was a kindly expression on Mendy's face as he said, "Where?"

My mouth was dry, my tongue was frozen, I couldn't talk.

"Where?" Trigger repeated patiently. He was staring at me with the gun in his hand for hours. With a terrific effort I was finally able to raise my hand and touch my forehead. Yeh, that was where I wanted the slug to crash into me. It seemed all eternity passed as he slowly, oh so slowly, lifted his arm. The gun with the silencer attached looked enormous, like a cannon. I was hypnotized by it. The muzzle of the gun against my head felt icy cold and burning hot at the same time.

In a voice that seemed a mile away I heard Trigger say, "Hey, Mendy."

Mendy asked, "Yes?"

If I hadn't been paralyzed stiff with fear, as if rigor mortis had already set in, I would have been a heap of quivering terror on the floor.

"Ain't you going to let Noodles say a prayer? Ain't he entitled?" Trigger repeated. "Yeh, you're right, Trigger."

Mendy turned to me apologetically. "I'm sorry, Noodles, I forgot, go ahead and say a prayer."

Dumbly I shook my head.

"Nothing you want to say?" Mendy asked graciously. "A last message to somebody, maybe?"

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A last message? I thought who to? I ain't got nobody, only Eve. How can I get in touch with her? So at least she'll get the benefit of that hundred grand I got in the United States Bank. And that elusive million in the trunks that I couldn't find. Suddenly my mind began to function. Yeh, if I play it smart and don't overdo it, at the least it would give me a short reprieve. I got nothing to lose. Maybe, somehow, I could get word to her through Moe?

Yeh, but I got to play it slow and smart. I got to tempt them just a little bit and not overdo it. I can't buy them off. No, they won't take a chance. The hope, the slim hope loosened my tongue, I was able to speak. I had an idea.

"Yeh, I would like to send a message to my brother," I said.

"Okay, I'll have it get to him. What do you want to tell him?"

"I want to tell him where my dough is."

At the word dough, the three exchanged glances.

"Okay, I'll tell him, where is it?" Mendy asked.

A greedy look came into his eyes.

"You know the order Frank sent around to everybody to take their dough out of the banks?"

"Yeh, I heard of it," Mendy said eagerly.

"Well, Max, Cockeye, Patsy and I took our dough out of the banks and put it into trunks."

"You grabbed all that dough?" Mendy questioned tensely.

Shamefully I hung my head. "Yeh, I grabbed all the dough."

"It must amount to plenty? Hey, Noodles?"

Trigger stuck his face close to mine, an avaricious smile on his face.

"Yeh, we all had money." I tried to sound evasive.

"How much?" Muscles grabbed me by the head. He almost twisted my head off, like a chicken's.

Mendy jumped in, grabbed Muscles by the hair, and pulled him off me.

I fell back, feigning pain and anger.

I shouted savagely. "I got a million bucks stacked away. You'll never get any part of it. I know what's on your mind."

"Keep your hands off Noodles. I'm giving you your last warning."

Mendy glared furiously at Muscles. "Let's you and I talk this over." He motioned me to a box. We both sat down.

"We can make a deal." He offered me a starter.

With a supreme effort, I controlled my eagerness and played hard to get.

I shrugged and said, "I don't know. What's the deal?"

"Half the dough, and I let you go."

I tried to look gullible.

"That's a fair deal, Mendy. Is it okay with those guys?"

I nodded in their direction. Two hostile faces were looking at us.

"I can handle them, they take orders from me." Mendy raised his voice. "Come here." He motioned to them. "I made a deal with Noodles. We get half the dough and Noodles disappears, leaves the country for good. Okay with you?"

He didn't wait for their answer; he turned to me.

I nodded.

"Nobody will be the wiser," Mendy continued. "We'll report you got the business and dumped you in the Hudson River."

"It's a deal," I agreed hurriedly.

They went into a whispered huddle. From the group Muscles gave me a mocking grin as if I didn't know that even if I had the dough and could produce it, they would take all of it, and then dump me. These crumbs would even fight and kill one another over the division of it. If—yes, a big if—I had it. What the hell was I to do now? Why did I prolong it? It could have been over with. Where could I take them? What could I do? God Almighty, I got to think of something, I got to use my noodle now. Please, God, give me an idea what to do. Anyway, I'm going to get out of here.

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This place always gave me the creeps. I don't want to die here. It's like a big mausoleum. Too many guys were killed in this joint. If I got to die, I'll die on the outside. Frig them bastards. As a last resort I'll fight until they murder me. Maybe I can take that Muscles with me. If I can lay my hands on something, a shiv or a gat.

God, where can I? Maybe there's something laying in a closet in Fat Moe's? Yeh, that's it, I'll steer them there. Maybe Jake the Goniff or Goo-Goo or Pipy would be around and help? God, would that be a break. Please, God, do something. I will go to schul for the rest of my life like my papa. Please God.

They broke up, grinning slyly at me. Mendy said, "We'll go and get the gelt?"

I nodded. "Yeh, let's go."

I tried to act tough.

"Where?" Mendy smiled pleasantly.

"It's in storage."

"Storage? Where?"

"First I got to pick up the keys and receipts for the trunks at Fat Moe's."

I tried to say it quick and businesslike.

"In Fat Moe's?" Mendy smiled. "All of us don't have to go." My heart jumped for joy; they were going to split up; what a break. "Me and Trigger can go for them," Mendy said.

My heart dropped into my belly.

"Why can't we all go?" Muscles asked suspiciously.

"I'll never tell you where the keys are and you'll never find them if I don't go along," I said grimly, "no matter what you do."

"Okay," Mendy smiled amiably, "we'll all go."

During the ride I almost took a chance to dive through the door. We stopped for traffic where two cops stood talking together.

But I guess I didn't have much of a chance with Muscles' arm draped affectionately around my neck. One move out of the way, and he would have strangled me. God, I was in a hopeless state. The most ridiculous comparison entered my mind: I felt like a fish squirming helplessly on a hook in a basket. I guess that was because the upholstery of the car was a straw weave, and every time I fidgeted, Muscles growled, "Stop twisting like a fish, or I strangle you."

I wasn't very frightened any more. I was in a state of bewilderment. I was wondering what I should do when we got to Fat Moe's. I was resigned to the inevitable. I didn't have a chance. I was muddled; the fight was out of me.

I kept saying to myself, the hell with it, what's the use. I got nothing or nobody, no friends, Maxie, Patsy, Cockeye, all dead. I may as well join them. My mother. God Almighty, Eve—Eve will be waiting for me. My wave of self-pity was interrupted as the car pulled up to the curb. Like a sleepwalker in a trance, I walked between them across the crowded sidewalk of Delancey Street into the front entrance of Moe's.

Did I imagine it? Did Fat Moe really give me a sign of assurance as we passed him? He seemed to give me a look of compassion and understanding. No, that was wishful thinking. No, nobody in the whole world could help me. Even Moe, after that quick look, turned his face and went about his business. The back room looked empty and cold.

"All right, get the stuff you're looking for and let's get out of here," Mendy said gruffly.

I walked over to the closet slowly. I was actually in a state of hypnosis. This was all a dream, some kind of nightmare. The closet door seemed far away as I put my hand on the knob.

From way behind me I heard Mendy growl. "What the hell you want? Keep the hell out."

Dazedly, I turned to see whom he was addressing.

Fat Moe was standing there with a bottle and glasses on a tray; his fat face was beaming in a friendly smile.

"Have something to drink, gents?"

"Yeh, that's a good idea," Muscles said, going for the bottle.

Smiling, Moe put the tray on the table. He said, "Help yourselves," and walked away.

I saw Muscles fill three glasses. Mendy had his eyes on me as he lifted his glass to his lips. I turned and opened the door of the closet, slowly I went down on my knees to rummage around on the bottom. I found

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nothing, not even an empty whiskey bottle to fight with. I remained in that position, sparring for time. I didn't turn around. I picked up the floor linoleum in the closet as if I was diligently searching for something. I had an urge to creep deeper into the closet, close the door and stay there in the dark for the rest of my life. It was strangely quiet behind me.

Then I found myself praying, praying for a miracle. I was praying to a God. What God? Was there a God? Would He hear the prayer of a miserable creature like me hidden away in a dark closet? What should I say? Please God, please God, spare me; I will be a good man. Or should I put it this way: spare my stinking life, God, and I will make a deal with you. I will do anything. Spare me, God.

Oh, the hell with everything. Why don't they yank me out and kill me? I was mumbling hopelessly to myself, "What's the use? Oh, what's the use, why don't they grab me and finish me off?"

CHAPTER 48

Suddenly I heard a crash behind me. I jumped up and out. I came to life. Mendy was lying on the floor, out like a light. Trigger was sprawled over the table snoring. Muscles, his eyes glazed, was on his feet staggering around muttering, "Knockout drops, all screwed up with knockout drops."

He poured the liquor from the bottle on his head in an effort to revive himself. He shook his head violently from side to side, trying to keep awake. He saw me. He came for me.

"You told him to give us knockout drops," he muttered. "I'll strangle you."

He tripped over Mendy and fell on his face. He lay there. I was about to dash out when I spied the gun protruding from Trigger's pocket. I stooped for it, it was caught in the lining of his pocket. I pulled the gun and the lining out together.

I heard a step behind me. I whirled around. Muscles grabbed my arm in an excruciating grip. It felt paralyzed. The gun fell out of my hand. I dashed out to the front bar. Muscles leaped on top of me. He flung me to the floor and grabbed me by the throat. The patrons ran into Delancey Street, shrieking.

I saw Moe break a whiskey bottle over Muscles' head. It dazed him for the moment. I kicked out and got him in the belly. I struggled to my feet and staggered out into the street into the immense crowd gathering around the door. Muscles made a dive for me. I fell to the sidewalk with him on top of me. A screaming bystander was under me. The blood from the crack on his head was all over me.

The crowded street was in an uproar. It seemed as if thousands of men, women and children were running in wild panic in all directions, screeching, "Police! Police! A man is being murdered!"

Muscles had his hands around my throat. I was beginning to see black dots and sharp flashes in front of my eyes.

I thought this was the end.

As in a dream I saw Moe leaning over him with another whiskey bottle that flew into thousands of pieces as it hit Muscles' head. I struggled to my feet, knocking, screaming, frightening people out of my way. I looked around, Muscles was right behind me. Blood was pouring from him. His blood was all over Delancey Street.

I staggered into a bakery shop and held the door shut. It was as if I had burst into a crowded chicken coop. Like startled hens, the cackling, shrieking women shoppers went flying in all directions.

With a shower of broken glass Muscles came crashing through the door.

The women ran out to the street, screaming frantically.

I dived behind the counter. I spied the big bread knife.

I had it in my hand just in time. I swung it at the face of the charging Muscles. The point caught his right upper cheek and ripped it open to his mouth. His cheek was actually hanging over his chin. I could see his back teeth through the side of his face. He ran bleeding and screaming down Delancey Street, with me after him, swinging the big bread knife, yelling like a maniac, "I'll cut you into small pieces."

Screaming, panicky people darted in all directions out of our way.

"Bastard," I raved as I slashed furiously. I ripped a slice of his coat off his back. I slashed out again. The point ripped the back of his neck.

I heard running feet behind me and a voice shouting, "Drop that knife, Noodles, or I'll shoot."

I stopped and turned. There was the neighborhood cop pointing his gun at me.

I saw he meant business. I dropped the knife; it clattered to the pavement.

"You there, come here." The cop shouted at Muscles.

Muscles staggered dazedly over, holding up his hanging cheek. Hundreds of people crowded around us.

"I finally caught you in the act of committing murder, Noodles; this rap you'll never beat."

The cop looked at Muscles' bleeding head and cheek.

"You butchered this guy good. You people stand back," he waved to the crowd. "Somebody call an ambulance," he said.

He walked behind me to frisk my back pockets.

The Hoods

With a murderous incoherent yell that seemed to come out of the opening at the side of his mouth, Muscles sprang for me. The cop jumped between us. The terrific force that Muscles put into the grab for me knocked the gun out of the cop's hand and hurled the three of us, including five shrieking bystanders, sprawling into the gutter. It was a mad scramble.

How Muscles got possession of the big bread knife, I don't know, but there he was stabbing the air wildly around me as I twisted and turned, rolling with the cop in the filthy gutter of Delancey Street. I saw the cop's gun against the curb. I slid face forward, grabbed it and pulled the trigger in the general direction of the knife—swinging dervish.

The first slug hit him in the belly. He fell in the gutter on his face. I pumped one more into him. My hand was shaking. It missed, ricocheted into a bystander, who fell to the ground screaming. Muscles began pleading and crying, “Oh, oh, I can't stand the pain. Please finish me off, Noodles—please.”

I walked up close to the dying Muscles. I took careful aim and shot Muscles clear through the head.

I pointed the gun at the charging cop and yelled, “I'll kill you, too, you bastard.”

He stopped. I waved the gun at the crowd. They pushed back out of my way.

I started running, not knowing in what direction, the cop and the yelping, howling pack right after me. It seemed as if thousands of people took up the ear-splitting shout, “Catch Noodles, the murderer.” It seemed as if thousands of hands were reaching out to grab me, to tear me to bits. Delancey Street vibrated with the howling of a bloodthirsty mob.

A taxi had stopped in the middle of the street. The driver was standing on the running board with the motor running.

I was on top of the startled driver before he realized it.

I poked the gun in his chest and shouted, “Beat it before I blow a hole right through you.”

He jumped like a jack rabbit. I dived into the driver's seat. I jammed the shift handle into first, second and third and went careening across Delancey Street, the tires screeching. I passed the Clinton Street Station House. A horde of blue coats ran into the middle of the street shouting and emptying their guns after me. I made a left turn under the Williamsburg Bridge to go uptown. I remembered, as in a crazy dream, hitting and upsetting pushcarts in my wild ride up a narrow street. It was a miracle that I made the open street of First Avenue.

I left the cab at First and Fourteenth. I ducked into a movie house where I stayed until the place closed. Then I grabbed a cab to Joey, the Chinaman's place.

The moment I was in Joey's presence I felt safe and relaxed. I said to him, “A private room, Joey. I'm on the lam from everybody, the mob, cops, everybody.”

“Don't worry, Noodles,” he answered. “I'll put you in a room that nobody will find.”

I lay on the cot. Joey lit the lamp under my pipe. All the distress, pain and uneasiness floated out of me with each puff of the wonderful moist vapors. Gentle peace seeped into my blood with each puff of the good smoke and was carried all through my body. Then dreams, colorful and strange dreams, through the sweetish vapor of the pipe.

CHAPTER 49

Suddenly, somebody grabbed me. The hands that held me, shook me violently and an insistent voice pressed on me.

“Wake up, Noodles, wake up. They're downstairs. Wake up.”

I shook my head dazedly. I saw Joey's frightened face. He was pleading, “For God's sake, wake up, Noodles.”

“Jesus, what a pipe dream,” I murmured.

I sat up.

“What? What? What's up?” I asked.

“Get up, Noodles, quick,” Joey said.

I heard the shouting and the noise of revolvers going off downstairs.

“They're here,” Joey said in a tense hurried whisper. “Mendy, Trigger and two others.”

I jumped off the cot in alarm.

“Quick, follow me,” he whispered frantically.

I followed Joey down the fire escape through a narrow alley into a cellar. The other end of the cellar led to another alley at the end. We were two blocks away from Joey's house. I peered down the street. It was empty.

“Better leave town,” Joey said breathlessly.

“Thanks, Joey,” I said.

I scurried down the street. I hurried west. I walked in the shadows, close to the buildings. I hit Broadway. I had the shakes. I slowed down to catch my breath. I tried to pull myself together. What should I do? Where shall I go? Yeh, I got to get out of town, but how? Between the cops looking for me and the Combine, no train or bus station would be safe. That would be the first place they would watch, a terminal.

I saw the subway station a block away. Yeh, that's okay. I ducked down the stairs and caught a train going uptown. I rode all the way up to 181st Street. I walked up Broadway a few blocks, into an all-night diner. Trucks were parked outside. I had hamburgers and coffee.

When I noticed a driver walk out, I sidled up to him. I said, “Can I hop a ride with you, pal?”

“Yeh,” he answered, “if you give me a hand.”

“Sure thing,” I said eagerly. “Where you going?”

“Going to Hastings to deliver a load of case goods. When we get there, yuh going to help me unload?”

“It's a deal.”

I got in alongside of him. I breathed in deep as we rolled up Broadway and out of the city. I tried to push the fear out of my mind, but it was useless. I digested yesterday's harrowing experiences over and over. I got the shakes again just thinking of what had happened. And what might happen.

A national alarm will be sent out for me, from two sources. Which source would be more efficient in the search for me? The cops, or the Combine? Can I evade the cops with their direct connections with every city, state and Federal police group?

It wouldn't be too hard. But how could I keep away from the blasting guns of thousands of hoodlums who had already received their orders to drop me dead on sight?

Yeh, every mob in every city had received its orders. I knew how efficient the Combine was. The big cities wouldn't be safe. But I'd use my noodle. I'd keep to the jerk towns and the open country until things cooled off. The driver was humming to himself. It was daylight as the big Mack rolled into Hastings.

“Made pretty good time, hey, Bud?” the driver said, with a self-satisfied smile.

In spite of my aches and pains, I kept my promise. I helped him unload.

I said, “Thanks, pal.”

I walked down the street. The driver headed back to New York.

I took stock of my possessions. My wallet contained close to four hundred dollars. That was enough for my present needs. I wouldn't touch that hundred grand I had in the Bank of the United States. It was in a safe spot. Yeh, I wouldn't touch it. I was smart to leave my money there.

The Hoods

First, I'd better get some appropriate clothes if I intended to play the part of a gent of the open road. I walked north on the main street of Hastings. I spied an Army and Navy store. It was closed. I hung around for an hour until it opened. I bought high, sturdy walking shoes, work pants, shirt, jacket, socks, underwear and a cheap slouch hat. I spent thirty-two dollars for a complete change. I smiled to myself when I thought of the times I had spent more than that just for a good Stetson.

I walked out of the town along the Hudson River. When I came to a secluded spot where the bushes overhung the river I undressed, I washed myself with river water and changed into my new outfit.

I still had the cop's gun. One bullet remained. I took it out and flung it into the river. The gun I put on a big rock. Then with a heavy stone I pounded it until it broke into many pieces. Each piece I tossed in a different direction into deep water. The clothes that I discarded I buried in a hole among the dense growth of river bushes.

I walked jauntily to the Albany Post Road with a fresh feeling of hope and confidence. Near Harmon on the Hudson, I went into a small grocery and bought two tins of boneless and skinless imported sardines, a loaf of white bread, a quart of milk and five Hershey bars.

I walked along the river a short distance above Harmon into a small peaceful grassy open space protected by a thick growth of trees. With a new-found feeling of contentment and leisure, I sat down in this glade. I opened a tin of sardines and made two sandwiches. They disappeared very quickly. I hadn't realized I was that hungry. I contemplated eating the other can of sardines and the rest of the bread, but I decided on a Hershey bar and the milk instead. Two bars of chocolate melted in my mouth. The cool milk tasted like some sweet nectar. I tried to remember the last time I had drunk a glass of milk. I couldn't for the life of me, it was so many years ago.

I stretched out on my back with my arms under my head. All the aches and tiredness flowed out of me. I felt safe and at peace in this sanctuary. Yeh, peace is wonderful.

Well, you see I am here, after all the years, to tell the story. But how I got away, where I holed up—that's another story and you will understand why I can't tell that now.