

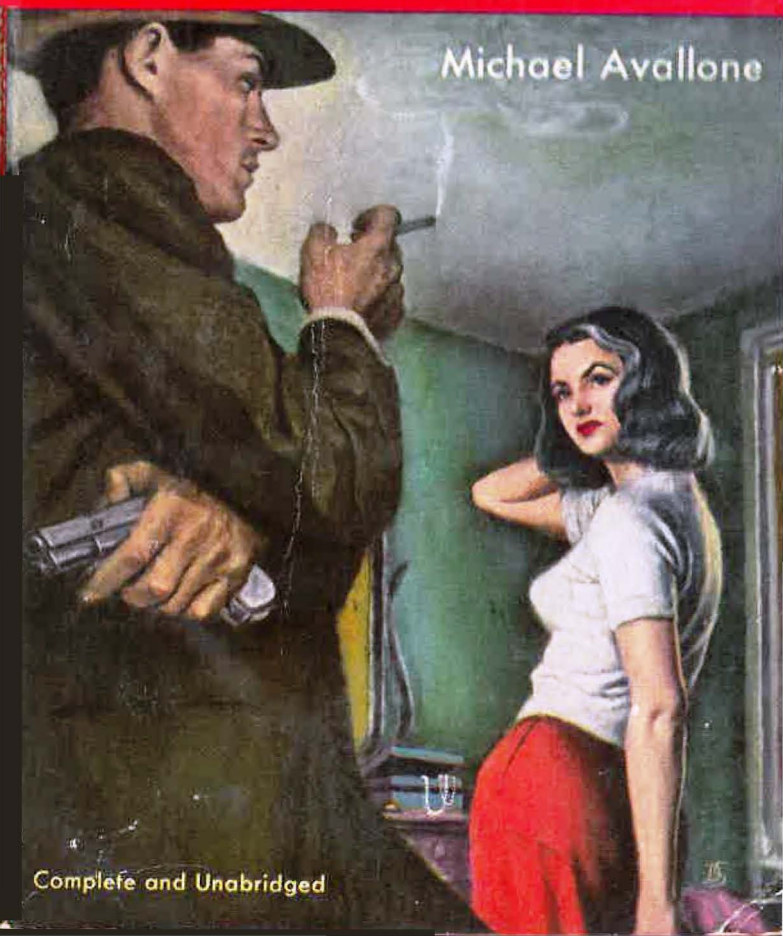
*AN ED NOON MYSTERY—BY
A TOUGH NEW WRITER
TO ADD TO THE GALLERY OF
JAMES M. CAIN AND MICKEY SPILLANE*

25¢



THE TALL DOLORES

Michael Avallone



Complete and Unabridged

I heard myself groan. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was Dolores. Her big laugh rolled around the room. I wriggled my fingers, tried to move my arms. No dice. I was tied down to something hard—like a table. I lowered my chin and got a jolt. I was naked.

Ed Noon is the name. I'm a private eye—a rough, tough, hardboiled guy with ice for blood. But just now I feel like a scared punk. Dolores is after me—all six feet three of her. She knows I'm coming too close to the truth in the murder of Harry Hunter. And she's out to protect someone. But who? Her queer little pal, Doc Clarke? A lady of pleasure like Alma Wheeler? Herself? One thing I know, it's not me. Dolores has me tagged for death. And Dolores is the kind of a dame who gets what she wants.

THE TALL DOLORES marks the first appearance of Ed Noon, a tough guy to top them all. And Michael Avallone, an author who knows how to write a fast, roughhousing story, puts Noon on an incredible murder-go-round of lust and murder that's dynamite to the last blood-soaked page.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

. . . in the order of their height

HARRY HUNTER	6'6"
DOLORES	6'3"
ED NOON	6'
RENO	6'
ROCKY	6'
KINNEY	5'10"
MONKS	5'9"
CHARLEY FLINT	5'8"
SAM FOLEY	5'7"
ALMA WHEELER	5'6"
BILLIE TOY	5'4"
DOC CLARKE	5'2"

. . . and several horizontal people

THE TALL
DOLORES

BY MICHAEL AVALLONE

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For Stevie—who is considerably shorter

ONE

I'll begin by telling you she was the tallest girl that ever came into my office. But tall isn't the word for it. Not really. As spotty as my schooling was, I can do better than that.

Dolores was a hell of a lot more than tall. She was huge, statuesque. A Glamazon. A regular Empire State Building of female feminine dame. And all woman, besides.

Six feet three in her stocking feet. Don't scoff. Don't laugh at the notion. Don't even faint. Put black pumps with three-inch heels on those feet and you'll get a rough sketch of the shadow she threw across my threshold the day she crossed it.

Believe me, I wasn't prepared for the shadow. Or the woman that brought it in.

The private-eye business was having a bad year and the closest I had gotten to some real green dough was a shadowing job for some Park Avenue doctor who suspected his wife of laying down on her wifely duties. For some other John. I had done myself proud. Photographs, a honey of a dictaphone recording when Lover Boy came in and the lights went out. The doctor was a real grateful

guy. The job had been worth a cool thousand, but that had been three months ago and the money had run out—thanks to my passion for comfortable living. So when Dolores showed up, I was worn down to the tail, as they say in Benny's back room.

I looked up from the desk in the mouse auditorium that passes for my office, and blinked.

A gigantic silhouette had fallen across the glazed glass of the door. A feminine silhouette. That bust line was unmistakable.

ED NOON—PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS, the modest four-inch lettering on the glass, lost its place in the sun. For exactly three minutes.

I consulted my watch, coughed, straightened my tie, and poured myself a drink. Aside from hallucinations brought on by extreme hunger, I could find no excuse for the feminine fantasy on the other side of the door.

I'm a game guy. I took a chance.

"Come on in," I sang out. "The joint's insured."

Come in she did. The shadow faded and Dolores in the flesh was a little less terrifying but still plenty disconcerting.

"Ed Noon—that you?"

The question didn't falter out of her. It just erupted from deep down in a chest, that at a very conservative estimate, I pegged at 50.

"It's the only name I'll endorse a check with. What can I do for you?" In spite of the gag, I had the impression I was whispering.

"Save the wisecracks, Noon. I'm too big to kid around with." Her words were loud but she sounded pleased. As if she had found something she was looking for. In this case, the something was me. Which just about describes how the Tall Dolores made me feel. Not like anything—just something.

As for her being pleased about me for some reason or

other, well, that made her the first dame since my mother who ever saw anything in me. Pleasing women is one department I never rated a blue ribbon in.

Dolores sat down and filled the only other chair in the place. What I mean filled. She overflowed in it. Not fat, mind you. Just big, shapely size. And a feminine kind of size, if you know what I mean.

I figured it was about time to assert myself. I smiled.

“Well, lady. Start. Begin someplace. The beginning is a good place. Your husband has just discovered it is spring and there’s a girl. . .”

“There is no husband. And no girl.” She outstared me. “But I do want you to find Harry Hunter for me.”

“Hunter?” Her stare convinced me to stop clowning. “Got a picture?”

I admit I wanted to see the sort of a guy a tall number like Dolores needed to hold hands with.

She dug into a purse that looked like a compact in her large, well-formed fingers. I reached for the small photo she handed over the desk.

It was nothing much to work on. Nothing for a Sherlock Holmes private like me. Just a head-and-shoulders shot of a very normal arrangement of eyes, teeth, nose, and ears. Not even a mustache. I was disappointed. I’d expected a cross between Johnny Weismuller and Man Mountain Dean.

“Not much to work on, Miss. . .”

“Dolores. Just Dolores. My name isn’t necessary.”

“You’re perfectly right about that, Dolores.” I’d decided to start throwing my weight around. “Only your money is. I ask two hundred dollars as a retainer. If I can’t find this Hunter for you, you get half of it back. If I do, you dish out one hundred more.”

Her face smiled. It was the last thing you ever noticed about her. Her face, that is. It was a fairly pretty face

topped by shiny black hair, but something about her tremendous size robbed it of charm.

"I'm glad my size doesn't influence your manners, Noon. I want you to be the sort of man who can't be buffaloed. Harry buffaloes very easy. Two hundred is agreeable. Do I pay you now?"

"Not until you fill in some of the details. I've been in all the jails in this town already. You have to help me decide if this is worth working on."

I dug a pencil and pad out of the remainder of my lunch and assorted scraps on the desk.

"Noon, I'll level with you." Her eyes pinned me down. "Harry Hunter is my man. The only one I'll ever love. The only one I'll ever want. . ."

Booming words sound awfully corny alongside string music like that. I held up my hands.

"Hold on, Dolores. Is he missing or isn't he? Did he take a powder on you—is that it?"

She smiled apologetically, Dolores did. Dolores who could go through life not having to apologize for anything.

"I see I'd *better* begin at the beginning."

"It helps."

Dolores talked and I scribbled. My notes weren't in shorthand. I'm even briefer than that. My pals, the one or two I have, get a kick out of my "Business File" as it is humorously called. Well, you never know when the cops are going to walk in and inventory your books. So I make my notes pretty cryptic. If you ever drop into the mouse auditorium, I can still show you my file on the Tall Dolores thing.

HUNTER ***	runaway steer, Big Six
DOLORES . . .	tall saddle to be studded in May
\$5,000	investment on riding equip-
	ment—barn door to be closed
	as soon as possible.

Roughly, it meant that Harry Hunter, who was all of six feet six inches himself, had promised to marry Dolores No-Last-Name in May but had taken off at the last minute with five grand of her savings that was going toward a big wedding and follow-up honeymoon in Arizona. Harry was a rodeo hand in the same circus that Dolores was headlined in as the Tall Dolores, Shapliest Amazon in the World.

Hunter's being a giant himself partly explained Dolores' desire to catch up with him again. Must have been love at first height if you'll excuse the pun.

"It's not the money, you understand, Noon. Frankly, Harry is the only man that could ever satisfy me. You should know what that means to a woman in a country where the average man is under six feet. . ."

"I have a rough idea. But why did he take off? I think it works both ways. A guy as big as this Harry of yours wouldn't run into many big girls either."

Her eyes looked small in her broad face.

"Harry wouldn't run away from me. Something must have happened to him. He was to meet me here in New York two days ago, the fifteenth—and here it's Friday and he still hasn't shown up. I gave him the money to hold because I thought it would be safer for him to hold it."

I could have given her a stiff argument there but I let it ride.

"Do you know of any place he might go in New York? Any friends he might have? You can't tell. Harry might have celebrated his last days of bachelorhood and overdone it." I laughed. "I wouldn't bet against his sleeping off a nice good drunk in some cheap hotel somewhere in our fair metropolis. It's happened plenty of times before this."

She shook off the idea.

"Not when you know that Harry never touched a drop. It was a laugh back in the circus how he got sick once on a

jigger of rum. No, Harry didn't drink. For a guy as big as him, it was kind of funny to see."

I put my pencil down. She hadn't given me enough to doodle with. Except the notion that her looks and brand of vocabulary didn't quite balance. Sort of like the tomboy being made to behave in front of company at dinner.

"Well, you haven't given me much to work on. Although I'll admit I won't have much trouble picking him out of a crowd."

"I'm sorry." She really looked sorry. "We met in the circus last year. Harry never talked much. He came from Montana, Helena, I think, but that was all he ever said about it. But—you've handled this sort of thing before, haven't you?"

"I have." I cut her short because my ears were beginning to ache from the thunder of her voice. "Drink, Dolores?"

She nodded. I poured two neat ones. She put hers away like a veteran. She was quite a girl, by and large. You just couldn't get by how large she was.

"Okay, Dolores. I'll get started on this. Where are you staying?"

"Hotel. The Yale. Room 1705. Call me as soon as you have any kind of word."

I made a note of it.

"There are lots of kinds of words and this has the looks of something that's going to take a little time."

She got to her feet. I got the impression my own six feet of manhide wasn't making a dent at all on her. I never felt shorter in my life.

I got the two hundred right then. She handed them over without a complaint. Two brisk, crisp, brand new C notes. At that moment Benjamin Franklin was my favorite American.

Just then my phone rang. She jumped for a second,

then relaxed. I motioned her to wait, and juggled the receiver to my ear.

“Ed Noon speaking.”

“Hello, Ed. How’s crime?” It was Sam Foley, one of my very few friends and possibly the very last of a long line of good lawyers.

“Still paying off very nicely, thank you. How’s tricks, Sam?”

“Trickier than ever. You doing anything?” He sounded anxious.

“Just got started on something hot, Sam. But if you need a smart young man to do the office work . . .”

He laughed in my ear. “It’ll keep, Ed. Just watch yourself, kid. Foley has discovered some more vice in our police department. Look, Ed. Stick around the office tomorrow. I may need you for some leg work. I’m not as young as I’d like to be. Okay with you, Ed?”

“Sure thing, Sam.” Dolores was beginning to look impatient. “Give me a ring.”

“Two to one it’s a blonde. Or a redhead.” His chuckle was old and wise. “Take care of yourself, Ed.” The receiver clicked in my ear.

“If you’ll excuse me, Noon. I have to be going.” She was giving me my cue.

I walked her to the door, feeling like one of those little tugs that guide the *Queen Mary* out of the harbor. When she had finally gone and her huge shadow withdrawn from the blackout of my name on the glazed glass, I had another drink. Not the weak stuff that was always on the desk. Private stock that I kept in one of the desk drawers.

Great business, this private-peeper racket. You get paid to look through keyholes, mess up fresh playboys for old guys who wanted to scare them off their child brides, find missing persons who usually preferred to stay lost, and get your own face pushed in once in awhile. For a fee, of course.

I'm buck-hungry like the rest of my fellow Americans. And not crazy about taxes either. So money dominated all the time I had. My time was anybody's who could pay for it.

And now the Tall Dolores wanted me to find Harry (also Tall) Hunter for her for the fifth part of a grand. Well, it was worth it. I'd done things for a part of a grand before that weren't so grand.

Where to begin? The police morgue would be a fair start. Missing persons make an awful habit of turning up in those air-cooled drawers down there. There were a dozen routine starts, all of which would help me get my wind, but it was a hot day. A hot baseball day.

I turned on my little portable. The Giants and Dodgers were brawling at the PG and just this once I had a five-spot on the Giants. Until Dolores had walked in with that big retainer, I didn't have the money to make a down payment on a cup of coffee. I only gamble when I have no chips anyway.

It was around the seventh inning and my five dollars was fading fast because Brooklyn was hitting Hearn like they owned him when the phone rang again. I turned the set down and reached for the receiver. It felt sticky in my fingers.

It was Charley Flint, my personal contact down at Police Headquarters. For twenty bucks a tip, Charley forgot his policeman's code and gave me first call on anything that looked like an opportunity for a private fish to join the school and get ahead in life.

"Ed, one of our patrol cars put through a flash. Stiff on the steps of the Museum of Natural History. Central Park side. Looks like a knifing."

"So what's in it for me, friend Flint?"

"Geez, Ed, I dunno. But this stiff sounds pretty peculiar."

"If there's more, Charley, spill it. A dead guy would have to have at least two heads to be peculiar."

"Ed, he was packing five G's! That peculiar enough? Imagine killing a guy and leaving that kind of dough on him for the department to find! Doesn't make sense, does it?"

I catch on quick.

"Description, Charley—was there a description?"

"Yeah. Wait a mo." I heard a rustling like when paper is handled. "Christ, yes. The stiff is a giant. Six feet plus."

I whistled through my teeth.

"Can you use it, Ed? Our usual deal?"

"I can use it, Charley. It's Christmas. Santa will send you your twenty."

"Fine, Ed. It's been a tough week."

"All over, Charley. Bye."

I hung up. The neon lights of the chop suey joint across the street were blinking on and off. Just like my brains.

I kept thinking of the Tall Dolores and five thousand dollars and Harry Hunter.

The runaway steer had been chopped down. There was nothing to saddle anymore. Except possibly the saddle. And that was the Tall Dolores.

Somebody's timing was a little too precious for words. I decided to get down to the Museum of Natural History as fast as the law allowed. Mrs. Dooley, my old high-school history teacher, would have been proud of me.

Going to the museum at my age.

TWO

Harry Hunter was tall, too. What was left of him. As I got out of the jalopy I laughingly list as a car on my tax form, I could see Harry Hunter was tall.

Monks and his stooge Kinney, two fine specimens of the Homicide Department, were standing over him. Even flat on his back with a dirty piece of canvas flung over him, Harry Hunter was impressive. The tips of big black shoes were a long way from the crown of disheveled black hair that barely poked out from the other end of the canvas.

Rainwater was gurgling in the gutters as I sauntered over. The rain had been a brief tear-jerker and now it was getting dark. A squad car dotted both corners of the museum entrance. Monks' car was cut at an angle into the curb as if he had just arrived on the scene. That small knot of people with rubber in their necks had gathered already but a pair of blue uniforms were ringing them off. Monks' orders no doubt. Police business or not, he hated crowds.

Monks saw me first. It was obvious. His mouth turned down on his cigarette and he grunted something to Kinney. The stooge looked at me through his college face with his usual quota of scorn for Ed Noon. It was mutual. They were both poison to me.

"Good day, gentlemen." I started off with polite cheeriness because I knew it irritated the hell out of them. Because they knew I was rubbing it in.

"You again. It never rains but it pours." Monks' fine dog face with its coarse features and prominent eyes, ears, nose, and mouth screwed up. "Go away, Noon. You draw flies."

"You're robbing the dead, Lieutenant." Calling him by his official title got results too. "W. C. Fields worked that one. With much better results, I might add."

Kinney bridled. His thin, nervous hands jerked out at me.

"Take off, Noon. You're a troublemaker. Also, you get in my hair."

"Don't worry about it, Kinney. You can always go to the Thomas people. The treatments are fun."

He was one dick I always wanted to hang one on. You know the type. A good education, mind like a steel trap, and a real "letter of the law" bozo. That kind is as inflexible as a wooden ruler and about as fair as a Southern jury with a colored chicken thief.

"What are you doing here, Noon?" Monks pushed his rank at me.

"Just cruising by." I looked past Kinney's shoulder down at the sidewalk. "Another unsolved crime for the department?"

Kinney looked pleadingly at his superior but Monks' bull head shook slightly. He smiled.

"Noon, you kill me."

"I love you too."

"Berle could use you, you're so funny."

"Lieutenant, you're too kind. Tell you what. When you run for dogcatcher, you've got my vote."

"Don't get flip. A license can get revoked awfully easy."

"You trying to bulldoze me, Monks? Don't. I got a couple of buttons I can push, too."

Kinney growled in his throat. He took a step forward.

"Watch your mouth, Noon. I've still got you open on that Ricardi deal. Withholding evidence—I don't care if you did nail the killer. Not cooperating with the department is bad business." He appealed to Monks again. "Send him on his way, Mike."

I always enjoyed these two. Kinney was forever asking to cut me down to size, whereas Monks was painfully aware of my record. Not that I ever did him any favors, but I had gotten him off the hook a few times in the past. The Ricardi killing for one thing.

"Keep cool, Kinney. You gotta handle this one with common sense. I don't like him either. But he's not ordinary. Hell, far from it."

"Why, Lieutenant," I grinned. "I didn't know you cared."

A siren bansheed from up the corner and the meat wagon pulled up. Tires hissed to a halt. Harry Hunter would ride back to the morgue in the style befitting all D.O.A.'s.

I got down to business.

"Who's the stiff? Anybody I know?"

Monks sighed and lit a cigarette.

"Card in his pocket. Says Harry Hunter, resident, Helena, Montana. Twenty-nine years old, unmarried, and six feet six or so by the looks of him."

That was my cue. Before they could stop me, I took a quick look under the dirty canvas. There was a mess of ugly, red slashes across a nice brown suit that Harry Hunter had put on without knowing it was his last day in the rotten old world. It was Dolores' Harry all right. The same face stared up at me.

"By the looks of him, somebody got careless with a butcher knife. Find the weapon?"

Kinney grudgingly produced it from the deep folds of the sloppy trench coat he always seemed to be wearing. I looked at the knife. Small sword was more like it. Straight blade, a full eight inches in length, standard black bone handle.

"Hunting knife, you think?"

"I don't think," Monks barked. I refused to offer at the pitch. "I find out. We'll check it. What it is, whose it is, and where it was picked up."

A couple of attendants piled out of the meat wagon with a basket. They uncovered it. Wordlessly, I watched Kinney and Monks give them a hand lifting Harry Hunter into the thing. The cop who was nearest to them made a face at the nasty red splotch that remained on the stone floor where Harry Hunter had died.

I scratched a match on the broad base of the statue

that housed the stone figure of Teddy Roosevelt on horseback. I reflected that Dolores' Harry was probably the first murder victim to dirty the museum steps.

I innocently puffed on my butt and waited patiently for either Monks or Kinney to mention the five grand that Harry Hunter's killer or killers had so foolishly left for the cops to confiscate. That was as good as throwing it away. It might have been overlooked but it didn't seem kosher.

"Anything else, gentlemen?"

"Gentlemen" got results.

"What the hell do you want?" Monks purpled. "A life history? Even Kinney got here before I did. A stiff's dumped into my lap not more than a half hour ago and you expect me to tell you what he had for breakfast this morning or whether or not he preferred checkers to parchesi. Besides, I don't have to tell you anything. And now I think we've been pretty polite to a taxpayer. Go on about your business, Noon. And stay out of this."

I smiled tight. "Fair enough, Lieutenant. There's nothing to keep me. Seems you boys should be able to handle this one without my help. Though Kinney certainly must have spoiled a swell set of prints on that knife—if there were any."

You could have dropped five grand on the ground and neither of them would have noticed it. Monks stared at Kinney's right hand thoughtlessly wrapped about the handle of the murder weapon. And Kinney's face got as red as two sunsets. I laughed.

Kinney swore at me. Unprintably.

I got mad.

"Is that all you have to say to me, you sonofabitch?" I slipped it in coolly, trying to keep my head.

"Boys, boys." Monks shrugged wearily. "We got a gymnasium down at headquarters. No rough stuff here. Skip

it, Kinney. We never find any prints on these things anyway."

Kinney's eyes had murder in them. Grinning, I climbed into my jalopy. I turned the ignition key and pumped the starter. Kinney put a foot on the running board.

"Fair warning, Noon." He gritted it out. "I'm going to hang a rap on you one of these days. You'll grow a beard a foot long before you get out from under it. Just keep it in mind."

"Mighty decent of you to rattle before you strike, Kinney." I engaged the clutch silently and put it in gear. My foot glided to the accelerator. "I'll remember to buy myself a pair of scissors. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

I rammed my foot down, the jalopy shot forward with a noisy spurt, and Kinney spun around like a top as the rear fender brushed him off my running board. A look back over my shoulder gave me my best laugh since the Marx Brothers. Kinney, a tangle of arms and legs on the paved walk and Monks helping him to his feet.

Chuckling, I swung the jalopy toward Broadway. The Yale was my next stop. Room 1705 to be exact.

No-Last-Name Dolores had a lot of explaining to do. The story she had brought into my office was beginning to stink like last Friday's fish.

THREE

The Yale Hotel was too big a place for the employees to wonder about every fairly well-dressed man who sauntered in and went right to the elevator. No sense in making it difficult anyway. Dolores was a cinch to be registered under an alias. Hell of a lot of good it would do her though. Built like she was, it was like spelling Elephant with the letters m-o-u-s-e.

The elevator operator asked me my floor.

"Seventeen," I said.

The ride up was long and dreary. A couple of notions were trying to take shape in my skull. What kind of game was Dolores playing? Had she given me the Hunter job because she was dying to find the guy so she could carve him into little pieces? No, it didn't jell. Besides, walking out of my office and accidentally running into him an hour later was stretching it a little too much. Maybe that stuff goes in the movies but not anywhere else.

"Seventeen," the operator said brightly. He was small and darkish and looked a little eager for conversation. I was game.

As I stepped past him, I asked, "How'd the Giants make out today?"

His face brightened. "A slaughter. Fourteen to three. Brooklyn murdered them."

"There goes five of my hard-earned dollars. Well, that's life."

"Mister, you're a sucker to ride against the Brooks. They got too much power. Take Robinson, Snider, and Hodges. . ."

"Take a breather, Jimmy Powers. Ever see the female giant that lives on this floor?"

"What—oh?" His eyes widened with my change of pace. "You mean the big job? She checked in yesterday. Boy!" His eyes rolled. "I wonder how much it would take to make her happy."

I laughed, taking in his five feet seven inches. It seemed he was interested in other things besides baseball.

"You shrimps are all alike. Offhand, I'd say more than you own. Anybody been in to see her yet?"

I had pegged him right. He didn't take offense. The urge to chin on duty was a drug to him.

"Funny you should ask. Fifteen minutes ago I woulda said no to that. Fact is, I just dropped a Chinaman off on

this floor. I kept my eye on him after he got out. Sure enough, he stopped at her door."

"Did he go in?"

"Can't say for sure because 1702 came out of his apartment—that's Mr. Ball, a nice old guy—and I brought him down. Hell, I guess the Chink went in. Say, what's up—you a cop or something?"

"Friend, let me give you some advice. Be a dog. Never a cat. Curiosity kills cats. Let me hear you bark once."

He looked baffled but also he went along with the gag.

"Rough," he said before he closed the elevator doors.

I went down the hall, saw I was in the right corridor, and slowed down. 1705 was a good spit away when I halted. The hall was vacant. I slipped my .45 out of its bed in my armpit and checked the clip. No sense in walking in like Simple Simon. I still had a clear image of Harry Hunter's smeared coat front. A Chinaman, huh? Well, maybe Dolores was having her laundry taken out. Only thing was I didn't think so.

I eased up to the door and pressed my ear to the panel. There was no sound. I debated for just an instant before I tried the doorknob. Surprisingly enough, it turned. I flung one last look down the corridor before I pushed the door in and stepped quietly past it. It clicked slightly behind me. It made no difference.

The guy on the floor would never have heard it. He was dead. As dead as they make them.

He was also the Chinaman.

I looked around the room. The usual hotel room, a little better than most. There was another room adjoining at the farthest corner of the place. Light streamed out from behind a half-opened door. Even from where I stood I could hear slight sounds. Soft scratching of leather, muffled thuds of cushiony material being slapped together in one area. Like when you pack a bag in a hurry after you've just murdered a man.

One quick look at the Chinaman had been enough. It was Dolores' homework, all right. The little Chinaman's neck had been snapped like a very dry twig. The crazy angle his head twisted away from his shoulders was proof enough. Dolores wouldn't have to use a knife or a gun on this bird. He was small, almost dainty, and the dirty yellow of his face made him look like a funny-faced kid.

He was lying in what passed for a foyer. I stepped over him, my .45 forward like a best foot. I wasn't traveling slow anymore. Chinaboy might have friends. Which might be why Dolores was packing in such a hurry. Her being scared was good enough for me.

I kicked the bedroom door open. I made my face foolish which isn't hard and my tone light and flip which is easier.

"The next time you kill somebody, it might be a good idea to lock the front door. The neighbors might not understand."

She was packing all right. A big suitcase was open before her. I had caught her just as she was stuffing a mess of hose and toilet articles into it. She froze that way. It was funny really. The color was drained from her face, and the toothbrush jutting from one huge hand seemed silly as a defense against a Colt .45. Only the Chinaman lying quietly outside with his neck broken kept me from laughing.

Her mouth worked and I gave her a chance to catch her breath. I came into the room around the bed across from her and sat down in a big soft chair.

The fright in her eyes shifted quickly to relief. That was the second time she seemed pleased if not relieved to see me.

When you have the advantage you press it. I wasn't pointing the gun at her anymore. Just letting it hang casually in my hand.

"Going someplace, Dolores?"

"Noon . . ." A long sigh exploded from her. "Is he dead?"

I almost laughed then. "Which one—Harry Hunter or the little laundryman outside?"

"Stop clowning. The Chinaman of course."

I raised my eyebrows. This was the kind of talk I had expected back at the office. Hard. Real hard.

"You couldn't have done a better job if you had run him down with a Mack truck. But aren't you interested in Harry Hunter anymore?"

Her head shook dumbly. She sat on the bed and it sagged with her weight. Her eyes looked close to tears.

"No—I knew Harry got his as soon as Toy showed up. Toy joked about it. I always hated Toy. They sent him after me . . ." The word "they" seemed to galvanize her. She jumped off the bed, began finishing her packing with unfeminine haste.

"Dolores, how about some explanations? What the hell is all this? First you're just looking for a lost lover; he turns up dead, then you kill a Chinaman, and now you're packing a trunk as if an old-time Tong was going to come after you. Which brings me back to wondering why five thousand bucks is found on a guy whom you figure is murdered for the said five thousand."

"Noon, you'll never understand . . ."

"I'll say I won't. And believe me, lady, even though you bought two hundred dollars' worth of my services, you're not going anywhere until you make me understand."

I leveled the .45 at her. Like she had said in my office, she was too big to fool around with.

She looked frightened again. Not at the gun but at what I had said.

"You can't—you're crazy or something. They'll be flocking here like flies pretty soon. Toy was sent to take me back—Harry double-crossed all of us but I didn't care. I loved him—they needed me—Harry they can re-

place. Noon, you've got to help me—I've got to get away—otherwise it will start all over again."

"Dolores, my head aches. Say something that adds up."

"If you'll just let me change my clothes. We're losing too much time."

"Go ahead. But I'm staying right here."

She shrugged but she was still relieved. "Suit yourself. I used to strip for a living anyway."

Strip she did. I should have waited outside. She got down to nothing in less time than it takes to tell about it. She wasn't coy or dainty about it either. Just kicked her skirt off, wriggled out of a negligee with remarkable ease, and walked over to a clothes closet as if I were miles away. I tried not to look, being just as aware as the next guy of what a bare ankle can do to your pulse and your logic. But Dolores was a hell of a lot more than a bare ankle. And I'm a hell of a lot more curious than the average guy. Which is one good excuse for being a private detective.

Dolores slowed down. She began to move with a catlike sensuousness from the closet to the bureau where there was a good mirror, then back to the closet again. I knew what she was trying to do but I could no more stop it than you can actually turn the clock back.

I didn't drool but I had an awful hard time pretending not to. I've seen naked women before but this six-foot-three specimen of what a big, healthy woman can look like was the something new that is sooner or later added. She was revising all the "Ten Best" lists.

I could see she was smiling as she moved to the bed with a bright print dress folded over her arm. Her hips moved voluptuously as she walked. I caught myself with the .45 considerably lower than what it had been. Angrily, I snapped it up again.

"You're quite a tough guy, Noon. It takes ice water not to want something at a time like this."

"I'll take the ice water," I cracked. "I need it more than you think."

Her eyes mocked me. I was annoyed. Because three quarters of her was still as naked as a peeled banana.

"No business with pleasure, Noon? You lead a dull life."

"If we stay here any longer, Toy's ghost will set himself up in business."

That seemed to sober her again. And that's what fooled me. I knew she was afraid of a follow-up somebody or other on the Chinaman's heels. She started to dress in earnest.

I drew a short hard breath. Dolores bent down to adjust a stocking or something. The next thing I knew the loaded suitcase was shooting off the bed in my direction. Traveling like jet propulsion.

It was a big suitcase. I didn't have a chance. No more than the little Chinaman with Dolores' big mitts around his neck. I tried to get out of the way. I flung my gun hand up protectively, twisted my head to one side. The dirty brown smell of the leather was in my nostrils as I whirled.

It caught me like a ton of bricks, head-on, mashing my gun hand against my chest. A roar of sound and the sharp smell of gunpowder was all around me. Dull pain stabbed at my stomach. I staggered away, the .45 dropping to the carpeted floor.

Dolores came around the bed with the speed of a big ape. She was still half undressed. I shook my head to clear it, brought my arms up to ward off what I saw in her eyes. It wasn't nice as near as I could make out.

She descended on me like a tree full of the same apes she looked like. Something exploded against my jaw. Lightning struck twice and I was going down. My eyeballs blew up in a crash of pinwheeling crazy colors.

It was a cocoanut she hit me with, I thought. A big hard cocoanut. Then my next thought was all black and

dark and full of nothing. A great big black blank nothing.

Later, I don't know how much later, someone threw water in my face and the pain came back. I groaned. My jaw felt like a limp piece of butchered beef. I opened my eyes. I should have kept them closed.

I was flat on my back. Still in the hotel room.

And Kinney was looking down at me, fairly licking his lips.

The expression on his face was the closest thing to Old Nick I'll ever see. His eyes weren't nice either.

"Well, Noon." His voice was a hissing snake. "I've got you this time, you bastard. Just where I've always wanted you. There's a dead Chinaman in the foyer and you in here. Let me hear you wriggle out of this one. We're going to have to take you down to headquarters. And don't be offended if we don't put on our kid gloves."

I tried to rise but he pushed his hand into my face. My head thudded painfully against the floor. A thousand fires started up in my jaw.

I closed my eyes. That way I couldn't see the awful mess I was in.

Kinney was right. He had me where he wanted me. Where he had always wanted me. Down at the station being asked questions under a bright light with a rubber hose in plain view.

FOUR

My head started to clear in the elevator going down. Monks and Kinney were flanking me like I was somebody important. The elevator car was close and warm.

I stared down at my hands. Handcuffs bit into my wrists. Monks' personal set. I didn't let the honor throw

me. My jaw still hurt. Dolores was losing a good thing not signing up for boxing as a living.

Kinney smiled. It was more of a leer. I could feel his hot breath against my face. He smelled like he'd been drinking.

"Stop licking your lips, College Boy. You haven't got me on the griddle yet."

He was obviously feeling too good to get annoyed.

"This is our party, Noon. We're going to ask all the questions. And you're going to supply all the answers. And they'd better be good ones."

"You birds got here in an awful hurry," was all I had to offer.

"Small wonder." Monks' coarse face was amused. "That slug from your .45 went off like a cannon. According to Junior here."

"Junior" was the small, darkish elevator operator. His tiny eyes were big and round like silver dollars. Baseball and what it would take to satisfy a big girl like Dolores had whizzed from his brain.

"Geez." He whistled through his teeth. "I never saw a guy with a broken neck before. Nearly tripped over him going in. Lucky thing I had my car on that floor."

"Lucky for me," I mocked. But my brain was working.

"How about it, Noon?" Monks pushed his lip out at me. Funny thing, he looked worried. Not like Kinney was looking at all. Which was glad.

"How about what?"

"You're in the soup up to your eyebrows this time. Dead guy. You still hanging around with a gun minus one cartridge . . ."

"I should have stood in bed."

"Can it. Some straight talk would do you a lot of good."

Kinney was still grinning and my jaw was still aching. The flashlight bulbs upstairs hadn't helped either. I blew my top.

“Listen, Monks. What the hell are the charges anyway? The Chinaman’s neck is broken, I didn’t use my gun on him as you must have guessed by now, considering the fifty-cent chunk of plaster it gouged out of that nice wall upstairs. And you couldn’t connect me with him in a month of summers. I haven’t seen a Chinaman since *The Good Earth* and I do my own laundry besides.”

Monks laughed.

“That’s what I like about you. Always leave them laughing. Fine. Okay. Technically, we haven’t got a thing on you except that you were Johnny-on-the-Spot. We can’t pin it on you but it certainly means we can keep you on ice until we find out where you do fit in.”

“And we’ll find out. You can bet on it.” I didn’t like the way Kinney said it.

We got down to the lobby finally. I was glad of it. My head still felt like a week-old hangover and their conversation was starting to sicken me. You know how a guy sounds when he has four aces and you haven’t even got a crummy pair? That sums it up.

The lobby was cleared of everyone except the hotel personnel. Not that I gave a rap anyway. With or without the cuffs on, the way I was feeling I didn’t care who saw me at my present low level on the social scale.

Kinney gripped my elbow hard, meaning to steer me through the lobby. I flung him off. He started to show his teeth but Monks gave him a dirty look. The elevator operator just stared. Like he’d never seen a tough cop up close before.

“Cut it, Kinney.” Monks’ tone was official. “Save it for downtown.”

Kinney’s grin didn’t fade. His eyes bored a whole book of meaning into mine.

“It’ll be a pleasure, Noon. I’ve been waiting to pound it out of you for a long, long time.”

I could see the elevator operator's eyes change from silver dollars to saucers.

"Sssh, Kinney. In front of this taxpayer? You wouldn't want him to know how the department is really run, would you? You see, Junior, when the police need a conviction . . ."

They hustled me outside fast, Monks swearing under his breath, Kinney for once in his life looking sheepish. I decided he looked better as a horse's ass. More natural, anyway.

They piled me into Monks' official car. There was a nice hunk of silence between all three of us. Monks was steaming. I could hear his chest working as he squeezed me into the front seat. Kinney was on my left. I was planted in the middle, suddenly knowing all about and not appreciating the canned life of a sardine.

Kinney drove. He cut out into heavy evening traffic, swung south, and flicked down the radio. Police calls droned monotonously. My jaw was starting to get serious about swelling. I rubbed my shoulder against it easy-like and winced.

Kinney spoke first.

"Sorry, Lieutenant. About what happened back there. Can't help it. This Noon rubs me the wrong way."

Monks kept his eyes straight ahead.

"Kinney, you're a dumb bastard. With all your education, you're a dumb bastard. Watch yourself."

Kinney started to say something, thought better of it, and took it out on the accelerator. We shot past a heavy truck in high gear. You could feel the tires flying over the asphalt. Inside, I was laughing my head off.

Monks suddenly remembered me.

"You certainly get around. We've run into you twice today. And each time somebody was pushing up daisies."

"I'm canvassing for a funeral parlor."

"Skip the stunt talk, Noon. If I know you you're working on a case."

"The last case I worked on had six bottles of scotch in it."

"Come clean. What's the connection? Stiff on Central Park West. Stiff in a midtown hotel. Both times you're hanging around."

"I'm a necrophile, Lieutenant. Know what that is?"

"Keep it up, Noon. Down at headquarters, I'll turn my back."

"Better not, Mike." I stuck my neck out. "College Boy here might stick a knife in it."

It was funny the way both their heads swiveled like barber chairs in my direction. It must have been a scream from the front. I wished I could have seen it. Kinney swore, his hand flicking across my face hard. I rolled with it but still got the best part of it. My jaw throbbed with fire.

"You sonofabitch," Kinney said.

Monks looked the other way. "You had that one coming."

I spit—spit hard. Right past Kinney's face out the window on his side. But I didn't say a word.

Monks laughed, admiration trying not to break through his ugly kisser. He changed the subject.

"Do you know a Dolores Ainsley?"

"No. Is she a good number?"

"What were you doing in Room 1705?"

"The Chinaman asked me in to help him hang pictures. He broke his neck falling off the ladder."

He refused to blow his top at me. From past experience, he knew I wouldn't say a word until I got in touch with Sam Foley. Sam got in his hair as much as I did. Sam owed me a favor. He was a swell lawyer to have around.

Monks grunted. "Dolores Ainsley registered for Room 1705. On Friday, a day later, she disappears. Hasn't been

seen since this afternoon. Came in looking flustered, according to the desk manager. Junior took her up about five P.M.—but swears he never took her down.”

“Interesting if true. Did he have any ideas how she might have come down from the seventeenth floor? She didn’t fly out of the place.”

“Dolores Ainsley is a very big girl, I hear. Almost as big as Harry Hunter.”

“But the Chink was a shrimp. There goes your Six Foot Murder Mystery, Monks.”

“Noon, we haven’t got a thing on this Dolores. No picture, nothing back in the room to tell us anything. You could be a big help this time. We sort of figured you didn’t knock off the Chink. We haven’t any record on him either. Only his name—Billie Toy. Somebody laid you out cold for us to find. Come on, why do you keep bucking the department?”

“I don’t like the department.”

“We could get along a whole lot better if you cooperated.”

“What do you want me to do, Monks? Sign a pledge to the Police Athletic League?”

Monks sighed.

“Okay, wise guy. It’s your funeral. Headquarters won’t be so nice.”

“Headquarters is never nice.”

“Mike,” Kinney pleaded. “How long you going to let him get away with that mouth of his?”

I wondered myself. Monks was still smiling though. I began to feel a little uncomfortable.

“Okay, Noon. Here it is.” His grin tightened into a grim caricature. “You can forget about Sam Foley. He’s dead. They found him in an alley early tonight. Beaten to death. We got the call just before this Yale Hotel deal. . . .”

He was still talking but I couldn't hear any more. Sam Foley was dead.

I liked Sam Foley. For his brains, for his understanding of what chumps all of us humans are. And for his tolerance. I felt a lump of something start in my throat, get hard, refuse to go down. Sam Foley. He'd gotten my seat off the hot patch more than once. It was crazy but I felt like crying. I liked Sam Foley.

"Sorry to hit you cold with it, Noon." Monks' tone was softer than before. "Just don't count on Sam to pull you out of this one. You're up the creek this time and Sam won't be sending you any paddle."

"How'd it happen?" I choked it out.

"Oh, for his dough, I guess. Sam had been hoisting a few in Barney Dunn's. Some small-timer probably."

"Probably." I bit my lip. "How about a cigarette?"

Surprisingly enough, Kinney came up with it. Held the wheel with one hand, fished it out of the pack he had, and put it in my mouth for me. Monks lit it with his shiny Ronson.

I drew a stiff drag on it. The shock had really worn off but I kept my face somber. I was in the soup all right. Forgetting about Sam personally, I had been counting on him for legal fencing before Kinney and the boys in the back room got a chance to work me over. Now, the way was clear for only one thing. I wanted the nearest door out.

Kinney was blocking it on one side, Monks on the other. I let my head hang as if Sam had been the only friend I'd had in the world. I let myself sag in the seat. They bought it. They pretended not to notice my grief. One of them had even turned off the police calls altogether.

Under my lowered lids, I kept my eyes on the road. We were just swinging off Columbus Circle. Kinney would be cutting crosstown next. We were close enough to the precinct to hit it with a rock. It was now or never.

I brought my hands up fast, swinging them past my

chest in a vicious arc. Poor Monks was the goat. He had to be. He was on the door side I wanted. I couldn't see myself squeezing past Kinney and the steering wheel combined.

As the metallic cuffs came down on Monks' thick neck, I rammed my foot down on the brake. It was a bad move to make, a sure way to wind up with a sheet over your face on the sidewalk near a badly smashed car, but my luck had run out already. So it was all or nothing.

Everything went upside down for a crazy minute. Impressions are pretty hazy at a time like that.

First, the air whistled out of Monks' throat as the cuffs caught him heavily on the neck just below his ear. Then Kinney screamed in fright, the tires screeched like four old maids finding a man in the closet, and there was a sickening jolt as the body of the car tried to run right across the locked wheels.

I had my hands on the handle of the door across Monks' body. We spilled out in a tangled heap as Kinney jackknifed over the wheel, his head thudding the windshield, the breath whipped out of him like it was jet propelled.

We landed hard. I kept my hands up to my face and my forearms took the paved street. I could feel the burn right through my coat sleeves. It hurt. Hurt so much I forgot all about my jaw.

Monks got off easy. He'd been out cold before we hit the gutter. He was a limp heap as I staggered erect. I began to run. Almost aimlessly at first, like a crazy man. Then I remembered the cuffs, got back to Monks in a feverish instant. I had a bad minute finding his keys.

A cool wind whipped my face. The wind following the rain—the craziness of thinking such a thought in such a spot sobered me up. That and the startling sound of some damn dame wailing at the top of her lungs. Somebody started yelling as windows rode up with a grating sound. Feet pounded toward me.

Without looking back, I cut out for Central Park.

It would have to do until morning. The area was going to be mighty hot for a few hours. Every hotel in New York would be searched. The mouse auditorium was definitely out. First place they'd look.

I ran down into the measured walks, cut across the tiny mounds rising beyond them, and headed deep into the park. I left the couples necking on the benches far behind me before I stopped.

I was tired, dead tired. My jaw was a swollen lump, my arms were skinned aches, and my insides were screaming for a drink. But it would have to wait. Until morning. Everything would have to wait.

The Tall Dolores. And Sam Foley's murderer.

FIVE

A couple of romantic pigeons woke me up. I'd never thought much about the sex life of the birds. What the hell. First there were two birds, then a third, then a whole flock. So what? But just this once, I thought about it. And was damn grateful.

My eyes fought the daylight. Bright sunlight was edging through the trees, washing my face and the whole landscape of green. The two pigeons whispering sweet nothings at the other end of the wooden bench didn't give a hoot about waking me up.

I groaned. I felt great. My arms still burned and my jaw was a solid rock. I must have been pretty worn out to fall asleep on a park bench with half the cops in New York pounding the pavements for me.

I looked at my watch. It was just eight. I looked around. There was nobody in sight for miles. Except me and Mother Nature and the two pigeons. I lit a cigarette, blew

the match out, and sailed it in their general direction. Their damn cooing was giving me a headache.

They soared off the bench and landed on the walk about a yard away. I had to laugh the way they strutted off together. As if my company wasn't so hot anyway.

I got to my feet and stretched, feeling a million little needles stitching me all over. I shook myself. It was time to get moving. But I had to have my coffee first. I can't do a thing before I have my coffee in the morning.

I made it out of the park in a hurry. Last night had been a bushel and a peck of trouble all right. I came out on the 79th Street side of Central Park East. I wanted no part of the west side. That was too close to where Harry Hunter had gotten his. Too close to the police precinct besides. That reminded me of Monks and Kinney. And it all came back.

It was Saturday morning and New York was banging the sleep out of its eyes. Traffic was getting heavy again. I had to get off the streets in a hurry. I got a quick flash of myself in a store window. My hat could stand a blocking, my clothes looked like hand-me-downs, and my face looked like it had lost a good argument. But I still had to have that coffee first.

I bought a *News* and went into the first cafeteria I could find. A combination luncheonette and drugstore was what it turned out to be.

The place was almost empty. Just a counterman and an old pharmacist sitting quietly in front of his shelves of bottles, boxes, and bargains.

"Coffee, scrambled eggs, and toast," I said.

The counterman nodded and went away again. The smell of frying and coffee steaming felt good in my nose.

It tasted better. I wolfed the eggs down, put the toast away in rapid order, gulped mouthfuls of the hot coffee. The coffee was lousy but it was hot. I lit a cigarette, felt fifty per cent better, and opened the paper.

I found what I was looking for on page three: a small item not given much of a spread.

MURDER SUSPECT CRASHES CAR
TO ELUDE LOCK-UP

After that, all you got out of the item was that one Ed Noon, a private investigator with a knack of irritating police headquarters, had evaded being brought in for questioning in regard to the murder of a Chinaman at the Yale Hotel by forcing a crash of the car in which Lt. Michael Monks and Arthur Kinney (detective) were also riding. Monks and Kinney had been shaken up to the extent of a cracked rib (Kinney) and bruises of the head and arms (Monks).

Well, that ought to keep them out of my hair for a few days anyway. But it certainly wouldn't strengthen their declaration of love for me.

I turned the paper again. I was looking for something else. I found that on page fifteen. The item was even smaller. It was practically a weather report:

LAWYER FOUND BEATEN TO DEATH

Sam Foley, who maintained a law office on Third Avenue, was found dead in an alley on 26th Street, last night. Foley, who was forty-five, had been severely beaten. Police are investigating.

Good old Sam. I lit another cigarette, ordered more coffee. Sam had been quite a guy. Always in there pitching for a client and not in too damn a hurry for the fee either. I remembered him pretty good, now that he was dead. It was Sam who had taught me all about habeas corpuses, the Sullivan Law, and just how far you could ride a cop and get away with it. Sam never wanted my dough either. But I'd always looked out for him. He was just a nice guy who liked his liquor, hated cops, and always helped the other guy.

And now Sam was dead. Sam who had once told me, "Ed, don't be a sucker. Quit this private-eye stuff. You'll

wind up in a back alley someday with the dirty rainwater running down your face.”

I remembered laughing. “Hell, Sam. I’d stagnate at a desk. I tried. Honest. Two weeks as an office jerk for a big export outfit. I blew my top. This is my life. Going into bars, pressing the wrinkles out of people’s lives, getting all the ins and outs. It’s a filthy, dirty jungle but the air is what I go for. Atmosphere. I can breathe in this racket.”

Sam had kidded me off. “Now you sound like a queer. Or maybe just a damn busybody. Anyhow, watch yourself, kid.”

I’d watched myself all right. But Sam must have let his guard down. Good old Sam who was interested in vice in the police department. Good old Sam in an alley. Beaten to death.

The three words did something to me. I don’t know—but—they suggested helplessness. Like somebody holding your hands behind you while somebody else goes to work on you with his fists or a broken bottle. People can scream all they want about intolerance and dirty living conditions, but the sort of thing I just described is what makes a guy like Ed Noon burn for the cause of humanity.

“Anything wrong, mister?”

I looked up quickly. The counterman was staring at me. I shook my head.

“No, why?”

“Look at your hands.”

I did. I laughed out loud. They were shaking almost uncontrollably. The paper was rustling with St. Vitus. I hadn’t even noticed. I laughed again. That broke the spell. My hands behaved themselves.

“Thanks, fella. It’s your coffee. Lousy coffee makes my hands vibrate. Funny thing, it happens every time.”

He laughed because I was a customer. Also, because he might have thought I was a little loco. And loco people have to be humored.

I picked up my tab and reached into my pocket. Luckily, I had some silver on me. Dolores' two C notes were beginning to burn holes in my pockets. I was going to have to change them pretty quick if I expected to operate over the week end. It was Saturday so the banks were out. A pawnshop was my only bet.

I paid my check and left. Then I found a pawnshop on Third Avenue and had the C notes broken down into ten tens and twenty fives. New York is one town you just can't get around in without dough. The places I wanted to go anyway.

Outside the pawnshop, I found a barber pole staring me in the face. I took a whole hour getting the works. Shave, hot towel, shine, manicure. I had my clothes brushed off as well as they could be. The hat would have to do as it was. Except for damaged sleeves, Ed Noon was still a pretty presentable guy.

I hailed a cab.

"Yale Hotel," I told the cabbie.

SIX

Ever read *The Purloined Letter* by Edgar Allan Poe? Well, if you ever have any notions to become a detective or even if you just like to read, that yarn will do you a lot of good. You see, in this one, all the characters including the coppers are looking for a very valuable letter that will untie all the trouble. Well, they look under rugs, in the lining of clothing, tap the walls, stick long needles in the stuffed sofas. That is everywhere but the most logical place. Right near the writing desk in a card rack where the main suspect puts all his mail.

Well, I was the Purloined Letter in this case, and no one would ever expect me to come back to the Yale Ho-

tel which would definitely be under police surveillance, if not crawling with cops. Poe was a smart customer. I might be sticking my neck out at the Yale but I had to. My only lead on Dolores was back there.

I had the driver drop me off a couple of blocks from the place. No point in overdoing it. Besides I had a call to make. I found a phone in a candy store. I dialed Charley Flint's home number. I was pretty sure Saturday was his day off.

It was. He sounded sleepy.

"Yah—hello?"

"Good morning, friend Flint."

"Geez, Ed, what the hell you been up to—half the force is looking for you."

"Skip it, Charlie. I'm in a hurry."

"Ed, I can't do a thing for you." He was wide awake now. "You shouldn'ta called—suppose this phone is tapped."

"Now, Charley, who else but me knows you're the biggest crook working for the New York Police Department? Don't worry about it."

"Ed, quit riding me. I've done you a lot of favors, haven't I?"

"Agreed, Charley. That's why I want you to do me another one. I need some dope on the Yale Hotel. I know the place is one of the biggest cathouses on the books at headquarters. How about three names of three ladies currently making men happy at that place?"

"Ed!" Charley sounded offended. "I got no in on that racket. Honest. That's Flynn's department. . ."

"Cut it out, Charley. You're breaking my heart. You and Flynn couldn't afford those fancy apartments you've got if you weren't getting in on the pimping racket. Come on, Charley. Three names, if you please."

"Ed, you got me all wrong. I'm no pimp."

"Charley, so help me. Three names or that twenty

bucks I owe you stays in my hip pocket. I haven't mailed it yet. And all the other twenty bucks of the future. And my lips will start flapping about that little shooting back in '47. You know, when you got loaded and pulled a gun on a guy in a bar on Lexington. . . ."

"Okay, okay, okay! That's enough, you crum—hold on a minute."

That's exactly how long he took. A minute. I clocked him because I had nothing better to do and the booth was like a Turkish bath. He gave me three names and I jotted them down.

"Ed, watch yourself. The Yale might be staked out."

"Why, Charley. I didn't realize I meant so much to you."

"Ah, for Chrissakes—" He hung up.

I had a coke to cool off before climbing back into the booth again. I was going to try my first notion first. After that, there were other ways.

I looked at the three names. *Dorothy Wingate*, *Alma Wheeler*, *Lora Allison*. Funny thing about names. These particular three were pretty nice ones. Names good enough for girls you were in love with, girls who might be famous. But they were just names for career women. Names for dames who made a career out of being women.

I got back into the booth again and called the hotel. Somebody got on the wire.

"Yale Hotel," the voice singsonged.

I decided to take them in order. "Oh, hello. Could I speak with Miss Dorothy Wingate, please?"

The voice fell about fourteen floors. With what I knew about Miss Wingate, it had to.

"Sorry, she hasn't come in yet. Her key is still in the rack. Any message?"

"Yeah. Tell her all is forgiven—come home."

I hung up.

I lit a cigarette and left the booth. A couple of doors

away was a drugstore. I squeezed into another hothouse stall. This was just a shade cooler. I dialed the Yale again.

Singsong got on again. I made my voice nasal and asked for the third name on my list just for luck. Lora Allison.

Miss Allison seemed to be in. I was connected with Room 405.

“Hello?” The voice was bored and sleepy.

“Hello, Lora? How about a little action?”

“Who is this?” She sounded a little more awake.

“A big businessman from Chicago with fifty good reasons for waking you up so early.”

Big money was interesting to her. But she was tired and very suspicious.

“Look, fellow. Who told you to get in touch with me?”

“Guy named Sulphur Charles. He said you were a very nice girl.”

She was no dope because she got the Charley Flint switch almost immediately.

“Of course. He said you’d call. But look, I just got in a little while ago. Big night. You understand, don’t you?” her voice honeyed for the Chicago client with money to spend on his restless liver. “How about around eight tonight? Really, I’m awfully tired. . . .”

“Sorry, but I catch a train for Chi at twelve.” I made my tone slightly anxious. “What do you say, Lora? You won’t regret it.” This I figured would imply that I had what every girl needed to become uninhibited. But she had obviously heard it all before.

“What do you think I am? A toy or something, goddammit? You want to bounce up here at ten in the morning and bounce right out again? Sorry, some other time.”

She was indignant. I was beginning to understand that call girls have certain standards too.

“But, Lora, couldn’t you just this once?”

"Don't bother me, guy. Go peddle your papers in Chicago."

She hung up. Just like Charley had. I was going great. Now I was down to my last card. And that was Alma Wheeler.

I got out of the drugstore and headed for the Yale. I knew just how to play this particular card.

SEVEN

I went through the front door of the place. The lobby was empty. There was one man on duty behind the desk. I flashed a glance at the arrow indicator over the elevator doors. It said fourteen. Good. That gave me a few minutes anyway. I had to work fast.

"Yes, sir?" He was well dressed, with the perfect hotel look about him. In person, his voice still had a singsong inflection.

"Would you ring Miss Alma Wheeler, please?"

He eyed me with a curiosity mingled with indifference. He made an official show of connecting his switchboard to her room. I watched his face, also keeping my eye on the elevator indicator. The arrow was slowly arcing down.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Is she in?"

"Yes, but who shall I say is calling?"

"Let me talk to her. It's personal."

With extreme formality, he motioned toward a phone cradled on the small end table near the desk. Grinning, I picked it up, keeping my back to the elevator.

"Hello, Alma?"

"Who's this?" Alma Wheeler sounded smart and tough, too.

"This is Robert Woolsey. I'm calling about those dresses

you ordered yesterday. The price we agreed on is rather impossible because of shipping difficulties. Can I come up? You'll find our new terms a bit more interesting."

There was a short, deep laugh from her end.

"When did I order dresses? And if your name is really Woolsey, the combination is a repeat. Wheeler and Woolsey have been out of business for years."

"That's very good, Miss Wheeler. I'll be right up. Thank you."

"Sure, come ahead," she mocked. "Your sales talk is a new approach. I'm dying for some laughs. Tenth floor—1011."

I could hear the elevator doors sliding open as I put the receiver back on the hook. It had worked. Miss Wheeler had probably never been propositioned from the lobby before. She was a sharpie herself and the stunt hadn't thrown her.

Keeping my face to one side, I made for the elevator and stepped in. The brim of my hat was turned down. I walked right up to the back of the car and then turned around. The operator was sliding the door shut when he recognized me.

It was Junior, the little guy with the littler eyes. I thrust the hand that was in my pocket out like it was loaded with something else besides my fingers.

"Natural, Junior. Very natural. Keep those doors closed and take us up to the tenth. Or you've ridden your last elevator."

I must have scared hell out of him, turning up the next morning like that. A guy he had seen shackled the night before on his way to jail.

He gulped, the color leaving his face. More from force of habit than anything else, his hand rode the lever and the car rose slowly. His small eyes were popping with fright.

"Whad—dya want from me? I didn't do nothing to you."

I didn't move an inch. Just stood there with my face set, my eyes on him. I was working on the generally correct principle that Junior had a pretty bad conscience.

"I'll ask the questions."

"But what are you doing back here?"

"Junior, I like you."

His color came back slightly at my tight grin. Now, he was sure I had other fish in the fire. Not him. So he started working on me.

"My name is Rizzo. Nick Rizzo. Why the tenth floor? Sure you don't want seventeen?"

"Nick, now that we're such good friends, we can talk freely. Sort of man to man."

His fright returned. "I dunno what you mean."

We had reached the tenth level. Now was the time. He was all set to slide the doors wide when I let him have it. Spinning him around, I brought my fist out of my pocket in a short hard arc. The uppercut made the air whistle through his teeth. I caught him before he could fall.

I rode the car up to the next floor. I threw him over my shoulder and got out of the elevator in a hurry. If anybody was in the hallway, it was all over. Luckily, no one was. I ran down the hall and got down to the tenth as fast as Junior's weight would allow. I needed time to talk something over with him. Something Monks and Kinney couldn't have noticed in his story.

Everything was going my way. Room 1011 was near the stairway. Junior was getting heavy, as small as he was. I rapped softly with my free hand.

She must have been waiting for me. The door clicked open almost immediately. I didn't lose any time. I elbowed in past a surprised-looking blonde, got into the living room, and dumped my load down on the thick rug. Junior started to groan softly.

"What the hell do you call this?"

The voice had vitamins in it. Low and husky, a velvety

song that sounded scratchy right now with the irritation that was in it.

"I need your room for a little while, sister. Keep your lipstick on and you won't get hurt."

"Why you—why that's Nick—what did you do to him?" She started to rustle over to the phone.

"Hold it." I thrust my pocket out at her. "Sit down and stay as sweet as you are."

I got a big surprise. She laughed, a short go-to-hell laugh, and started to pick up the receiver.

"If you can fire your finger, buddy, it's a secret weapon. Strictly. Nobody else can."

I cursed. "Okay, here's a twenty. Sit down and try not to be so clever."

She stopped, caught the wadded twenty I flung at her, and replaced the phone. Shrugging her rounded shoulders, she sat down.

"That's different. As long as you don't beat Nick up in front of me. I don't like the little bastard but don't beat him up."

I liked her for that. I relaxed.

"No, I wouldn't mess my hands. I just want to ask him a few things."

"Cops?"

I nodded. "Nick got me into a hole. I could have gotten out of it with his help. Got any water?"

Alma Wheeler was quick on the up-take. She got a glass out of the kitchenette. She handed it to me without expression. Nick was showing signs of life but I wanted him sitting up and taking notice.

"Anything to do with that Chink killing upstairs?" she wanted to know.

I flung the water in Nick's face, grabbed him by the shoulders, and shook him hard. Then I answered her question.

"A whole lot to do with it, Miss Wheeler. Now clam up for a while. Let's let Nick do the talking."

Nick had been playing possum on me. He moved suddenly, got to his feet with a bounce, and tried to get away. I brought him down near the door, turned him over, and slapped him across the chops hard.

I jerked him to his feet and made him sit in one of Alma Wheeler's chairs.

"Play ball, Nick, and you won't get hurt. I want to ask you something."

He looked cornered. His eyes were flitting from her to me in fright. Alma Wheeler's face wore a slight smile. She was sitting quietly, watching everything, the twenty-dollar bill still wadded in one hand.

I pulled a chair close to Nick.

"Yesterday, you told those nice men from police headquarters that you heard my gun go boom when you had the elevator on this floor. Then you said you came right in, nearly tripped over the Chinaman, and found me on the floor out cold. You know, you're a pretty big liar for such a little guy."

"I dunno what you mean," he asked hoarsely.

"No? Then I'll tell you. A second after that gun went off, the biggest thing in skirts hung one on my jaw. She was half naked at the time. She needed at least another ten minutes to get dressed, finish packing. Another five to get out of the building. She didn't walk down seventeen floors. Which means you took her down."

"I swear I didn't, honest, I never saw her once . . ."

"Stop lying, Nick. You'll get me mad."

"Let me outa here. I gotta get back to my car. Mr. Farrell will be looking for me . . ."

"Mr. Farrell will find you in the cemetery if you keep this up."

His eyes got bigger. Alma Wheeler uncrossed her legs and leaned toward him.

"Fess up, Nick. This guy's in a bad way. The cops are on him. If you got an out for him, give it to him. Otherwise, he'll kill you. He's got nothing to lose."

"But, Miss Wheeler, if I didn't see her . . ."

"Come on, Nick. Use your head. This fellow would get a lot of satisfaction smacking you all over the room."

He stared at her, his lips working. He looked at me. My face must have convinced him, but the Wheeler dame had worked wonders for me.

"Okay," he said sullenly. "It was a pay off."

"More," I growled. "Tell me much more."

He looked down at his polished shoe tips.

"Well, hell. Wouldn't you have taken a century just to keep your mouth shut? Just to forget to mention a point? Hell, I hate to help out the cops anyway."

"Hear, hear!" said Alma Wheeler.

"Keep talking, Nick. You have to make me change my mind about you," I said.

"So what else?" He was starting to toughen himself up. For her benefit, probably. "She gave me a hundred to keep a lookout on the door while she got ready. I took her down when she was. On the service elevator in the rear. That's why the desk never saw her check out."

"A hundred bucks," I said. "She killed a guy, laid me out for the rap, and you say nothing about it. I'll bet you stole money out of tin cups from blind men when you were a little boy."

He didn't answer me but said something in his throat. I grabbed his collar, swung it till it was tight in my hand like a vise. He squawked but was afraid to do anything else about it.

"Now, Nick, rack that pimple of a brain. Did she say anything, did you see anything, that might tell me where she was going? Take your time. Think carefully. Anything at all?"

I kept an eye on Alma Wheeler, as busy as I was. She'd

let me buy her privacy for twenty bucks. Maybe she had a price like little Nick. I wasn't taking any more chances.

But Alma was still batting for my side.

"Be smart, you little chump. If you know anything at all, open up."

"Let me breathe, will ya . . ." I loosened my grip slightly. He coughed. "Yeah. She got out of the elevator in the basement and I tailed her out to the street where she got a cab. After all, I wanted to keep my eyes and ears open. Maybe there was more to be had. She got a cab okay. I heard her say 'Pirate Club and step on it' to the driver. That was all, honest. I got back to my car. Good thing too. Farrell was buzzing me."

"That's how I figured you knew something, Nick," Alma said. "You were keeping *me* waiting for the elevator."

"Anything else, George Washington?" I asked.

"Hell." He made a face. "Ain't that enough?"

I slammed him down into the chair. My brain was working. The Pirate Club. Doc Clarke's place in the seventies. Dolores sure got around. From a circus to New York to the Pirate Club. What the hell does that dame really add up to? I asked myself. I was beginning to get a headache and my jaw was throbbing like the motor of the jalopy.

The phone rang. Before I could say anything, Alma had picked it up.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Farrell . . . yes, he's here . . . my friend Mr. Woolsey needed some aspirin. Nick went upstairs to Miss Wingate's to borrow some for me . . . fine. I'll tell him to go right down . . . yes. No trouble. . . . Thanks again, Mr. Farrell. Very good service here . . . good-bye."

I was amazed. Alma Wheeler seemed to be one of the fastest-thinking dames I'd ever met. Nick still looked worried.

"Beat it, little man," I told him. "And remember to keep

your mouth closed about this too. Only I haven't got a hundred bucks for you."

"Ah—" He made a show of being tough. "Keep your money. I don't talk to cops anyway."

He left us in a big hurry. Farrell must have given him a rough time in the past.

When he had gone, I looked at Alma Wheeler. "You've got a brain."

She laughed. "Don't look so surprised. Common sense, that's all."

"Uncommon, if you ask me. Well, thanks for the use of the hall—"

"What's your hurry?" She pushed a drink at me. I took it and got it down fast. My jaw stopped aching so much.

"Thanks. But I've got to move fast."

"The Pirate Club?"

"Maybe." I looked around the room. I liked what I saw. For a prosty, she kept a pretty clean house.

"You gave me twenty dollars." She gave me a funny look and I felt something come to life in my blood. "I kind of wish you'd let me earn it."

"Don't you ever take a day off?" I cracked.

"Don't rub it in." She refused to get mad. I watched as she poured another drink for herself. I put a hand over my glass. She shrugged. "You're the first guy that never got around to the heart of the matter first when he talked to Alma Wheeler. That makes you a novelty. Therefore different. Therefore nice."

"You're quite a number, Alma. Can I take a rain check?"

Her eyes lighted up. She smiled. It was a damn nice smile on a damn nice face.

"When you get the notion, call me, Mr. Woolsey."

"It's a deal, Miss Wheeler." I took my eyes off her because her legs were long and lovely and everything was as it ought to be but seldom is. "But I'd never buy anything from you. I don't want what the next guy gets

because he has the money. I'd want to get only what you'd want to give. Otherwise, it wouldn't work out. I'm a funny guy. Been that way ever since the tree fell over on me."

She saw me to the door.

"You talk pretty straight, Mr. Woolsey."

"I have to. Lying confuses me."

"Well, figure this one out."

She was in my arms before I could think of the idea myself. She hooked a soft arm around my neck, pulled my face down to her own. Her lips burned, clung. I forgot how much the kiss hurt my jaw. Because it felt like the tonic for the ages. Her smell got in my nostrils. Which is plenty bad medicine for any level-headed guy. So help me, a prosty was kissing me and I liked it. It was apple blossoms, violets, the same old singing in the veins.

The bug was biting me. Now I couldn't imagine she had ever been one.

I pushed away, drew a deep breath.

"I'll be seeing you, Alma."

"Maybe sooner than you think."

She closed the door and set me wondering. What the hell, I thought. She was conning me. Like they all did. Just plain dames and just plain whores. "This is new, this is different. . ." Hogwash and baloney and hooey.

But she was a knockout. A smart knockout.

I forgot about her and concentrated on getting out of the building without being seen. It was going to be a busy day. The Pirate Club had a customer guaranteed.

Ed Noon, fugitive from justice. On the trail of the Tall Dolores. I was beginning to feel like a two-bit movie.

EIGHT

Things were moving pretty fast. Too fast. Yesterday my biggest worry had been a Giants-Dodgers game. And where my next big chunk of dough was coming from. But Dolores had walked into the mouse auditorium and it had been a rat race ever since.

Harry Hunter had been knifed, Billie Toy had been handled like one in the hands of a careless kid (Dolores was some kid), and Sam Foley had gotten it in the neck, too. Add it all up and a pair of tough cops named Monks and Kirney were looking all over (with the help of the New York Police Department) for one Ed Noon.

I couldn't do much with the pieces I had because I didn't know what kind of a puzzle I was working on. Which was why I was heading for the Pirate Club as fast as a taxi could take me. Junior, the elevator cowboy, had heard Dolores say "The Pirate Club." That was good enough for me. I had to catch up with Skyscraper Sadie before much more sand ran out of my glass. Otherwise, the cops had me for the duration and six.

The Pirate Club was a pretty famous joint as joints go. Even for New York, things went on at Doc Clarke's place. Somebody must have been paying somebody in the right place because the sky was the limit at the Pirate. It wasn't a front-door dive with a fancy sign and ads in all the papers. But any self-respecting cabbie in town knew where it was. Whatever you had in mind for an evening of plain old fancy hell, you could have it at the Pirate. All you needed was the money and Old Man Propriety walked the plank at Doc Clarke's diggings.

That was the catch in a nutshell. The Pirate Club was the playground for the richest crowd in town. All the

bankers' sons who didn't want to be bankers like good old Dad, all the debutantes who really wanted a coming-out party, all the dirty rich who were sick of their dirty money but glad of what it could buy—that's who you rubbed shoulders with at the Pirate.

The cabbie got me there in twenty minutes. I got out, paid my fare, and waited for the cab to take off. I lit a cigarette and looked at my watch. It was going on one. I looked at the Pirate Club.

You'd never have known it from the front. Ever see those big granite mausoleums on upper Fifth in the seventies? Well, that was the Pirate. It was a real Pirate. Looking like a rich man's home on the outside, an upholstered dive on the inside. It was some layout.

I hesitated only for a second. I took just that much time trying to decide if I should have brought a gun with me. My final verdict was that it made no difference. The frisk at the door would have taken it anyway. Besides, I had to appeal to Doc Clarke's better nature.

One o'clock in the afternoon might seem like a hell of a time to go night-clubbing. But you don't know the Pirate.

I took the marble steps one at a time, smoking my cigarette casually. I knew I was being watched. A tiny slit in the fancy carvings on the heavy wooden door was a little too dark for such a bright day. The door was one of those monstrosities right out of the horse-and-buggy days.

I went through the formalities of rapping with the heavy knocker that was fashioned in the shape of a skull-and-crossbones. The Jolly Roger.

The tiny slit angled a bit higher and a pair of eyes looked me up and down. They were the kind of eyes I didn't go for. Mean eyes.

"Say something that makes sense," a voice under the eyes said. The voice was mean, too.

"I've got a bad cardiac condition. A friend of mine recommended a doctor named Clarke."

"Who's your friend?"

"You wouldn't know him. But he's got a bad cardiac condition, too."

"Shame. Real shame." The voice was really broken up about it. "Not enough. Got to have a name."

"Let me in and I'll tell you my life story. Standing out here on the sidewalk talking to a door would look awfully silly to that cop just making the turn at the corner up the street."

The voice growled something but the tiny slit vanished as it closed and the heavy door angled inward.

I stepped inside and blinked. The door closed behind me. It was night again. Bright sunlight outside, lights burning all over the joint inside. There were deep plush carpets, old-world mirrors, and new-world paintings. Sounds of gaming tables and clinking glasses and people having a good time came from some compartment at the end of the mile-long, richly decorated hall.

Mean Eyes was giving me the once-over. He looked out of place in his tuxedo. On him it looked like a uniform.

He patted me expertly up and down. Just as I expected him to.

"Well," he growled. It was my play. He made it pretty plain.

"Tell Doc, Ed Noon wants to see him."

"Who the hell is Ed Noon?"

"Me, stupid."

His hand flew to his armpit holster. But I had pegged that minutes ago. I grinned and that surprised him. His hand halted in bewilderment and his mean eyes got worried-looking.

"You take chances, friend," I mocked. "If I was a very

dear friend of Doc's and you started pushing me around, Doc might get himself a new doorman."

"Doc know you?"

"If he doesn't, we're both two other guys."

He glowered.

"Wait here. You better know Doc. Or he better know you. 'Cause if it don't work out that way, you've lost some teeth."

"Tell you what. I'll wait here and worry about it."

You have to have lip in this racket. Otherwise the mugs of the universe walk all over you. Tough talk they can understand. Anything else is over their heads like a home run. But when you do talk tough, better not be bluffing.

Mean Eyes left me. He took the stairway at the end of the hall and ran up the thickly carpeted steps on heavy legs. But he wasn't fooling either. Someone else came down the same steps to take up the watchdog job on the door. For a crazy second I thought it was Mean Eyes again because the fill-in was a close enough ringer for him to be his brother.

I drifted down the hall toward the noise. But Mean Eyes' double motioned me back with his hand. The way his tuxedo fit him, I could see he was well-heeled too.

I didn't have long to wait. Somewhere in the middle of the sounds from the other room, Mean Eyes came back down. He looked disappointed. But not too disappointed.

"You're in, mug. Doc said to bring you up."

"You probably hate people who say such nasty things like I told you so. But I told you so."

"Reno, you gonna let this mug crack wise like that?" It was the other one talking. The slightly bigger of the two.

Reno of the mean eyes made a face.

"Skip it, Rocky. Lock up and send that mob home. Out the usual way. Doc's orders."

"Who is this bozo, Reno? The ghost of La Guardia or something? He shows up and right away the joint closes."

Rocky's voice held all the chumminess of a bulldog's growl.

Reno got irritated.

"Dammit, do what I told you. Doc is still head man around here."

"Go ahead, Rocky," I chimed in. "Do what Reno tells you. If I know Doc, he hates to be kept waiting." They were both beginning to give me a headache. I was anxious to see Doc.

Rocky was an efficient party-breaker-upper or bouncer or whatever you want to call it. It took him exactly five minutes to close the Pirate Club for the day. Right on the heels of the party sounds fading, he came back wearing a big grin.

Reno was impatient.

"Everybody out?"

"Like a bunch of soldiers." Rocky, showed his teeth. They were bad teeth. "The Collins kid wanted to keep on going but I changed his mind."

"Nothing rough?"

"Nah. Just a knockout drop in his drink. He'll never know what hit him."

"Now you're thinking. You know how Doc hates the rough stuff. Okay, Noon. Let's go up for a little visit."

"Time enough. I have to go to the men's room, now, I'm so nervous."

Rocky ripped out a laugh but a dirty look from Reno shut him up fast.

They were both big boys and nothing about their tuxes and white shirt fronts could make them look like they belonged in them. Their looks were hard, their eyes pinned like buttons in rough, overly shaved faces. They were two of a kind. Twinnish in looks from the word go. Only difference was in their eyes. Reno's were mean and Rocky's were just stupid.

Suddenly Reno pushed me ahead of them, giving me

the lead up the stairs. They fell in behind me and up we went. Something prodded my backbone and I didn't need a blueprint. Doc Clarke was playing me safe for some reason.

The men's room of the Pirate Club was somewhere on the first floor, past a long stretch of deep, smooth carpeting. Unlike other comfort rooms, it was roomy and plushy. All the chairs were richly leathered, making you feel right at home. Doc did things right in his office. Rich paintings, fancy vases, useless ornaments. The works. Knowing what I knew about Doc Clarke, it figured.

The twins closed the thick door behind us. Before I could turn around fully, Rocky, who seemed to have the lower I.Q., pushed me down into one of the chairs. I started to get up, seeing red, when Rocky's big hand slammed me back down again. I cursed.

"Easy, Rocky," snapped Reno. "Leave him some teeth to talk to Doc with."

I grinned at Reno's charity.

"Thanks, friend. Thanks a lot."

Reno's mean eyes got meaner.

"You private cops are all alike. Just mugs. Bigger mugs than we are. Playing both ends against the middle. What ride are you playing Doc for?"

"Yeah." Rocky put his two cents in. "Some mug you are."

"You guys are cute." I was madder than I let on. "The Gold Dust Twins. Stick around and we'll have some fun."

Reno swore.

"Keep up the lip, shamus. You'll get a whole lot of bruises."

"Where's Doc?" I demanded. "If anyone is going to push me around, I'd rather have it done by the big cheese himself. Not you characters. My face is pretty particular about who punches it."

Rocky was starting for me with murder in his eyes when there was a shrill, range-of-the-scale laugh from a

darkened corner of the room. I turned as Rocky froze. I had a flash of Reno looking a little pale himself.

There was a broad, high-backed chair by the one window in the place which was at the far corner. The man who had popped from its leather depths made it seem ridiculously large by comparison. He was as short as Dolores was tall. Reno and Rocky clammed up as he came forward with little mincing steps.

The white carnation in the black dinner jacket and the diminutive height were trade-marks as big as billboards. That and other things.

Doc Clarke was famous for his five-foot physique and constant carnations no matter what time of day it was. Surrounding himself with the biggest and burliest men available was another peculiar quirk. There was enough peculiar about Doc to make a psychiatrist sharpen a dozen pencils.

He was smiling now. It made his rimless spectacles look silly alongside his bad reputation. I wondered what Dolores would look like with Doc Clarke hanging on to her arm. Or was it vice versa?

"So you've got a particular face, Edward? That's very interesting. I'm always curious about men who can joke in the face of physical danger." His voice was small too. Grotesquely thin and high-pitched like a Junior Miss.

"Doc, I want to talk to you . . ." I began.

Clarke had seated himself behind the big desk. He looked like a little boy playing bank president with his father's glasses.

He laughed again.

"The shoe is on the other foot, I'm afraid. I want to talk to you. Why do you come to my club with half the police force in New York looking for you in connection with a murder?"

I laughed. "Doc, you're as sharp as those scalpels you

used to use. Fact is, that's what I want to talk to you about. Confession is good for the soul."

Clarke's small eyes were drilling holes into me. "And that means exactly . . ."

"Just this. Clear the twins out of here so we can talk. I'm clean, Doc. No hardware. We're old friends, Doc. I wouldn't pull anything on you. This is business."

"Don't go for that, Boss," growled Reno, moving in closer.

Clarke waved him off without looking at him. Reno fell back, muttering. Rocky wasn't saying a word. Just looking stupid.

"Edward, I like you." Doc Clarke smiled. That didn't make me feel too good. Doc Clarke's liking you could mean a lot of things. "I've always liked you since I first organized the club. I was genuinely sorry that you refused my offer to hire out as my personal bodyguard. I needed you badly at the time. You've got brains, a strong body, and, as I said, I liked you. No hard feelings, however. But I wish to make myself understood. You will have to do your talking in front of Reno and Rocky. You're a businessman, Edward. You can understand. We are in, shall we say, different businesses? Therefore, I am no longer in a position to trust you. It wouldn't be good business. You understand?"

"Perfectly. I sing for my supper before all three of you or not at all. Is that the new order of things, Doc?"

He nodded but a wince passed over his small, smooth face.

"That's it exactly, Edward. And one thing more. Do not ever, I beg you, call me *Doc* again. It will cause both of us some grief."

"Come again?"

"I assure you I am not fooling." He didn't look as if he was. "It has a painful memory for me of the briefness of what could have been a brilliant medical career. You'll

understand when I say that my professional silence about a certain operation involved ten thousand dollars. You always were the sort of man who understands the value of a dollar in this sordid world."

"Like Irving Berlin said, always." I remembered about Doc. "Okay, Mr. Clarke. If that's the way you want it."

His eyes got funny. "Call me Boss. I like Boss."

"Okay, Boss," I said.

He flung his head back and howled. He laughed right out loud. Reno and Rocky joined in as if at a given signal. I laughed, too. For a different reason. Doc Clarke had gone from eccentricity to egomania. There's a big difference in that, too.

We had been feinting long enough. I threw my right.

"Ever hear of Harry Hunter?"

Clarke shook his head.

"How about a little Chinaman named Billie Toy?"

Again a shake. Reno and Rocky both looked blank.

Doc Clarke simpered. "Is that what you came to ask us about, Edward? Two of your own corpses?"

It was my turn to look stupid. He was toying with his carnation.

"Heard about it already, I see. Then that makes it a whole lot easier." I was saving my haymaker for last. The time wasn't right yet. Doc wasn't on the ropes at all.

"I'll level with you. I can't get places by lying. I haven't killed anything except a cockroach that ran across the office desk last week. The homicide boys are after me for a fall guy on this one. They hate my guts. I put two of them in the hospital yesterday but they'll be out gunning for me in a few days. I've got to crack this thing or I'm a lost cause. I came here for a good reason. There's a somebody. A big somebody. The one person who started this wild goose chase. I've got to ask that somebody an awful lot of questions. And I'd better get straight answers. Or I'll be no better off than Sam Foley was."

Clarke was making pyramids with his fingers, his face all screwed up like a small boy's over a watch being taken apart too fast, being put together too slowly.

"A shame about Sam Foley, Edward. He was a good lawyer. I liked him."

"Heard about that too, eh? Well, I guess it made all the papers."

"It did." Clarke stopped pyramiding and frowned. "You said you came here for a good reason. What did you expect to find at the Pirate Club?"

I took my time lighting a cigarette. I used a book of Pirate Club matches from a neat setup on Doc's desk.

"The Ninth Wonder of the World. Twelve pretty girls rolled into one. The Biggest and the Mostest. Dolores Ainsley." I let it sink in. "The Tall Dolores."

Reno stirred as if a firecracker had gone off under him.

"Throw him out, Boss. He's a mug with too many ideas. Let me and Rocky dump him where he belongs."

The idea seemed to appeal to his apish partner. Rocky flexed his big hands with enthusiasm.

Their open affection for me worked in my favor. I could see it in the angry eyes of Doc Clarke, the childish twitch of his thin lips. His girlish trill rose like an elevator.

"Since when do you two prizes tell me what to do? Be quiet! Both of you!" He turned to me again and his voice settled down. Reno and Rocky nodded sullenly and I couldn't help thinking about the little boy who got to play with the older boys because he had the bat and the ball.

"Now, Edward. You've just made a very peculiar statement. But I recognize it as a definite character trait. What makes you think that this Dolores person is here? Or that any one of us know her at all?"

He had rolled with the punch but Rocky was doing his damndest to look like he didn't know what I was talking about and Reno had tipped off the whole show.

"Don't fence with me, Boss. I was up late last night and I'm tired."

His eyes twinkled behind the glasses. "Meaning?"

"I know she's here."

"Knowledge is one thing, Edward. Proof of that knowledge is another thing entirely."

I explained about the cab driver as if he had told me personally. I described Dolores some more.

Clarke pretended for me. He turned his stooges with an efficient, office-worker air.

"Well, what do you both say to that? Anyone like that come into the club yesterday? You couldn't have missed her if Edward's description is only close to accurate. A woman that tall, that striking-looking . . ."

They were lousy liars and somehow I knew Doc wasn't telling me the truth. The eyes behind the glasses were as mischievous as that little boy he kept reminding me of.

I got to my feet. I was down to a last trick again.

"Okay, Mr. Clarke. It's your game and you're running it but if you just happen to stumble over this Glamazon I've been talking about you might tell her I've got the something she wants. Something she wants very badly. Something she really wanted from Harry Hunter. Something that Harry Hunter got killed for having. Tell her that. That is—if you happen to run into her."

I started for the door half expecting to be stopped on the way, half expecting not to be. I didn't at all expect what did happen.

A voice behind me said, "Okay, Noon. You win. You've got your interview. But you'd better have that something that I want very badly."

It wasn't a man's voice. It was a woman's. And I didn't have to turn around to know that it was Dolores'.

NINE

I turned around, easy-like, barely able to hide the elation in my voice. I felt like I was getting someplace for the first time since Monks had confiscated the jalopy outside the Yale Hotel.

"Oh, babe," I said. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

She was. She had imprisoned her six feet three of Big Girl in a skirt and a black woolen sweater. She looked like school had just let out in Valhalla. Wagner must have had Dolores in mind when he wrote about the female German super race.

She came around Doc Clarke's desk with slow animal strides. The gaping door to the rear of the office showed me where she had come from.

Doc Clarke was smiling, still pyramiding his fingers, and Reno was still scowling. I could see what Rocky was thinking about. His eyes were all for Dolores. Filled with the kind of admiration a big man can have for a big girl. I made a note of it for future reference.

Nobody was flashing any hardware. It wasn't necessary. It was three to one. And I wasn't looking like I was going anyplace.

Dolores' eyes had me pinned.

"Noon, you get around. How'd you tail me to the Pirate?"

"Money makes a positively brilliant man out of me. You gave me two hundred dollars. The job was over before it began. Harry got his in a hurry. You packed a trunk pretty good last time we met." I rubbed my jaw for emphasis. The swelling was gone but a hard lump was still a reminder.

Dolores grinned for the first time since I'd known her.

"You ought to understand a thing like that. You were keeping me on ice. Billie Toy's friends might have shown any second. I can't afford people like Billie Toy's friends."

"I'm glad you mentioned the late Mr. Toy. Just where does he fit into this, Dolores?"

Reno didn't care for my attitude at all.

"You asking questions, shamus? In the spot you're in?"

Doc Clarke suddenly cut out the Egypt routine with his pink fingers.

"Dolores, I suggest you complete your business with Edward as soon as possible. His being a fugitive from justice suggests the possibility of policemen suddenly appearing on the scene. I wouldn't like that. I could also arrange it so that no one else would either."

He could bluff all the other six-footers in the world. But Dolores was a different kind of six feet. She whirled on him and the set of her mouth promised things that weren't so nice.

"Let me handle this, Doc. Okay? Otherwise, you're out in the cold and the deal's off. Noon is no jerk. Understand?"

"Hurray for my side," I said.

Doc got up from his fancy desk and minced around it. Now I had a chance to see him stacked alongside Dolores. Ludicrous had a new meaning in my book. Also, Doc's feelings about who could call him Doc didn't seem to count this time.

"That's fair enough," he bridled. "But stop mixing words with him, Dolores. Get to the point."

She let it go at that and suddenly everybody was looking at me again. I felt like a bargain in a department store.

"Doc's right, Noon. Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The something you said I wanted so very badly. The dingus Harry was carrying. That's why I hired you to find

him for me. I figured you saw through my little cock-and-bull story about wedding bells."

I thought fast. "Not too hard. Missing Persons was your logical stop if you really thought Harry had been in an accident. So I figured you wanted to stay away from police stations for a good reason. So that makes Harry secondary. Now something Harry might be carrying was a stallion of a different hue."

She got impatient.

"Never mind the sleuthing. If you've got it hand it over."

"The five grand? The cops got that."

Her eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"You're holding out for a cut? You want a slice. Is that it?"

"You still talking about the five grand, Dolores?"

She lit a cigarette.

"You're in too big a spot to be acting cute, Noon. You know the five grand isn't it at all. Now, open up or I'll have these palookas knock it out of you."

Reno and Rocky made noises that could only be classified as a chorus of approval. I looked at Doc Clarke. His kisser was as bland as a dentist's. Dolores looked like she was in a bitchy mood. That left me up a tree. Harry Hunter's killer was the only one who could have answered her question. Or could he? Maybe Harry Hunter in his air-cooled drawer down at the morgue still had it on him.

"I wasn't chump enough to bring it with me. If that's what you mean. There's a police rap I've got to square. I'll trade you. Some straight answers from you to a couple of questions of mine. Simple trade. No catches." I took a wild stab. "Hell, what Harry was carrying isn't worth a damn to me."

Dolores laughed. It was a big noise.

- "What's so funny?" I asked, conscious of having stuck my foot in it.

“You are, Noon. You’re the first guy I ever saw who had no use for half a million dollars.”

I was relieved. She thought I’d been clowning. Also, I had a slightly better idea about what dead Harry might have been carrying. His killer had left five grand untouched. How about diamonds?

Dolores had sobered up. She was lounging back in the big chair behind Doc Clarke’s desk, eyeing me coolly.

Reno and Rocky were beginning to fidget. Just like the twins they were. Doc Clarke had both his tiny hands poked into his pants pockets.

“Make your deal in a hurry,” Doc complained. “This is not a pink tea, Dolores. I’m waiting to hear more about your offer.”

She ignored him.

“Noon, you ask your questions. I’ll answer where I can. But when the quiz is over, I’ll expect you to produce that little something we’re both trading on.”

Bang. A stone wall again. She was back to calling it a little something. I was stumped again. But I was going to ride the train all the way just on my nerve. The worst they could do was kill me.

I went over to where a shiny decanter was reflecting the bright lights of the room. Nobody else seemed to want a drink. But I needed one. Suddenly, I remembered how much I had forgotten about food. I was hungry.

“Okay, Dolores. We’ll begin at the beginning. Did you really team up with Harry at the circus or was that a gag?”

“Want to see my clippings? I was the best skin dancer that outfit ever had. Yeah, I met Harry there. Anything else you want to know?”

I put my drink away neat. It felt good going down. I felt less hungry and much better.

“Lots more, my lady. Who double-crossed who? Harry and you had some kind of big deal on the fire. You both

come East to clinch it. En route, one of you had a change of heart. He or she wanted the whole pie to himself. Or herself. Whatever the deal is or was."

"Do you always talk like that? You sound nuts."

"All the time. But just explain it away for me and please do not fail to mention Billie Toy in passing. He bothers me more than any Chinaman I ever met."

I could see Doc Clarke paying close attention. I realized Dolores had kept him hanging, too. This was the first time he was hearing this part of her yarn, by the look of him.

Dolores leaned back and lit another cigarette. She took a deep breath and what it made her breasts do would scandalize a family magazine. It didn't scandalize Rocky. I could hear his hoarse intake of air clear across the room.

"Okay. Here's how it was. Harry and me hit it off right away at the circus. We were nuts about each other. Well, a gal wants to learn all she can about her man, naturally. So I pumped him quite a bit about why he was working a circus and all that sort of junk. He came right out with the sob story. Only his had a happier ending than most of them. What should have been a happier ending anyway." She paused to pluck some tobacco from her full red lips.

"Harry claimed he'd served a stretch in San Quentin and was working just to make enough dough to see him clear to New York where he had this big deal coming off. The biggest deal in the world to hear him tell it. Well, him and me hitting it off so good, he dumped the whole yarn in my lap, finally. And figuring we were going to get spliced and afraid he'd lose out on the deal if he waited too long, I bought in for five grand. Money I'd saved from my circus act for five damn long years."

Her mouth looked ugly with a bad memory. "Noon, you get around a lot. I guess you remember Daniel Brand and that diamond deal about ten years ago."

I whistled. A lot of light was suddenly being thrown off by all those diamonds.

"A half-million bucks' worth of uncut jewelry," I said. "Heisted from the Parry Corporation, a diamond-import outfit. I'll tell the world I remember. The cops went crazy trying to get Brand to tell where he'd socked them away. But he kept his lip buttoned all the way up to a twenty-year stretch. No, Daniel was too smart. The cops are still wondering where five hundred thousand bucks in hot rocks are hidden in our fair little city."

Dolores nodded.

"That was it. Harry being a jailbird, I guess you can figure some of the rest when I tell you that the Brand character died of TB early this year."

"Not too hard," I admitted. "Brand told Harry where the loot was because he knew he was cashing in and Harry was getting his walking papers. And also, he was a crook to the end. Didn't want the nasty old law getting the junk that had cost him some of the best years of his life. That it?"

"You're a smart cookie, Noon."

"I'll do in a pinch. I take it Harry and Brand weren't cellmates?"

Her eyes were wide with admiration. "Now how the hell did you guess that?"

"Don't be a chump, Dolores. The cops aren't really jerks. Brand's passing on his hot news to a prison buddy would have been their first guess. Anybody really close to him would have had a million cops shadowing him when his stretch was up."

"That was it. Harry and Brand hit it off good in the Yard. You know. Recreation period or something. But this Brand must have been a real character . . ."

"What makes you say that?"

She made a face and killed her cigarette. "Because he didn't tell Harry either! Gave him some crazy kind of map

or something. Harry couldn't get sore at him. How could he? The guy was tipping him off to a fortune. Harry said Brand told him something about . . . 'having to do a little work to get to the palace of pleasure' . . . How's that for a screwball?"

"Not so screwy. Daniel Brand sounds like a guy I might have liked knowing."

"Yeah?" She bounced to her feet and immediately towered over all the rest of us. "You guys! And your screwy notions! Harry felt the same way about it. That's why he never showed me the map at all. Not once. He said he wouldn't trust me completely till we got hitched. So we made the trip into New York with me quitting my job, giving him my five grand, and him not trusting me. Can you tie that?"

"I can. Where a half a million is involved."

She gave me a dirty look that made me feel five inches shorter. Her expression changed swiftly and she leaned toward me intently.

"The map. Or whatever it is. You got it, haven't you? If this is a gag, Noon . . ."

I waved a hand at her.

"Not so fast, lady. I'm still trading."

I'd almost forgotten about our three playmates. Doc Clarke and the twins. They were so quiet. But it was like a barrel full of snakes lying in silence.

"What more is there?" Dolores practically bit it out. "Harry got his. And I'm not mad. 'Cause he took a powder on me. Between Newark and New York. Ran out like a rat. After he met that lousy Chink."

"Enter the late William Toy," I said.

"Billie," she corrected me. "Something was screwy about it all. It must have been part of Brand's deal. Because Toy got on the train at Kansas City. And him and Harry started talking like they were brother Elks. From their talk, I got the idea the Chink ran a laundry in K.C."

that was a front for one of the biggest fences in the business. Seems like this fence sends a man along on the deal to speed up everything without losing time. Daniel Brand had a lot of connections. Toy was this fence's agent. But what the hell did Harry know about diamonds?"

"Enough to get himself killed."

"The Chink must have done it. It was a double-cross all around. That way the fence wouldn't have to split with anybody."

"So why does Billie Toy show up at the Yale Hotel—to have his neck broken?" I asked unkindly. "And why does he kill the only man that knows where the stuff is? Without first finding out."

That irritated her. "How the hell do I know? You're the detective."

"Not such a hot one." I mixed another drink. "Cheers, gentlemen," I cracked at the other three. I was beginning to dislike their silence a little. It was too much like a library. Too little like the Pirate Club. And Dolores' story smelled from limburger.

Doc Clarke finally said something. It was a mouthful.

"So, my dear Dolores. Five hundred thousand dollars in diamonds. But you're nowhere near it if our amiable Edward is bluffing. How did he get this map? And why didn't the police find it?"

That put a bonfire under her and a bee in her bonnet. She made fistfuls of my lapels and pulled me toward her like I was a bundle of grain.

"How about that, Noon? When you caught me with that dead Chink on my hands, you didn't let on about whether or not you found anything on Harry."

I might have been drunk but I cracked wise.

"Mangle one hair of this fair head and you're really out in the cold. The map is in a safe place."

What the hell. They were calling it a map. Why

shouldn't it be a map? How else do you find buried treasure except with a map?

She released her hold so that I staggered back about a couple of feet.

"You better start saying something that makes sense, Noon."

Reno growled again. If I'd had a bone I would have thrown it at him. He was beginning to get on my nerves.

"Look," I said. "How about me? The diamonds are all yours. But the cops want a fall guy. A killer. Who got Harry and how can I convince them that Billie Toy isn't my homework either? You're not kidding the pope, you know. You can't afford to let me walk out of here with what I know. If it weren't for Harry's lifesaver of a map, I'd be a worm's banquet right now."

"We're still trading, Noon." Dolores was businesslike about it. "I could put a million miles between me and the cops with what those diamonds could bring. Then you could sing your head off. That fair?"

"Quit arguing with him," Reno horned in angrily. "I say let's start mussing up that smart-alecky face of his."

"Keep still, Reno." Doc Clarke was hovering over the whole scene like some silly-looking schoolteacher.

"Okay, Dolores," I said. I had made my decision. I'd shot the works anyway. One more bluff might work. "I need a telephone."

Doc Clarke motioned to the desk. I stepped around Dolores and picked up the receiver. I dialed the Yale Hotel. I prayed. Somewhere deep down inside me, I prayed. Know what I prayed for? I prayed that I hadn't been wrong about how smart a number Alma Wheeler was.

Reno moved in close to me and showed me the ugly-looking bore of one of the biggest .45's I ever saw under those circumstances.

"No monkey talk, shamus. I'm giving you fair warning. One funny word and I'll blow you wide open."

I marked off the sweat on my forehead to room temperature, the weather, and the whisky I'd been swallowing like water.

There was a buzz, then a click. I asked for Room 1011. I was connected.

"Hello?" a voice asked. I recognized the smart sound of it. It was her, all right.

"Hello, Wheeler. This is Woolsey. Mr. Woolsey."

"Oh, it's you again. Well, what are you up to? Did you get to the Pirate Club?"

I drew a breath, seeing the snout of that .45 close to my stomach, seeing Reno's mean eyes, seeing Dolores hulking eagerly behind him. Seeing the blandness of Doc Clarke's pink face. Seeing Rocky, who was in the very rear, with his stupid eyes fascinated, riveted to Dolores' enticing rump and long, white, meaty legs. It was quite a little group.

"Forget all that, Wheeler." I made my voice matter of fact. "Remember that package I left with you for safe-keeping?"

"Boy, you're a panic. What package?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Uhuh. Look, bring it right over to the Pirate Club, will you? I need it right away."

"Say, Woolsey, make sense. If you're drunk or in some kind of jam . . ."

Good girl, I thought, my heart leapfrogging. My answer fell in place like the right key in the right lock.

"*That's it exactly.* Look, don't take a cab. Use your car. I'll be waiting."

I hung up before any of them got suspicious. I made it as casual as possible. But I felt a whole lot better. Alma Wheeler would come through for me. I was sure of it.

I looked at them. "She'll be here in twenty minutes," I said.

Reno had barely lowered his gun.

"She's the only one that better be here. What was that Mr. Woolsey stuff, shamus?"

I sneered. "Ever hear of aliases, stupid? I got a million of them. But what the hell is Reno? That isn't any name. It's a place."

His reaction was all that I had hoped for. His face blackened with rage and he took a step in toward me. He brought the gun barrel up high. With a rush. Ready, willing, and able to smack my smart-alecky face with it. It was a dumb move on all counts.

You can't shoot a guy with your gun pointed toward the ceiling. Especially when your eyes telegraph your idea a full two seconds ahead of your follow-through. It was as good as Western Union. And all that I ever really wanted out of life when I was in a spot like that.

I caught his arm at the wrist, twisted hard so that his tuxedoed back was to me. He cursed and I knew he was all mine, with me pinning his arm behind him. He started to squirm before the pain got through to him. I didn't have much more time.

I let Rocky have him full-tilt. Stupid Rocky who was too busy giving Dolores' shapely hugeness a lip-wetting going over. One good push and Reno catapulted into his brute of a buddy and they went down into a tangle of arms and legs. Dolores squealed as if a mouse had run across the floor of the room.

Doc Clarke was running toward his desk looking frantically for a weapon a bit more substantial than the letter opener he had seized in his fright.

But I had already reversed Reno's .45 in my mitt, covering the whole bunch of them. I felt like a million bucks. Like seven was my number and it had just come up on the board.

"Hold it," I said. "Let's play Statues."

TEN

Rocky really was big, dumb, and stupid. He lurched to his feet clear of Reno who was still down and rumbled toward me like a bull with a bee up his fanny. I didn't care anyhow. I owed him one. It was as good a time as any to straighten out accounts.

I transferred the .45 to my left hand and met him halfway. I lashed out as hard as a line drive. My right hand caught him full, mashing his ugly face. It gave under the thud of my fist. The second punch was a better one. Right on the button. He dropped like pigeon ballast and spread over the rug.

"When he wakes up tell him he takes an awful lot of chances," I said.

Reno got to his feet painfully. His mean eyes were blazing.

"Come on now, people. Let's not forget our Emily Post. When a guy gets the drop on you, it's customary to raise the hands."

Reno's went up grudgingly. Doc Clarke's delicate paws were trembling. They fairly shot up. Only Dolores wasn't obliging. She was suddenly interested in straightening out the crooked seam of one of her stockings.

I pointed the .45 at her.

"You an orphan or something? Get those lunch shovels of yours up, too."

Her attention came back to me. Her brows formed a scowl.

"Noon, I'm on your side. Remember? We got a deal."

I moved back and got behind the desk where I could run the whole show a little better.

"Sure you are, Dolores. But you tell too many stories.

And I can't buy any of them just yet. Because I can't afford to. So for the time being I play it cautious. Habit, I guess. If you really want to make the team, get the bunch of keys that jangle so loudly in Doc's pocket. That's a good girl."

She did it in a hurry. The sight of her digging them out of diminutive Doc's pocket was almost too much for me. Doc's party manners had nearly deserted him. His eyes were popping in alarm.

"Edward, you're making a grievous error. I won't be able to ignore this. I'll have to repay you . . ."

"Save it, Doc. Accent on the Doc. I'm in a hurry."

"What about the keys, Noon?" Dolores wanted to know.

"Doors, Dolores. Doors. Find the one that locks that back one you came from. From the inside. On the way out, we'll lock the other one. Doc and Reno can baby-sit with Rocky. You and I are going for a buggy ride."

She could move when you told her. Especially when you had a gun in your hand. But I still couldn't figure her out. Something about her just didn't add up.

Reno took a menacing step forward.

"You playing hero again, Reno? It's miscasting."

He showed me his teeth. He was one up on Rocky. His were white at least.

"Punk. Playing Doc Clarke for a sap in his own place. You'll wish you was never born. Won't he, Doc?"

Doc Clarke was too upset by nice old Edward Noon to notice the fracture of the ruling about calling him Doc. He could only nod.

"You ready, Noon?" Dolores was ready.

Any further talk was a waste of oxygen. I stepped over to the phone and jerked the wire until it ripped from the wall moorings. I checked the desk for hardware. There was a dainty little .22 of gorgeous pearl hidden under an even daintier fluff of rose-colored handkerchief. I dropped it into my side pocket. An extra gun is like a dividend on

an insurance policy. You never know when it will pay off.

I motioned Dolores toward the door. Reno's hands had started to lower. I smiled at him. His hands went back up.

Dolores seemed anxious to get going. I couldn't blame her. She made friends wherever she went. Reno was looking at her as if she was the largest rat that ever left a sinking ship. And Doc, little Doc was practically heart-broken.

We got outside and closed the heavy door. She found the right key quicker than a burglar. I made her walk ahead of me all the way.

Somebody started to pound on the door upstairs. Pounding and yelling. Poor Reno, I thought. Still trying to make an impression on the Boss. I'd spotted Reno's style from the first. He'd cut Doc's throat, given half a chance.

We made good time to the front door. I made Dolores edge it open so I could case the street for Alma Wheeler. I wasn't going to stand around outside waiting with a freak attraction like Dolores. We could sell tickets with her looks.

I checked my watch. I couldn't wait too long for Alma to show. We couldn't hang around the Pirate. As it was I had expected the joint to be jumping with Doc Clarke's mugs. But it was the afternoon and probably time off for most of them. Must be a strong union.

Dolores snarled. "What are we waiting for—the cartoon to come on?"

I still had my gun on her. "Skip the cracks. Our chauffeur will be here any minute."

The words of the prophet. A jazzy-looking convertible screeched to a halt directly in front of the club. I took a good look. There was only one person in the car. It was Alma Wheeler. The sharp, professional blonde look of her was unmistakable. I waved.

I pocketed the .45 and hustled Dolores down the stone steps. I practically steered her toward the car. We piled

into the back and Alma just shook her head at the wonder of Dolores. Maybe me. I couldn't tell for sure.

"In gear, baby," I snapped. "And fast. Got to make the five-fifteen."

Alma laughed and the convertible shot away from the curb. Dolores' big bulk flew back against the cushions.

I hugged my corner of the rear and kept my hand on the gun in my pocket. Dolores put her big mitts in her lap and said nothing.

"Where to?" Alma asked.

"Drive for a while. I have to think out loud."

"You sure get around," she said.

"Don't I though? I'm a real popular guy."

"Who's the giant?"

"Miss Wheeler, meet Dolores Ainsley. The Tall Dolores. But don't believe a word she says. She's a real storyteller."

"Hi, Dolores," Alma said. But she kept her eyes on the road. We were cutting toward the East River Drive. Alma was smart, all right. We'd never attract attention with all the traffic on the Drive.

"Look here, Noon." Dolores gave me a dirty look. "Why all the cracks? You and I have to get along, don't we? Without each other, we're nothing."

I lit two smokes and gave her one.

"Behave, Dolores. And we'll talk this thing over. You told me one thing, you told Doc Clarke another. Why? And why did you go to Doc in the first place? Didn't you know he likes boys?"

"What's that got to do with him being the biggest fence in the city? I thought I could get his help and give him a slice. Because I didn't know just how to go about finding Harry's map. But, now you've got it. . ."

"I've got beans! Didn't you know a stall when you heard one? I was up a tree. You were the only one that could get me down out of it. Why the hell do you think I crashed out of there? You better tell me a much better story this time,

lady. One more lie and it's all over. I'll turn you over to the cops so fast, it'll make your ears hum."

"But why do you think I'm lying? I told you . . ."

I could see Alma watching us from time to time in the rear view. I didn't mind a bit. She was a smart cookie, on my side, and it would save me a lot of explaining later. Which she was entitled to, seeing as how she had come when I called.

"You told me a lot of things, Dolores. When I broke in on your packing routine at the Yale, you kept talking about Billie Toy's friends coming, about a big syndicate that Harry Hunter had double-crossed. That was hooley. You, Harry, and Billie were the only three involved before you went panhandling to Doc Clarke. Yet you knew Harry had got his. How come?"

"I told you." She was biting her lip. "It was a double deal all around. Harry had run out on me, then he probably crossed the Chink which . . ."

"Which would make better sense if Billie Toy had gotten the map or whatever the hell it is, when he supposedly killed Harry. No, Dolores. It doesn't jell. What really happened back there at the Yale? You said it was self-defense. Why should a little Chinaman pick on a King Size like you?"

"He had a bigger knife, wise guy. How do I know? Maybe he thought Harry had changed his mind about me and left the map with me for safekeeping."

I rubbed my chin. The cigarette tasted lousy but I kept it anyway.

"Map, map, map. Did you ever see it?"

"I told you what Harry said. He wanted to wait until the right time."

The convertible cut onto the smooth ribbon of concrete that was the Drive. The East River was beautiful under the afternoon sun. But the poet in me was dead. My peasant side was out in full dress.

"Dolores, it's hard to swallow. I go along with the Brand angle and the uncut diamonds and all that. But Harry working in a circus to pick up some dough to finance a jaunt East doesn't add up. With what he had, he could cut any of the right people in as an angel. It's something anyone else would have done. Offhand, I'd say he came to the circus for the specific purpose of looking you up."

"No, that's not true," she said.

"Weren't you and he sweethearts before all that? You were too perfect a match for it to be otherwise. Come clean, big girl. I'll admit I'm trying to help myself. But I can help you while I'm doing it. You still have Toy's dead body on your doorstep."

"Noon, I swear I never laid eyes on Harry until the circus. That's the God's honest truth, I swear it."

I sailed the butt through the window and winked at Alma in the rear view. She winked back. I was beginning to like her a lot.

I decided to hit a different tack with Dolores.

"Why would anybody leave five grand on Harry? It doesn't make sense. You weren't lying about that dough. I'll say that much for you because my little bird told me. But the cops certainly made it top secret."

It was funny how Monks and Kinney both hadn't mentioned it at all. I smelled a rat someplace.

"Any ideas yet, Woolsey?" Alma flung it over her shoulder.

"Not yet, Wheeler. I'm waiting for Dolores to say something."

"I'm hungry," Dolores said.

I shook my head.

"No dice, lady. You can't expect me to walk you anywhere in this town. The cops have a description of you out as big as a billboard. If we eat at all, it will have to be real cozy. My place is out. And we can't go back to the Yale."

Alma suddenly turned off the Drive at 79th. We cruised until she found a space between a truck and a bright red coupé. She braked and swung around in her seat.

"Look. I got an idea. Pal of mine is in Vermont for the summer. She always leaves me the key. We could run down there. Then you two can wrestle this thing out."

"Where is it?"

"In the Village. It's a swell dump and well off the beaten path. Leastways you won't run into any cops."

"Alma, I love you. Let's go. Chop-chop."

She knew her way around all right. I clocked her. She cut through the heavy afternoon traffic like a cabbie with twenty years' experience. Pretty soon the buzz of midtown Manhattan's rush and roar was behind us. We wound up somewhere below 14th Street on the east side in front of a three-story building that was jammed between a spaghetti joint and a tailor shop. A stone stoop ran like a corkscrew up to the front door.

Alma got out from behind the wheel and went around to the sidewalk. She handed me the key.

"It's a walk-up. The top floor. You and Dolores make yourself cozy. I'll see if I can dig us up some chow."

She clicked away on high heels and disappeared into the spaghetti joint. I paid some attention to her figure. It was a damn good one. The candy-striped blouse and skirt with flaring pockets were a little loud for my tastes but on her it looked fine. Her hips were swell medicine. I hadn't seen a pair of legs like hers in a long time.

"Who is that dame? Your girl friend?" I was surprised. Dolores was pouting.

"I hadn't thought about it till now. But it's a good idea."

She made a sound with her lips. It wasn't nice.

"Come on, Dolores. Don't get jealous. A six-foot runt like me couldn't possibly appeal to you."

I hustled her out of Alma's convertible up the stone

steps into the building. Once more I felt like I was mooring the Hindenburg.

ELEVEN

Alma's friend had quite a joint. It was a real fooler on the inside. Downstairs in the car, I'd expected a crummy walk-up. But upstairs was an eye-opener.

We almost tripped over the thick rug going in. Thick isn't really the word. The rug made you feel overdressed. It was soft and deep like the inside of a powder puff. The apartment had two levels. I guess it would pass for what you'd call duplex, but remembering the location, a more accurate tag would be studio apartment.

The rug was just a beginner. There were fancy paintings and fancier vases anywhere you happened to be looking. A shiny ebony piano ran out from the wall elbow-style alongside a terrific arrangement of a long lounge and three plush chairs. The place looked strictly for comfort.

Dolores and I had barely settled down when the front door flew open and Alma marched in with an armful of goodies. That killed any idea of small talk for the time being. We dug right in. When you're really hungry, meat ball sandwiches and Italian *pizza* topped by cold beer can be a minor banquet. We were hungry.

Between mouthfuls, Alma asked me what a "shamus" was. I told her about the old man who watches the Jewish temple at night. He was called a shamus. He was the original. I couldn't figure exactly how that made a private detective one too but Alma let it ride. Dolores just wolfed down her sandwich and said nothing.

Later Alma investigated the kitchenette that was stuck in the rear of the joint. She came back with glasses with

ice in them and what was more important, a bottle. This was one time a brand name wasn't important to me.

I settled for one stiff drink, no water, and felt one hundred per cent better. Then I got back to Dolores. She still had a helluva lot of explaining to do.

Alma sat back in one of the three chairs, arms folded and slender legs crossed. She looked more like a big-shot lady executive than a call girl.

Dolores had sprawled her big figure on the long lounge. She fit it like it was made to order.

"Okay, Dolores. We're back to the last chapter again. Right where you said you were hungry. Now, you've wined and dined, thanks to Alma here. So start talking and no lies please or I'll yawn right in your pretty face."

Her eyes snapped. I could see she didn't like me talking to her like that in front of Alma.

"Don't you ever lay off? I told you straight. I never saw Harry before he showed at Tomlin's."

"Tomlin's?" I laughed. "That the circus? First time you've mentioned it."

"You didn't ask."

"That's right, I didn't."

"What kind of guy are you anyway? Are you for me or against me?"

"For you, Dolores . . . when you come to me and hire me to find a guy for you. But when your boy friend turns up dead and you kill another guy and I get hung up between both corpses, then I'm all for Ed Noon."

"Ed Noon." Alma Wheeler tested the sound of my name. "I like that better than Woolsey."

That got Dolores' goat. She whirled on the considerably smaller Alma.

"Isn't that gorgeous! Just what is your connection in this, sister?"

Alma had guts. I liked the way she stood up to her.

"I'm Wheeler, Woolsey's partner. Aren't I, Ed?"

"With bells on," I certified. "Keep your girdle on, Dolores. Alma's a silent partner. But I'm very much interested in your side of the business. Give."

She got to her feet heavily. She did it so suddenly, I nearly backed up two steps.

"Don't be a piker, Noon. Help me track down that map that was lifted from Harry and I'll cut you in for half of the whole pie."

"That's real neighborly, Dolores. All we have to do is find the party that murdered him for it. Then we just ask him for it. Right now, I'd say that was a pretty tall order."

She made an exasperated sound.

"Can't you think of something? I thought you were a smart operator."

The crack got under my skin for some reason. Right down under the short hairs. Suddenly I was remembering how Monks and Kinney had kept mum about Harry Hunter's five grand.

I ignored Dolores and turned to Alma.

"Is there a phone in this palace?"

I'm one guy who believes in the invention of the telephone. I'd do all my business by phone if I could. Saves so much wear and tear on your shoe leather.

She motioned upstairs.

"In the bedroom. On the night stand."

I was starting up the steps when Alma gasped.

"Hey, you weren't thinking of leaving me alone with Big Bertha, were you?"

That stopped me. Grinning, I reached for Doc Clarke's dainty .22, changed my mind and took out Reno's big .45 instead. I slipped the safety off and handed it to Alma. Dolores started to growl in her throat.

"Behave and you'll stay healthy," I told her.

The way Alma took the heavy Colt said more for her ability to handle it than anything she might have told me.

Alma sighed. "I feel better already."

"The safety's off, Alma, so don't let any mosquitoes tickle your trigger finger. I need Dolores a whole lot." I figured that would make the big girl frightened enough to stay quiet for a while.

"Noon, I'm not going to stand for much more of this pushing around," Dolores said.

"Then sit, Dolores. Sit. Now, you girls entertain each other. One way or another. I'll be right back."

My first impression of the bedroom was the best kind. It was a terrific place to spend a rainy Friday night in. Or any day for that matter. With someone like Alma.

It was dark, cool, and seductive in style. A full-length mirror was set in the ceiling directly above the large, roomy bed. The large painting of a nude on the opposite wall wasn't anything you might find on a business calendar. I let myself wonder just what sort of specimen Alma's pal was before I dialed Charley Flint.

My watch said eight o'clock. Knowing friend Flint's habits, he should be home. Charley was actually the domestic type deep down.

"Ed!" Charley's squeak-box nearly split the receiver. "Stop calling me, will you? I can't afford getting mixed up with you. Where the hell is my twenty?"

"Charley," I made my voice sound hurt. "Is money our only basis for friendship?" How well I knew it was. Charley would sell his fingernails if he could find a buyer.

"Look, Ed, hang up, will you? I'm expecting some of the headquarters bunch for Canasta. It wouldn't look so good, me talking to a guy the whole department is looking for."

"I will, Charley, I will. As soon as you fill my eager ears with some information."

"Oh, Christ—okay, okay—what is it this time?"

"Good boy. Remember the big stiff that you called me about?"

"Yeah. What about him?"

"You mentioned five grand. Who phoned the kill in?"

"Adler. The museum's his beat. Why?"

"Nothing. Except that Lieutenant Monks and the great Kinney didn't say a word about it when I showed up. Now why, do you suppose?"

Charley was quiet for a full minute. Then he cursed.

"Geez, Ed. This is kind of ticklish."

I'd had a feeling about that five grand. Charley's change of tone made it something more than an idle notion.

"Come on, Charley. If there's more, spill it."

"Well, Ed, damn your soul, I saw the lieutenant's report listing all of Hunter's stuff—what he was carrying when he got knifed—no dough was mentioned."

I drew air into my lungs.

"Thanks, Charley. That helps. How are the boys?"

Charley's voice warmed up a little.

"Monks and Kinney? Resting up. They're back in harness Wednesday morning."

"I'll send flowers."

I had a hunch. Monks was a hardhead. But he was honest. Frisking stiff wasn't in his nature. That left my boy friend.

"Where does Kinney hang up that sloppy trench coat he always wears?"

"Huh?—oh, now wait a minute, Ed."

"Come on. You want another twenty to keep the other one warm?"

You can always count on the almighty dollar. Money meant more than pictures of presidents to friend Flint. He gave me Kinney's home address faster than Jackie Robinson steals second.

"Good boy, Charley." I wrote it down in my notebook. "One more thing. Any dope on Sam Foley's funeral?"

"Monday, Ed. A bunch of his Third Avenue pals are all chipping in. Hanson's place. You know where that is."

"Yeah, I know. Look, Charley. Put me in for fifty. That'll make ninety I owe you. You'll get it next time I see you."

Charley started to swear but suddenly hung up in a hurry. I laughed. Canasta could make you move faster than Ex Lax in this changing world.

When I hung up, two things happened.

Reno's .45 went off like a sixteen-inch gun downstairs. And Alma Wheeler screamed. Screamed hard.

I dug Doc Clarke's peashooter out of my pocket and headed for the stairway on the dead run.

TWELVE

I reached the top of the landing in two seconds flat. I looked down expecting the worst. It wasn't too wild a conclusion.

The room was upside down, comparing it to the last view I'd had of it. Alma had been sitting quietly in the chair farthest from the lounge, pointing a gun at Dolores while the big girl had fumed and done nothing.

Well, she'd done plenty in one telephone call. Two of the three chairs were out of position and the lounge had moved a good three feet. I hurtled down the stairs feeling foolish. I had a stab of something looking for Alma. I'd never had that sensation about a girl before.

Dolores was nowhere in sight.

A smell of gunpowder still hung in the room. It burned in my nostrils. I flung through the smell and headed for the front door. I was just in time. Just in time to see the door closing on one of Dolores' three-inch heels. I had a flash of her long white leg before it slammed shut.

I hit the panel hard, jerked at the handle. Too late. A key clicked in the lock. Dolores must have nabbed the key from Alma. We were in and she was out.

I swung to one side of the door and flattened myself. You never know when someone will shoot back through a

door. But Dolores must have had her appetite satisfied. I heard her heavy heels thump rapidly down the stairs.

I ducked back into the living room. A sound came from behind the lounge. A dull groan that still managed to be plenty feminine. I got over in time to help Alma to her feet.

She was a mess. Her blonde hair looked like it had gone through a wringer. The candy-striped blouse was in tatters. The cream of her throat and breasts shone through the rents. I didn't need a blueprint. Alma had been naturally outclassed in the toe-to-toe department.

I put my arm around her firm waist and steered her over to the lounge. I tried to keep the worry out of my voice.

"You okay, Alma?"

She managed a smile. But I could see she had gotten a good scare.

"God, what a monster! Sorry I muffed it, Ed."

"Forget it. The way that dame tosses heavy furniture around, Doc Blanchard couldn't have stopped her."

Her lipstick was on a little crooked but she still looked better than most dames do all dolled up for the boy friend. I got her a drink. She put it down without coming up for air.

"What happened, Alma?"

"She sucked me in. I fell for it. Like a Junior Miss. I let her get too close. That's when the gun went off. I tried to hang on but . . ." She heaved her nice shoulders expressively.

"We got to move, Alma," I said. "This buddy of yours got a wardrobe? You can't run around looking like you've been raped. That gun going off was solid advertising for any cops in the neighborhood."

She got to her feet and went over to an oval mirror set into the wall. She started combing her hair.

"Forget about that, Ed. The joint's soundproof. Like a bank vault. This is quite a place."

"Still no good. Dolores locked us in."

"Still no problem. There's another key in Winnie's room."

I sat down.

"That takes a load off my brains. So Winnie is her name. You're right. This is quite a joint. I saw the bedroom. Is Winnie a Lesbian?"

She turned to look at me and I wished I could take the crack back. Right then and there.

"Don't be nasty, Ed. Winnie's a gal like me. We've both been there. We made our choice. It hasn't been so bad."

That made me mad enough to hit her. Anyway, it took my mind off my troubles. I forgot all about Dolores.

"No. The hell it hasn't," I said. "One guy after another. For a buck. The sky's the limit for a buck. But don't get me wrong. . . . I love America. I don't know about Winnie. But I do know about you. You've got class. You can do better."

I got to my feet again and stood directly behind her. I could see her face in the mirror. And my own. Hers was flushed and fiery. Like she was mad.

She whirled and glared up at me.

Her mouth was working.

"For instance?"

"For instance—this."

I grabbed her, knocked her combing hand down, and let her have it. I held her like crazy. It felt good. It felt great. It felt wonderful. It had being a private detective beaten by several million light years.

I knew it. And she knew it too. She pushed me away and caught her second wind. Her eyes were shining. All lighted up like Palisades Park.

"Oh, Ed . . ." She was whispering now. "I wanted a guy

like you—I always did—I never found him. What does a gal do?”

“She holds out.” I was whispering too. I didn’t recognize my own voice. “She holds out; if it takes a lifetime, it’s worth it. Understand? It’s worth it . . .” I was biting into the delicious softness of her neck.

“Ed, Ed . . .”

Electricity was at my fingertips, fires were burning all over me. I lifted her, carried her. All the way up the stairs into that bedroom with that ceiling mirror. With all my headaches and half the bulls in New York looking for me, I had only one thing on my mind. Alma Wheeler.

“I love you, Ed,” she said.

“I love you, Alma.” It was unbelievable but I really did. Maybe I should have laughed, out loud, but I didn’t. I said “I love you” and I meant it.

I set her down easy on the bed and lay down beside her, ringing her with both arms. Her softness got into my nostrils again. My temples exploded.

She started to cry softly.

“Baby—Alma, what’s the matter . . . ?”

She put her fingers across my mouth, shutting me up good and proper.

THIRTEEN

It was Sunday morning. Harry Hunter, Billie Toy, and Sam Foley had been dead since Friday. And I had been plenty busy. Except for Saturday night which I spent with Alma Wheeler in the most comfortable bed in the world. Besides, I needed the break. I’d been on my feet too long for one guy.

I didn’t worry about Dolores coming back with a raiding party. Because I had her all figured out. She was a cinch

to go back to the Pirate Club and work back into the graces of Doc Clarke. She needed him for her deal. There was no other place she could turn to.

Alma drove me to Kinney's address. Naturally, our relationship was a whole lot different now. And better. I needed Alma and she could be an awful big help. As she had been all the way.

It was a swell summer day and I'd just as soon have taken Alma to the Polo Grounds to watch the Giants or maybe cruise through upstate New York. But I had to work. If I didn't crack this one, I might never have any free time at all for the rest of my life.

Kinney's address surprised me. It was on West 84th just off Eighth Avenue. Which wasn't so far from the museum steps where Harry Hunter had fallen down and never gotten up again. It looked real cozy from a suspicious point of view.

We had a tough time finding a place to park the car. I wanted Alma pretty close to the front door in case I had to get out of Kinney's in a hurry. Finally, we had a spot of luck. A station wagon pulled away from the curb and we hopped right in. Kinney's door was twenty yards away.

Alma switched the ignition off. She looked at me.

"I have a funny feeling a girl who was in love with you would have to get used to waiting around in a car. Well, at least I can catch up on some of the reading I never had time for."

That's what I liked about her. She was sharp. And even a gripe came out of her wrapped up in laughs. I squeezed her elbow:

"Your wings may be a little bent, but you're an angel."

She liked that. I got a gorgeous smile.

"Ed, I know what you're doing is important, but don't stick your neck out. That Dolores is a mean dame."

"What makes you say that? I know she pushed you around a little. . ."

"It's not that. She's mean. Don't ask me why—but one dame can tell you about another dame."

I laughed.

"Okay. I'll file the information. Now, stay here awhile. I want to find out why Mr. Kinney pocketed five grand without telling the police department. Or anything else he might have pocketed along with it. It's got to be him or the beat cop, Adler. If Monks is in on it, I'll be a very surprised character."

I kissed her. Good and hard. If it was at all possible, it felt better than ever. I got out of the car a little reluctantly.

"Here." I dumped my pack of butts on the seat alongside her. "This may take a little time. Also, it'll save some wear and tear on those fingernails. Look, give me about forty-five minutes. If I'm not out by then, come barging in like a suspicious wife. Got it? The apartment number is ten."

She nodded. But her nice blue eyes were worried. I started away from the car.

"Watch yourself in the clinches, Ed," she sang out.

It was a brownstone front as I had suspected. That meant furnished rooms and every tenant with a personal key for the downstairs door. That would make it tough. There was only one thing in my favor. It was still sticky-hot summer and very early in the afternoon. The front door might be opened.

It was. I breezed in as if I lived there and walked up a short flight of stairs without stopping. Number ten would have to be past the first floor. The hallway was as empty as a ball park in winter. Not that it would mean a helluva lot if I ran into anybody at all. You could live in one of these places for years without ever seeing your next-door neighbor.

Somebody's radio was dishing out a commercial as I turned up another landing. Now was the time to look.

Apartment seven was at the head of the stairs. I had marked off four apartments on the first level. Which would put number ten at the other end of the floor I was on. At the front of the next landing.

I reached the top and turned. About twenty-five feet down the badly carpeted hallway was a door slightly ajar. Another good break. I was throwing nothing but naturals.

I tugged at my collar, feeling the heat. Walking boldly as if aiming for the next level, I made it to number ten and halted. A toilet flushed suddenly. This I gauged came from behind the door I had passed midway in the hall. A door with no number on it. It didn't take an Einstein to figure it was the bathroom that was shared by all four apartments.

I eased Kinney's door open and stepped in quickly, my fingers curled around Doc Clarke's .22. I missed my .45 more than a little these past few days. But my string was holding. I had made another pass. The room was empty.

A lone bulb illuminated the joint. But it wasn't necessary. Sunlight was waterfalling through the open window which faced the street side. I fixed the door so that it was set as it had been and took a quick inventory of the room.

Kinney was taking a shower. It figured. The bed was made and a pair of clean shorts and an undershirt were propped on a chair. His shoes were set on the floor near the chair with a pair of socks dumped in them that still had the department store band on them. For final proof, dangling over the arm of a rocker-type chair by the Civil-War-style bureau were the dirty underclothes he had probably just taken off.

A cigarette was burning away in an ash stand next to the chair. It was long enough to have just been lighted. Which meant that Kinney had just lighted it, forgotten about it, and gone for his shower or bath. Which gave me some time to nose around. About five minutes at least.

I raced through the drawers of the dresser like a GI

looking for misplaced furlough papers. I finished in a hurry and was disgusted.

Kinney's service revolver was in the top drawer of the dresser along with his shield and his wallet. I pocketed the .22 and grabbed that right off. But everything else was a dud. There were just some linen, a mess of technical books about law, and all that other personal junk that doesn't mean a damn to anyone except the guy who owns it.

If Kinney had the dough, it was somewhere else besides this room. Annoyed, I sat down in the rocker chair because it faced the half-open door and still kept me out of view. I leaned back in it and idly trained Kinney's revolver at the door.

Something was burning like rubber in a garbage can. It was Kinney's unsmoked cigarette. I reached over and snuffed it out in the ashtray. A book of matches caught my eye. I wouldn't have thought anything of it but the design hit me right off. It was one that I knew. A sexy-looking babe carrying a trayload of cool-looking drinks. Something registered in my brain as my eyes read the words:

SPEND THE NIGHT AT BARNEY DUNN'S
FOR AN EVENING OF FUNN

Barney Dunn's bar. Sam Foley. An alley right alongside. I tucked the matchbook in my handkerchief pocket. My head was full of busy little hornets. I got ideas.

I heard a door click open down the hall. Footsteps padded in my direction. A slight breeze came in with Kinney as he pushed into the room.

He looked silly with a wet towel wrapped around his middle and his skin clinging with moisture. A thick wad of taped bandage ran around his chest and shoulder like a cartridge belt. I remembered the cracked rib. Some guys are bugs for this cleanliness stuff.

But the expression on his face was really a howl. He was in spite of everything an intelligent guy. And when you catch them with their thinking caps off, they look real stupid.

"Close the door and get out of that draft," I said, "or I'll crack another rib for you."

I wasn't thinking so much of Hunter's five grand now as I was of Sam Foley being beaten to death.

Kinney did as I told him. But the surprise was wearing off. He reached for the clean underwear.

"Never mind, Kinney. I like you just as you are. Nice and clean and helpless. We have a little talking to do."

His face mottled with anger. "What do you want from me, you bastard?"

"Answers to questions. Lots of them. But let's understand each other first. Watch your mouth. Or you'll be minus some teeth."

He saw that I meant it because his face got sullen and he shut up. He shifted uncomfortably.

"Noon, you keep pushing your luck. That last little deal that you worked on the lieutenant and myself is going to cost you."

I didn't have time to gloat over him.

"Look who's promising big bad jail to an honest taxpayer. A detective, one of New York's Finest, who rifles corpses for five grand. And something else we won't go into right now." I had to play him right. He wasn't any dope.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that Harry Hunter was packing five thousand dollars when somebody lowered the boom on him. Five thousand dollars which wasn't listed in the dead man's possessions down at the morgue. Five thousand dollars which you pocketed and didn't report."

"You're crazy, Noon. Get out of here!"

"Am I? What beats me is how you kept it from Monks.

Unless Mike is getting crooked in his old age. Which I can't believe. He's a square shooter for a cop."

Kinney got cocky.

"And what proof have you got—even if we consider your cockeyed story for a single minute?"

"A couple of little items that can be easily checked. Officer Adler phoned the murder in and mentioned the five grand. Now, if I check on it, I'll bet Adler is now pounding the beat in the sticks someplace so no one can hear him talk about it. That or settled for a split of the dough. Not too hard to believe—because cops aren't paid too much money at that."

Kinney shook his head as if he was sorry that I had gone crazy.

"What else, bright boy?"

"This place is just a few minutes from the museum. You phoned in as I see it, heard about Hunter, and took it from there. I remember Monks mentioning how you got to the place a little before he did. Which gave you some time to go through Hunter's things before anyone else got there. I'll bet you sent Adler for a pack of butts or something. There are a dozen ways you could have worked it."

"You're forgetting something, aren't you? Adler is in on it." His smile was eager as he shook his damp head. "I thought you were a smart guy, Noon. But you're just a wise punk. All of what you said is circumstantial as hell. It doesn't prove anything. Even the lieutenant would bear me out on that."

I had a hard time keeping my finger still on the trigger. Because my trump card was itching to be pulled from my sleeve.

"I've got a witness," I said.

He refused to get worried. But he still looked silly, half naked as he was.

"Well, you seem to want to keep this nonsense up,

Noon. So I'll humor you before I call your bluff on that gun of mine. Who?"

I made my voice flip.

"Nice guy. A pal of mine. With a great reputation for honesty. He's a bartender. Sees and talks to a whole bunch of people everyday. Now last Friday night, he would swear you were in his place, drinking like a fish. And having a whale of a good time. With a very good friend of mine."

The change in his demeanor was so slight that if I hadn't been looking for just that I wouldn't have spotted it.

He laughed. "You were always a clown, Noon. Say it in English."

"Anything to oblige. Finding the five grand like that was a little too much for you. You had to have a drink. So you filled your glass at Barney Dunn's. A couple of hours before you and Monks ran me down at the Yale."

He bit his lip but he was still smiling.

"Is there any more to this pipe dream of yours?"

"There is. Because Monks had it in for you that night. For bragging about what you'd do to me down at the station. In front of Junior, the elevator boy. Now even you wouldn't pull a rock like that. Unless you were feeling high. Sort of half drunk. And Monks was sore at you for being drunk on duty. Does that figure?"

"So maybe I had a drink. But you can't prove why I had it or where I had it. And it certainly doesn't put me down as having this five thousand dollars you keep talking about."

"Oh, yes it does, College Boy. Especially as a motive for murder. Especially for killing a nice guy like Sam Foley who was also in Barney Dunn's that night. And somehow happened to get in your way. Sam who told me he was tracking down the crooks of the department. Sam who was very probably following you and stumbled

onto this thing. And maybe you guessed that a smart lawyer like Sam knew all about you. And maybe you figured he might pass it on to your biggest pain in the ass—Ed Noon.” I got to my feet. “Tell me this, you sonofabitch—did you give Sam one for good measure because he was such a good pal of mine?”

My face must have frightened him. He backed off, the bed cutting him across the knees, making him sit down. The towel came undone and fell away from him. I laughed hard. Because he had nothing a man could be proud of.

His lips were working.

“Prove it, Noon. Prove it. You haven’t shown me one Exhibit A yet.”

I dug the matchbook out of my pocket. I held it up like a medal.

“How’s this for a starter? When you buy cigarettes at Barney’s, you get his advertising matches too. You can’t get them anywhere else. And just try to convince a jury that someone gave them to you.”

He fumbled with the towel and covered himself again. His smile was thin enough to convince me I had guessed right. But like he had said, it wasn’t much in the way of real evidence.

“How long are you going to keep this up, Noon? Let me get dressed, at least. I’ll listen to this crazy talk because I have to but . . .”

I sat down again. The gun was wet and sticky in my fingers. I transferred it to my left hand. His eyes followed the movement.

“That isn’t all, Kinney. Not by a mile. You stumbled onto something when you frisked Harry Hunter. Something you don’t understand. Or at least haven’t had time to work on because I took care of that. I put you off duty and laid you up with a cracked rib before you could work it out.” I let it sink in before I put the change of pace

across his letters. "Have you figured it out yet—that slip of paper Harry Hunter was carrying in his wallet?"

There was a long pause. I could almost hear him thinking. He couldn't admit anything but I had to be right. Hell, Dolores didn't have it, Billie Toy hadn't had it. Kinney had to have it if I was right about him lifting the five grand.

The room was alive. You could feel seconds ticking away.

Kinney was breathing hard. Sweat was forming on his white skin fresh from a showering.

He flung his head back and laughed.

"Don't be stupid, Noon. You expect me to say yes now when it would be saying yes to everything else you're trying to pin me with?"

"I do expect you to say yes, Kinney. Because Noon has you dead to rights. Because if he hasn't—I have."

It wasn't me doing the talking. It was Monks, holding the door open with one hand and leveling a gun at us both with the other. He had eased in on us like an Indian.

Lieutenant Monks looked tired. There was a bandage over his forehead from the accident but that didn't do it. There was a tired hurt in his old eyes. Eyes that were looking more at Kinney than at me.

He closed the door wearily. I lowered my own gun. Monks had Kinney covered. Not me. I'm afraid I let my jaw hang, as sore as it still was.

Monks' smile was tired too.

"Stay where you are, Noon. And stay out of this. The department takes care of its own."

FOURTEEN

"Tennis, anyone?" I said.

Monks ignored the crack. He only had eyes for his partner.

"Get dressed, Kinney."

Kinney looked bewildered but climbed into his shorts and undershirt. He dug a neatly pressed suit out of the closet.

"What's ailing you, Mike? We've got Noon, haven't we? Now, we can clear that Toy murder . . ."

"Save your breath, Kinney," I said. "Monks isn't here to hold your hand. You crossed yourself up somewhere and he's got you. That right, Monks?"

Monks snarled. "Shut up, Noon. I'm running this. It's bad enough to run into a crooked cop without a bunch of wisecracks about it."

"Crooked cop?" Kinney stopped dressing to stare at him. "Mike, you're kidding me—say, you weren't listening outside the door, were you . . . ?" He put on a dumbfounded face. "You don't believe that story Noon had cooked up, do you?"

"Drop it, Kinney. Right now. You're it. And there's no mistake." Monks still sounded tired. I was beginning to get the picture. He didn't like Kinney too much, but the idea of one of his own kind being a phony was too much for him to take. I guess cops have pride, too.

Kinney finished dressing. He lit a cigarette and puffed on it nervously. I kept my hand on the gun in my pocket. He kept staring at Monks and bit his lip.

"Okay, Lieutenant. If you're charging me with anything, I've got a right to hear it."

Monks must have been waiting for something like that.

Because his free hand shot out almost immediately and caught Kinney right across the mouth. The blow rocked him back, set him down to his knees. I'd never seen Monks mad before. His face was contorted with hate. He cursed.

"Just like all the rest of them. Crying about your rights no matter how crooked you are." He cursed again. "Get on your feet and listen to what I have to say. And forget about any stalling. I did this all on my own because I wouldn't believe you could do something like this. Right now, I'm the only one at headquarters who knows you for the stinking rat you are."

Kinney started to blubber. Which made Monks madder. He dragged him to his feet and flung him down on the bed. Kinney's mouth was bleeding. And he was scared now. Damn scared. His smart attitude had fallen off him like a blanket.

"Mike—don't lose your head. It's a frame. Noon . . ."

The look in Monks' eyes stopped him faster than another smack across the chops would have.

"You mean you always had it in for Noon. That always bothered me, Kinney. Ed's a wise guy all right. But he's honest. And I never could go for your interpretation of law and order. And the way you work on those cheap hoods down at the station. Sure, they're punks. But they're human beings. You were too much of a fanatic to suit me. Or the department."

I was taking it all in because I had the idea it was something I might never see again. A real tough cop like Monks letting his hair down.

"Riding Noon was your first mistake. Showing up for duty half stinking was another. And that five grand—whatever gave you the idea it wouldn't come out in the wash sooner or later? Well, it did—Saturday. Adler's conscience was too much for him. Or the five hundred you

tried to shut him up with was too little. Did you expect to cut me in when I glommed on to it? Was that it?"

"Adler is lying, Lieutenant . . ." Another look from Monks and Kinney couldn't go on with it.

"Is he? That cop's been on the force for eighteen years. So you took five grand. That started me off. I checked with some of your habits. Like Barney Dunn's where you went and had a few from time to time. The bartender remembered you being there the same time Sam Foley was. I never would have tied you up with Sam Foley's murder if it hadn't been for the money and me knowing how much you hated Ed here. Nobody had anything against Sam except a guy who had something against Sam's best friend. Is that why you killed Sam or was it because he knew about the money?"

"Mike, give me a break, let me explain."

Monks' sneer was something to write home about. "Did you give Sam Foley a break when you beat him to death?"

I wasn't expecting it but Kinney put his face in his hands. He was crying. Like a little kid alone in the dark.

"Mike, I was drunk—I didn't know what I was doing. . ."

"Save that for the third act," I cut in. "Mike, ask him where the dough is. And above all, ask him what else he took from Harry Hunter's dead body."

Monks gave me a funny look.

"What kind of a dick do you think I am? I know where the money is. Do you think I'd move in on Kinney without having the evidence first? That's what's wrong with your methods, Ed. They're not according to the book."

"To hell with that book. Your way is too slow. You give them time for habeas corpuses, you turn back from a thoroughly warranted search of a known gangster's home because you haven't got a warrant. Fine and dandy. For the crooks. Gives them all the time in the world to ditch

the hot gun, the body, or the sixty grand in forged notes. Don't tell me about Law and Order. I've had mine. Ask Kinney about Harry Hunter. Maybe he killed him, too."

Monks shook his head.

"Not this time."

"What did he do with the dough?"

"Put it in one of those ten-cent lockers at Penn Station. Went down in person. Yesterday. Cracked rib and all. That was peculiar too. He was banged up worse than I was but he wouldn't stay in bed."

Kinney wasn't whimpering any more. He was glaring at the both of us. His mouth was pushed out in an ugly way.

"Okay, I took the money but you still can't tie me in with Foley. It won't stand up in court."

I felt pity for him for the first time. I had always thought he was weak deep down inside where it counts. He was certainly living up to my advance notices.

"Don't be a chump," I said. "You heard the lieutenant. He said he's got all the evidence he needs. Now help me forget how much I'd like to kill you with my bare hands by giving me what you found on Harry Hunter."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, but you do. Hand it over."

Monks' anger gave way to curiosity.

"What's all this? Anything to do with that Chink killing and that female giant who gave you a going over?"

"Everything in the world. It's the reason she wanted to catch up with Harry. It's what started this whole blooming mess. Sam would still be alive. So would two other guys. Make him give, Lieutenant."

Kinney's hands flew up protectively as if Monks were going to hit him again. But Monks only looked as if he were going to spit.

"You're finished, Kinney. Through. If you've got another lead on this case, hand it over."

"There isn't anything else I'm telling you."

"Bow out like a good cop. It's the last decent thing I'm asking you."

Kinney seemed to concentrate. His eyes screwed up comically. Then he went to the bureau and lifted up one corner of the scarf that covered it. He handed Monks an envelope of some kind. I was dying to look at it but Monks just dropped it into his pocket.

Monks did a funny thing. He held out his hand in my direction. Somehow I sensed his meaning. I handed him Kinney's service revolver.

He broke it open, suddenly. Kinney stared at him, goggle-eyed.

"What are you going to do with me? Turn me in?" His voice sounded like a cracking water glass.

Monks slowly extracted the bullets from their chambers. He dropped them into his other pocket. The gun snapped shut again with a click that split the silence wide open. He stepped to the door, opened it, and motioned me outside. I stepped past him and walked half-way down the hall without turning.

Monks' voice came to me as low as he was speaking. Somehow, I knew he had tossed the gun on the bed. And I also knew it was a gun with only one bullet in it. A gun with one reason.

"I'm not turning you in, Kinney. Because I can't. There's only one way out for you. Take it. The chair is too long a wait. And you'll suffer that much longer. You can't beat this rap. So I'll be waiting downstairs until I hear from you."

The door closed on a strangled gasp of noise or something and Monks joined me. We headed downstairs. We had reached the front door when a muffled explosion reached our ears.

I could just hear what the housewife across the way would be thinking as she heard it.

It can't be gunfire, probably just a car backfiring.
Monks grunted and said nothing. We met Alma on the front steps.

FIFTEEN

"I need a drink," Monks said. He looked it. There were circles under his eyes.

"There ought to be a bar on Columbus," I said. Alma just shook her pretty curls as I motioned her to keep quiet. Monks was in a funny mood. He kept his head down and his lower lip thrust out.

We went around the corner, found a joint that wasn't selling poison, and walked in. Monks headed for a booth buried at the other end of the place. Alma and I trailed along.

He must have looked like a tough customer with his rugged kisser and the fresh plaster sticking over his right eye. I had to laugh the way the fat bartender gave the lieutenant of detectives a suspicious once-over as we sailed by. Monks could probably have had him locked up on a dozen counts.

Monks ordered a whisky straight. I conferred with Alma and asked for two dry martinis. That made me feel good because it was just something else we had in common. Along with a lot of other things.

After Monks put his drink away, he shifted his wide shoulders wearily and looked at me. I looked at him.

"You," he said. "I don't know what the hell to do about you. I owe you plenty for that stunt in the car Saturday night. You could have got me killed."

"Lock me up," I suggested.

"Not a chance." He surprised me with a big grin. "You're worth more to me out than in. I lock you up. What

happens? I sweat my brains out trying to hang a murder rap on you that I personally give you a clean bill of health on. You didn't kill the Chinaman and you didn't kill that Hunter character either. But you're mixed up plenty in both killings."

"Take me down to headquarters and beat it out of me, Lieutenant."

Monks made a face.

"I'm no Kinney, thank Jesus. Look, Ed. I've got a vacation coming up next month. The wife would have my hide if I have to pass it up for this investigation."

"Fine." I tipped my glass at him. "Then we cooperate."

"Isn't that what I'm telling you?" Monks seemed to see Alma for the first time. "How can you stand him? He's got more brass than bar rails."

Alma patted my arm affectionately.

"He's not such a bad egg, Lieutenant. It's just his rotten liver." I gave her a wink of appreciation.

"Look, Ed. This Dolores Ainsley business. Give me something to work with. What's with the Chinaman and Hunter? What's it all about anyway? Narcotics or something? I can't figure Kinney in it at all past the thirst for some extra spending money."

"Lieutenant, we'll order another round. And then Poppa Noon will tell all."

I signaled the waiter, lit up cigarettes for myself and Alma. Monks already had one burning. Our drinks came. I took a deep breath and tore right into Dolores' fable about Daniel Brand, the five hundred thousand in uncut diamonds, and the circus romance with the trip East to find the booty. Of course, the yarn tripped right over the respective corpses of Harry Hunter and Billie Toy. Monks' eyes lighted up like candles at the Doc Clarke interlude. From my private information, I knew that Monks had always ached for the chance to padlock the Pirate

Club but headquarters hocus-pocus had kept his hands tied.

"Danny Brand, eh?" Monks managed to look thoughtful. With his rough mug, it was like a bulldog with intellect. If you can picture it. "That takes me back. Thirty-nine or Forty. Smart operator, Danny. Every cop in the city was on the lookout for that ice."

"Was Brand ever married, Monks?"

"Not for the record. But that doesn't mean he wasn't. Why?"

"Just a notion."

"He gets lots of notions," Alma said.

Monks made a noise with his nose.

"Don't I know it, Miss . . ."

"Wheeler's the name. Call me Alma."

"Okay, Alma it is."

I could see he liked her, which was saying plenty. Monks was one of those old-time guys who can't see modern dames for apples. He wanted a girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad. I'd never had the heart to tell him what a sleigh ride that kind of logic is.

"Notions, eh?" Monks grunted. "Any more of them, Ed? Like where this whole damn Diamond Exchange is hidden?"

I'd had the reins on my impatience long enough. I'd been sitting on my hands waiting for him to get the idea without having the roof fall in on him.

"Don't be a chump, Monks. That isn't a love letter from one of the police matrons you've got in your pocket."

His jaw dropped down to his shoes and came up again. He reddened, his fingers going slowly to his side.

"You mean . . ."

"I mean the map or whatever the hell it is that Daniel Brand gave Harry Hunter as a last will and testament is now resting in that side pocket of yours. It's exactly what

Double H was killed for. And what his killer somehow missed.”

Monks took the envelope out and placed it on the table between the three of us. I hunched over to stare at it. But the outside of the thing was blank. Just the regulation business-size type envelope. It wasn't sealed. Monks dug his fingers inside and pulled the contents out.

It was my turn to look stupid. Monks swore softly and immediately apologized to Alma.

Harry Hunter's "map" was a fifty-dollar bill. A genuine, bona fide, as-green-as-a-pool-table American fifty-dollar bill. It lay on the table with the Ulysses S. Grant side up.

Monks eyed me sarcastically.

“The only directions you'd get on this thing would be the way to Washington, D.C.” It was the first decent crack he'd ever pulled.

“Is it a counterfeit?” Alma asked.

I was feeling foohsh when she reached down and turned the bill over. It was a day of surprises. The back of the bill wasn't green and it wasn't money.

It was white paper. Plain white paper cut exactly flush with the size of the bill. There were neat handwritten lines running vertically to the way you normally look at folding money. Like the way people crowd a postcard sometimes.

Monks swooped down on it. He squinted at it up close. The expectation in his face turned to disgust.

“Limericks,” he sneered. “And lousy limericks at that.” He handed it over to me.

I took it from him. I wasn't discouraged. Monks would have a hard time with the crossword puzzle in the *Daily News*.

“Now we know why the killer missed it. Hunter pasted it on the back of this bill. But why the chump passed up the five G's I'll never know.”

"You got company," Monks rasped. He was too disgusted at the "map" to worry or care about Alma seeing it, too. I spread it out so she could get a good look at it.

I couldn't really blame Monks much. When it comes to maps telling you where a fortune in uncut diamonds is stashed away, I'll take a Socony road map any time.

The handwriting was small and neat, like a careful bookkeeper's hand. It wasn't a limerick but it was as lousy as Monks had said it was.

I read it aloud:

*"They play her with football
She's taller than you
She'll never leave home
'Cause her heart is true
Diamonds go to her head
In the old-fashioned way
The crown of a queen
Is the place where they lay."*

Monks had gone back to his drink.

"Just my luck. A real lead. A chance to crack a case and I run into a minor poet."

"You give up too easy, Monks. This isn't toilet wall poetry. It means something."

"I'll tell the world. It means I've got my work cut out for me. I start right from the bottom of the manure pile. Routine police work. Oh, my aching back."

Alma got interested. "You think it really is anything, Ed?"

"Hell, yes. Harry Hunter didn't ruin the back of a perfectly fine fifty-dollar bill to be cute. This is a direct route to all those diamonds. It has to be."

"You've got more faith than I have, Ed." Monks got to his feet, dug out some change. I shook him off.

"My treat, Mike."

"Suit yourself." He smiled. "Don't spend that fifty by mis-

take. Hang on to it. If you get another notion, call me. I'll be getting back downtown. Somebody's probably phoned in about Kinney by this time."

Suddenly he looked tired again. Like his big shoulders were too heavy for him.

"Look, Mike." The urge to be kind to him was too much for me to push aside. "He had it coming. Sam Foley never bothered him at all. Sam Foley was a good guy."

"Sure. You said it right." His voice got thick. "But it's funny about us cops. Lousy work, lousy hours. But we got pride. It hurts like hell when one of the boys goes over to the other side."

"I know what you mean." What else could I tell him? I wanted him to scam before he began bawling out loud in front of Alma.

"Remember, Ed. I'll expect to hear from you. I'll ease up the search for you. But consider yourself on probation. Cooperate with me this once and I'll see about your license not being revoked."

"Thank you, kind sir."

"Ahh—go to hell. Well, so long, Alma. Nice seeing you."

Alma watched him saunter away. She shook her golden head. I got a nice bright look from her.

"What happened back there in the building, Ed?"

"You mean Kinney? He turned crook and the lieutenant gave him the privilege of blowing his own brains out. The old honor system. For the good of the force and all that crap. I thought that went out with the old Prussian army."

Alma shuddered. "How awful."

"How nice." I wasn't thinking of Kinney any more. Alma's rounded knee was digging into my thigh under the table.

She laughed and moved away.

"Business first. You're a desperate character. How about straightening this thing out first?"

"You're terrible. Just like a wife." I felt like clowning with her because it was fun. But she was right. I was still way down under. Dolores had messed up my comfortable existence plenty.

"Ed, does this poem help you any at all?"

"Like a big headache it helps. But it's got to mean something. Or Daniel Brand was the sort of practical joker I'm not exactly nuts about."

I'd said it myself. But I didn't believe it. About Daniel Brand just having a big joke on everybody.

There's something about the nearness of death that cleans everybody up, that makes each one of us want to do something good before we cash in our chips.

Like deathbed Catholics, like Kinney cleaning off his own slate. Like Daniel Brand wanting to give his prize, even if he hadn't exactly earned it, to the living. To someone who could use it. There's a lot to be said for things not going to waste.

I grabbed Alma's pink-white arm.

"Come on, Wheeler. We gotta see a man about a girl."

SIXTEEN

To say that Charley Flint was surprised when Alma and I paid him our little social call is putting it gently. Charley tried to slam the door in my face. But I'd been prepared for something like that. My foot shot out and held the door. I stiff-armed him across the chest. He calmed down, muttered helplessly, and shook his head. I walked in behind Alma.

Charley glared at me in his living room. It was a modest little dump he had. If you call ultra-modern furniture, a television set with a twelve-inch screen and a small cock-

tail bar modest. Charley's tastes ran pretty high for a mere switchboard cop.

His tastes in dames were modest too. There was a cigarette burning away in the ashtray that had a full inch of lip rouge on it. There weren't any glasses in sight but the condition of the bar told me that Charley had been throwing a nightcap together when he answered the door.

"Fine thing, Ed," Charley whined. "A million cops looking for you. So you turn up here."

I glanced at the closed bedroom door. A light gleamed out from under the crack. I smiled.

"Sorry to spoil your little party, Charley. But I'll make it short and sweet. So your girl friend can stay put in the bedroom for a few minutes."

Charley was giving Alma the once-over. As put out as he was, I could see Alma was getting a mental rape. She ignored him and curled up in one of the comfortable chairs.

"What's the smart idea bringing her here?"

"Keep cool, friend Flint. She's a trusted operative of the Noon School of Detection. Anything you tell me, she won't tell anybody else."

Charley sneered. "Since when do you tie in with chippies, Ed? Isn't this one of the wrens that works the Yale?"

I kept my temper, but Charley never knew how close he came to getting a bunch of knuckles in his face.

"She graduated from Yale. Listen, Charley. Forget your social study and concentrate. What do you know about Daniel Brand?"

His small eyes got shrewd.

"How about my ninety bucks?"

I showed him my teeth.

"Would you like to try for a hundred?"

His lips moistened. "What does that mean?"

"It means I can use anything you can tell me about one Daniel Brand and all that ice he put on refrigeration."

"Hell." He was disgusted. "I can't tell you any more that you don't already know. The guy's dead and the ice was never found. I thought you knew that."

"I did. But a war kept me busy for three years. The details are hazy in my mind. I'd wait if I could for the library to open but I haven't the time."

Charley stared back at the bedroom door. He looked at his watch and bit his lip again.

"Where's the hundred?"

I peeled the amount off Dolores' retainer and put the rest back in my pocket. That satisfied him. He went to the bar and mixed a few drinks. He was just enough of a gentleman to serve Alma first. I toyed with my glass. From habit, I let him swallow his drink ahead of me.

"Shoot," he said. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything that strikes you about the guy. The sort of stuff that wouldn't turn up in the newspaper."

Charley rubbed his face. It looked freshly shaved. Suddenly, he smiled.

"Brand was a great kidder, Ed. He was sharp for a crook, but his rep as a joker was almost as good. I remember something about him now. One time he pulled a safe job, down around Wall Street, I think. He couldn't resist leaving a little poem in the safe he cracked. Sure—that's how he was caught the first time. He never figured the cops could track him through the typewriter he used. That was long before the diamond heist but it gave him a rep. A rep he tried to live up to."

The news bothered me. It put the poem he had given Harry Hunter in a questionable light. Maybe it had been one last big joke on everybody, I thought. Me included.

"Keep talking, Charley."

"Geez, what else is there?" Charley showed disappointment at my reception of his information. "The guy's only connection with our department was the diamond

heist. I don't know much else about the little shrimp except. . ."

"Shrimp?" I scared Charley the way I cut in. "Did you say shrimp?"

"Yeah—shrimp. You know, small. Christ, Ed. What's eating you?"

"I don't know." I didn't either. But the word had set up a little irritation in my think-box. "How tall was he?"

"You got it backward." Charley laughed. "You mean how short was he. Brand was barely five feet. That was another thing. He got ribbed a lot about it. Even wore elevator shoes all the time."

"Charley, you seem to remember a lot about Daniel Brand. Now, that I think of it."

He shrugged. "Listen, I keep my eyes and ears open. I'm no jerk. Think I'd rate a dump like this if I was a jerk? You never know what kind of info will mean a few bucks in the kitty. How else did I rate this extra ten you just gave me?"

He had me there. Which was why I had looked him up in the first place. Charley was the Winchell of the police department.

"Dig back into that marvelous brain of yours a little more. Was Brand ever married?"

"I can't say. I don't think it was on his record. Leastways, I can't remember any wife in any of his history."

I had another flash.

"How old was he?"

Charley thought a minute. "Going back to the time he was nailed on the diamonds, I'd say he was about forty when he was sent up."

"Which would make him about fifty when he died in jail." That killed the wife theory a little bit. But not relatives. "I don't suppose he had any family."

Charley shrugged. "Who can tell about a crook? He never advertised about a mother or father or any brothers

or sisters. As for having a kid of his own . . .," Charley's leer was positively wicked, "you don't need a marriage license to knock up a broad."

"What a filthy mouth you have, little man," Alma said, coming to life for the first time.

Charley started to look indignant but I gave him a dead smile. He relaxed.

"Is that enough for now, Ed? I'm keeping a lady waiting. So if you'll kindly beat it . . ."

Alma got to her feet and headed for the door. I had a last word with Charley.

"For your sake, I hope you weren't tied in with Kinney on that five-thousand-dollar business. Monks is still plenty sore about it. I'd hate to lose you, Charley."

"Not me, Ed. I wouldn't cross the lieutenant. Anybody but him. Why?"

"Kinney took a long vacation. You won't be seeing him around any more."

He got my meaning. He got a little greener around the gills.

"Not me. I wasn't in on it. The lieutenant is a bad guy to cross . . ."

I shut the door in his face and joined Alma outside. I had a mental image of Charley going back to his girl with apologies. I laughed out loud.

Alma had a funny look on her face.

"I don't like some of your friends, Ed."

"Neither do I, lady. But I'm not in the geranium-growing business. He's a big help to me."

"He'd double-cross you for a five-dollar bill. Ed, why don't you get out of this while you're still young and handsome? I'm starting to lose sleep about you."

"Now you sound like Sam Foley. Sam always wanted me to get out too." I had a chill thinking about Sam. Alma's blue eyes were troubled. I squeezed her. Right there in the hallway. I kissed her. Soft and nice.

Through her fear, she smiled. "I still think you'd make a terrific vacuum-cleaner salesman."

"Not a chance. I tried. I'm a case for a psychiatrist, I guess. Because I get kicks out of this racket. It keeps me interested in a whole lot of things. It keeps me alive."

"You're maladjusted," she said. "Like I was, about sex. But I'm okay now. Thanks to you."

The only comeback I had for that was another kiss. A longer and a harder one than before.

I let her go so she could breathe a little easier. And so I could get back to the things that I had to take care of. We got out of the building where Charley Flint lived and climbed into Alma's convertible.

"Where to now, Ed?"

"The nearest Western Union office. I'm going to send a telegram to the Pirate Club. On the very good hunch that Dolores is holed up there again."

"For Pete's sake—why?"

Before starting the car, I dug the fifty-dollar map-bill out of my wallet.

"Read that once more."

She was smart. But it had escaped her too. Just as it had Monks.

"I'm a big help, I know," she said. "But it's still Greek to me."

"Alma, think. Remember Dolores' story. She *accidentally* met Harry Hunter who *happened* to have been given that crazy little rhyme by a dying con with a buried treasure that the cops are still looking for. . . ."

She didn't let me finish. Her eyes widened.

"Of course, it's practically addressed to Dolores—!"

"Good girl. *They play her with football, she's taller than you.*' Who else could it be but Dolores? That kicks her story right in the fanny and definitely establishes her as someone that Daniel Brand knew. Don't you see? It shouts to the rooftops that Brand sent Hunter to Dolores

with this map because it would make sense to her and nobody else."

"Yes but—wait a minute, Ed. You said Hunter was a pretty big guy himself. It could still apply to him, couldn't it?"

"Not half so well when you consider that Dolores is practically a freak because she's so tall. And I can't buy the coincidence of her being a giant and Hunter just having a rhyme on him that has to do with a female giant."

"This whole thing doesn't make much sense."

"It's screwy enough but it's beginning to add up. Once I can prove something, my idea of it will make sense. Right now, I've got to get in touch with her again."

I put the car in gear.

"Ed, if I'm right about the poem applying to Hunter—no, I can't be. He was taller than Dolores."

"That's what I like about you, Wheeler. You remember the facts."

She put her lips to mine before I pulled away from the curb. She had one more notion to warm me with.

"But remember what I told you about her, Ed. If you are right about the poem, it gives Dolores a swell motive for killing Harry Hunter herself."

"Could be," I said. "Could be."

SEVENTEEN

I didn't have much trouble composing the telegram because I knew just what I wanted to say. I made it short and sweet so Dolores couldn't possibly misunderstand me. It wasn't addressed to the Pirate Club because no such place was listed anywhere in New York. But the building was an address I remembered.

The clerk in the Western Union office made no com-

ment as he totaled up the words. There were just fifteen of them:

COME TO MY OFFICE HAVE WHAT YOU WANT
DON'T NEED MEDICAL ATTENTION DEAL ON TO-
DAY

I figured it would be plain enough. I had the map and I wanted to see Dolores without Doc Clarke and his nursing staff tagging along.

I took over the wheel and drove Alma back to my office. It should be safe now that Monks had given me some elbow room. I was certain his dogs had been called off. The mouse auditorium was the best place to have it out with Dolores. That's where everything had started.

Alma was unimpressed by my business establishment. I couldn't blame her much. My overhead wasn't much more than the rent, electricity, and the phone bill. The desk, the two chairs, and the filing cabinet were all hand-me-downs from different jobs. Cases where my clients hadn't had the dough but their problems had got under my skin.

The cops had left the joint upside down. The four drawers of the steel cabinet were sticking out like tongues. My papers were all over the floor and desk like some parade had gone through the place. Some ambitious cop had overturned the metal wastebasket.

I rummaged through the desk and had my worst fears confirmed. Three cartons of Camels had been confiscated by the police department. My pals, I thought. I felt remorse that the butts weren't reefers.

Alma stepped daintily through the mess and made herself comfortable on the leather lounge that ran alongside the big window. She stared up at the lettering on the glass.

"There's nothing like a nice clean office," she said.

I rubbed my chin ruefully. "I guess I'd better

straighten the place out at that. I wouldn't want to offend a nice girl like Dolores."

"I'd like to do more than offend her," Alma snapped. Her blue eyes had sparks in them.

"I'm glad you're on my side, Alma."

"I'm going to stay there, too. You get mixed up in too many crazy deals."

"Hear, hear. Well, someday I'll retire. Might try growing those geraniums I was talking about."

"That I gotta see," she said.

Alma pitched in and between the two of us we got the place looking a little less like the city dump. The tiny office clock had been knocked off the desk. Its glass was smashed and no matter how much I shook it, there wasn't a tick left in it. I marked off one more victim to law and order and dumped it in the wastebasket.

I sat back in my swivel chair, put my feet up on the desk, and relaxed with a cigarette. Alma had gone back to the lounge. She raised the window a bit more. Soon a breeze came into the room and fanned us. It was a relief. Cases in the summer are awful hard on the metabolism.

After a silence that seemed to be mutual, Alma stirred.

"Think she'll come, Ed?"

"She'll show all right. She hasn't a thing to lose. Everything to gain."

"Do you think she killed Harry Hunter?"

I shook my head. It was something I'd done a lot of thinking about.

"Hard to say. A girl as big as Dolores—I can't see her having to stab a guy with a knife about a dozen times. It doesn't make sense because one or two in the right place would stop a horse. Truthfully, the murder smacks of Billie Toy."

"The little Chinaman, you mean?"

"Uhuh. You see, with Toy being a half-pint and Hunter just the reverse, it adds up. Toy might not reach Hunter

in a vital spot. So that might explain the repeated slashing. Same way you keep chopping at a tree."

"But why didn't Toy take the money, if that's the case? Even though he missed the poem because he couldn't have guessed it was pasted to the back of a fifty—why didn't he take the dough? You just don't sneeze at five grand after you've gone to all the trouble to kill somebody." She had all the toppers. I caught myself shaking my head again.

"Only unless someone was coming and Toy didn't have the chance to search Hunter."

She wouldn't buy it.

"Maybe it's the Irish in me but you wouldn't be lucky enough to have the murdered man and the murderer all accounted for before you even begin the case."

The room was still hot. I didn't get her.

"You're way ahead of me, Alma."

"Damn it, Ed, look. Dolores hires you to find this guy. He gets killed. You go to see Dolores and you trip over this dead Chink on the way in. Now, if he's the one who killed Hunter, you really got a switch. The only two corpses in sight are the murdered man and the murderer. But everyone else is still all hopped up about this map."

"Hell, Alma. It could be. Life isn't like the movies. Coincidences are practically the rule sometimes in this game."

"I'll take Twenty Questions."

She was ruffled about something. That was plain. She was beginning to fidget. I went over to her and sat down beside her. Outside, the million street lights shone like stars on a dark night at sea.

"Well, look," I said trying to make her feel better. "How about us? I was in a hole. You helped me. You just happened to have a car when I needed one bad at the Pirate; you know your way around town. It was only because two other babes weren't available that I settled

for your room at the Yale. And it was just my luck that you turned out to have brains. Like the way you used the old think-box when the manager phoned up about Junior. Say, how about that, anyway? Why should he ring you just because his elevator boy wasn't to be found?"

I was really just making small talk. But I got a reaction out of her. She got very pale. Very suddenly. Then two balls of red filled her cheeks.

"I was wondering . . ." Her voice choked. Like when you've got something in your mouth and you're trying to say something. ". . . when you'd start wondering."

"Talk sense, Baby."

"Ed, please understand."

"Alma, what's eating you?"

Her arms went around me suddenly. I felt myself pulled toward her lips. Her face brushed my cheek and the smell of her warm curls was in my nose again. Something was wrong. A gentle tremor ran through her but the sensation went through me, as slight as it was.

Some detective I am, I thought. I'll bet I sounded like I'd been third-degreeing her. Or maybe rubbing it in. Apologies rushed to my lips.

I held her off and looked at her. There was ragged worry in her blue eyes and her lovely mouth was pinched.

I couldn't figure it out. She was crying.

"Alma, Alma—what's wrong, honey? I didn't mean anything by all that gab . . ."

"Ch, Ed." The words tumbled out of her. "I can't go through with it any more—I tried but I can't—Dolores is my *sister* . . ."

EIGHTEEN

"Don't kid me, baby," I said.

"I'm not kidding, Ed—it's true." She turned her face away.

I let her go, got up, and went over to the window. I had to think, help myself make sense. I stared down at the street. It didn't help. The people down there scurrying back and forth like so many ants, the bright nightmare of the lights of the city—all of it—didn't make any truth at all. There wasn't any real meaning to anything.

Alma had lied to me. Alma had taken me. Alma with her bright blue eyes. Bright blue, lying eyes.

I kept my back to her. I heard my voice husking out of me.

"Back there at Winnie's was a put-up job, wasn't it? Dolores didn't jump you—you helped her get away . . ."

Her answer seemed to come from a million miles away. Like a tiny murmur from the hills after a storm.

"I had to, Ed, she's my sister."

"I know. You told me." It blurted out of me. Loud and sarcastic before I could stop it.

Maybe it's happened to you. You go along for years thinking something is the whitest thing in the whole wide world. Then one day the blinders are pulled away and you find that what you thought was white is blacker than the ace of spades. Like finding out that your religion is a lot of hooley or that your best friend is your biggest enemy.

It was like that about Alma. I'd only known her for a few days but my thinking about her had included the years ahead. But I get over things in a hurry. Yeah, me. Ed Noon. A regular little old rubber ball.

I snapped out of my trance and went over to the desk. I yanked the bottom drawer out and found the false panel I'd had built in by a carpenter pal of mine. My luck was holding. The cops hadn't found it. I came up with the funny-shaped P 38 I had hung onto since my ETO days. Dropping it into my pocket, I came around the desk and walked toward Alma. She was still on the lounge, her face buried in her arms. Her shoulders were heaving. It was tough not putting my arms around her. I had to try and forget how much I liked her.

I stood over her.

"Come on. Turn the waterworks off, Alma. Time's running out. I want you to answer a few questions before your sister gets here."

Alma wasn't the cry-baby type either. She sat up, sniffed into a handkerchief, and except for the moisture in her eyes looked okay again. Okay being beautiful.

"Don't be sore, Ed."

"I'm not sore. Just a little bowled over. But I'm a big boy now. I'll get over it."

She didn't like my tone. Her eyes widened.

"Ed! Don't let this make a difference between us."

"That depends. On your story and just what it amounts to."

She wet her lips. "It wasn't easy, Ed. Double-crossing you. You know that. But I had to. Dolores is no good. Never has been and never will be. But she's my sister."

"On your mother's or your father's side?" I was being vicious but I couldn't stop myself. The news was still burning me up inside.

Alma had an answer for me.

"Daniel Brand was my father. Mine *and* Dolores'. Paste that in your scrapbook."

"This is great. Now, I'll bet Billie Toy is a cousin and Harry Hunter is a long-lost brother. This time give it to me straight."

“Ed, how about a cigarette? I’m all up in the air.”

I lighted two and handed her one. The short halt did me a lot of good. My head felt clearer. I wasn’t so mad at her any more. I flung a look at my watch. It was still a little too early for an answer to the telegram.

“Start all over, Alma. And don’t skip anything. This thing is confusing enough without me having to fill in the missing details. But I do get one thing right off. You and Dolores have been on the outs for years. You and your old man too, for that matter. Which is the only explanation for Brand leaving his diamonds to Dolores and not you.”

Her eyes were full of confirmation.

“You’re right, of course. Pop’s being a small-time crook was too much for me when I was in my teens. It was okay with Dolores because he sent us money from time to time. But it got me. So I pulled up stakes and came to the big town. I know what you’re going to say. My racket isn’t so nice either. But at least I’m not stealing and I’m paying my own way.”

“How come there was no record of a marriage? According to everybody, Daniel Brand was a happy little bachelor.”

“There never was. Pop had a common-law wife somewhere in Chicago. She died before Dolores and I were old enough to remember her.” Alma’s voice was a little bitter now. “Pop was glad in a way. Him being such a half-pint, he was ashamed to acknowledge her as his daughter—Dolores, I mean. I think I know how he must have felt. But it’s a screwy way for a father to be.”

“It’s a screwy world,” I offered. “So he tried to make up for it by giving Dolores a chance to cash in on his haul? Is that it?”

She nodded. “From the way that map is worded, it’s the only thing to think. He wanted Dolores to have the money. He didn’t know just how far to trust Harry Hunter

so he worded the thing so it could only make sense to her. Then she could decide for herself whether she wanted to cut him in or not."

"Fine. It figures. But what about you, Alma?"

Her smile was regretful.

"He hated me. I was too smart for him. Too independent. Too much like my mother, he said. Didn't appreciate his crooked money enough."

The more the answers fell into place, the more questions I could think of.

"So how did he know how and where to get in touch with Dolores?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "But his being a crook never bothered her, like I said. She probably heard about that last time he was sent up and got in touch with him. She was probably writing him off and on."

I couldn't buy it.

"No good. The cops censored his mail up at prison. They had to. There was still a half million in ice they wanted to get their claws on. They would have been on her doorstep constantly if she was exchanging any mail with a celebrity like your old man."

She was smart.

"Well, Dolores was with a circus that traveled around a lot. She advertised as a freak. Maybe he heard about her through that."

"More likely. And probably just the way it turned out. But it still leaves me up in the air. Because it means that Hunter never let Dolores see the map or else she wouldn't be wasting so much time looking for it. Or if he did, she wasn't able to make heads or tails out of it."

"Pop was a character. That poem is just like him. But I can't figure it out either."

The room was getting cooler as the night got longer.

"If you and your sister weren't getting along, how did

she track you down at the Yale? Don't tell me that was a coincidence, too."

"Wheeler's the family name. Besides that, I model from time to time. Dolores knew about that. It would have been easy enough for her to track me down if she really wanted to."

I took her fingers in mine. I squeezed them. Her lips quivered. I stared straight into her eyes.

"Alma, level with me. Why did she come to you?"

"It's hard to say, Ed. She never said a word about Pop getting in touch with her, I swear she didn't—or anything at all about the diamonds. She said she looked me up for old times' sake. I didn't know a thing about this business until the Chinaman's murder and you showing up with Nick."

"That's what throws me." I spread my hands. "I had a choice of three names to call on. I needed a room to pump the guy in. I got you only because the other two weren't available."

Her hands were getting warm in mine. She squeezed them back.

"Luck of the draw, Ed. And I'm glad. Maybe you hate me because I let Dolores get away but it's the only thing I owed her. She's my own flesh and blood. As screwy as that sounds. But I'm glad you came into my life. That makes up for a lot of things."

"You and her? Like night and day. I'm not sore at you any more, Alma. But I think I'm going to have to be awfully rough on your big sister. This is murder."

For answer, she kissed me. Which took my mind off everything again. A woman's kisses can be strong medicine. Depending on the medicine, of course, and who's spooning it out.

I kept my arm around Alma's waist and stared past her shoulder. My fingers closed around the souvenir in my

pocket. A tall silhouette was blacking out the letters of my name on the door. Just as it had done last week.

Just like last week, I sang out, "Come on in, Dolores. We've been waiting for you."

She did. She stood in the doorway and looked at us. She was still wearing the black woolen sweater and the skirt. But she had flung a scarf around her neck and the three-inch heels had given way to a pair of flats. Her idea of a disguise, probably. Now she was only as tall as the Chrysler.

She leaned against the door.

"Well, here I am," she sneered. "And this time you'd better deliver. Or we're going for a nice long ride with Doc Clarke."

I still had my arms around Alma. Dolores' eyes were mocking.

"How nice and cozy. I hope I was interrupting something."

It was about time for my Sunday punch.

"Come in and sit down. And stop knocking yourself out. We have some things to straighten out first, *sister dear*."

Reno and Rocky materialized at either side of her. Like they had come up through the floor or something. But that didn't surprise me half as much as my calling her sister did Dolores.

NINETEEN

It was my party. I'd done all the arranging and sent out the invitations. I had expected gate-crashers like Reno and Rocky but that didn't alter my plans any. The show was all mine, so I decided to take over before it got out of hand the way some parties and friendly gatherings do.

I waited until everyone was in and circled around to the door. I locked it.

"Make yourself comfortable, Dolores. And as for you two." Reno and Rocky looked more like twins than ever. Their faces wore the same expression. What they'd like to do to me was written all over their kissers. "Sit down and mind your manners. Don't try to rearrange the furniture or start pushing me around. My pocket is loaded. So skip the acrobatics or things can get awfully messy."

Dolores wasn't listening. She was standing over Alma, her face contorted with the lemon I had just shoved in her mouth. She glared at Alma.

"So you couldn't keep your trap shut? How much did you tell him?"

"No use lying any more, Dolores. He knows about us and Pop." Alma's voice sounded like a guy's must two minutes before the firing squad. "Play straight with Noon. He'll give you a fair shake . . ."

"Now isn't that nice of him?" She turned to me. "Noon, I'm tired of this whole rotten runaround. Okay. You're in again. Right up to that good-looking neck of yours. But so help me, come across this time."

I got behind my desk and sat down. I kept them all in focus. Alma was still on the lounge. Dolores was standing to her right, a good two yards away. The twins were holding down the opposite corners of the door side of the room. I didn't let the fact that their hands were in their pockets bother me. You can't afford to shoot the guy who has all the answers you're looking for. Not at this stage of the game, anyway.

"All in good time, Dolores. But our little family gathering is incomplete. Where's Doc Clarke?"

"We'll ask the questions, Noon!" Reno angrily moved forward as he said it.

Dolores flung him a look.

"Relax, Reno. What the hell difference does it make if

we tell him where Doc is? He's downstairs, Noon. Keeping a motor running."

Reno made a noise of disapproval but Dolores didn't pay it any attention.

I grinned. "Might I ask why?"

Dolores hid her impatience.

"Because he thought things might get a little rough up here. Doc can't stand roughhouse. But there isn't going to be any, Noon. If you follow through like you're supposed to."

"I hope he don't," Rocky said. I looked at him. His leer was something to scare a Commando. The way his hands were knotted into broad hams didn't help either.

Dolores loped over to the desk and put her hand out. Her palm looked like a flat top for an armada of mosquitoes.

"Give," she said.

I didn't say a word. I took my billfold out, extracted the fifty-dollar bill, and put it down on the desk, the money side up. Her eyes got mad. Boiling mad.

"Cut the comedy, Noon. I'm not kidding."

"Be yourself, Big Girl. I'm not aiming for the Congressional Medal of Honor. That fifty is part of the five grand you gave Harry Hunter."

She didn't get it and I couldn't blame her. Before she could open her mouth again, I turned the bill over. She snatched it up, brought it close to her eyes. I watched her.

Nobody was doing anything in the way of conversation now. You could have heard a mouse run across the floor.

Her reaction wasn't quite what I'd expected. The poem hit her the same way it did Monks.

"This--this is all you've got for me? This crummy poem? I thought there was a map."

"What made you think so?"

I felt I was on to something. I didn't know quite what it

was. But when you have a bee in your bonnet, you don't start swinging a flyswatter.

"I don't get you, Dolores. Isn't this what Harry was holding out on you? What you never got a chance to see?"

She threw the bill back on the desk. There was disgust in her big face.

"What is it—nothing, that's what it is! Who the hell is going to find the location by that silly thing?"

I lit a cigarette because tension had sneaked into the room in big black shoes.

"Apparently your father thought it would make sense to you. That's why he sent Harry to you with it. Harry who didn't know you were the daughter of the dying con who had given him the chance to cut in on a half-million hot ice."

She was still disgusted. "What gives you that idea, Big Brain?"

"It figures." I puffed on my cigarette. "If Daniel Brand was ashamed of your size in life, there's nothing that says he wouldn't be ashamed of it after death. Besides, the poem is addressed to you. The way it's worded shows that your old man wasn't trusting Hunter, a guy he met in jail, up to the limit. He was going to let you decide for yourself whether or not Harry was to be cut in on the grand prize. But what bothers me is this. How did Harry get to you in the first place? What was his approach?"

Dolores was glaring at Alma while I was doing my brain calisthenics.

"So you told him that too, you little double-crosser."

Alma glared right back.

"When are you going to really grow up, Dolores? You can't pull these lies all the time—you've got to come clean with yourself. . ."

"Shut up!" Dolores yelled. "Before I forget you're my little sister." She raised one hand threateningly.

"Girls, girls." I held up my hands. "Let's just talk, huh?"

Now as I say, there wasn't much chance of this poem making any sense as it stood to Hunter. So how did he introduce himself to you, Dolores?"

She was still mad but she saw we still had to parlay, knowing what kind of guy I was.

"Pop told him to look me up. Gave him my name. Where I worked. Harry showed me the poem all right. And he also had all the arrangements about picking up Billie Toy in K.C. But he was holding out on me! It can't be just this lousy little poem. There's a map of some kind."

"What makes you so sure?" I cut in.

"Hell, there has to be! That poem doesn't mean a thing without a map! What the hell does it mean anyway?"

"Daniel Brand must have thought it would be as clear as a washed window to his daughter. To write it in the first place."

"Well, it isn't. Where did you get it, Noon?"

I told her about Kinney, leaving out the parts that didn't concern her.

She sneered. "How's that for a switch, boys? A crooked cop's been giving us this runaround! Just goes to show you."

I laughed.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"You are," I said. I put my cigarette out. "You don't know what the poem is. Yet you and Harry catch a train, pick up the fence, Billie Toy, who you are going to need, and come East with a definite destination in mind. And don't tell me it was a honeymoon trip with the Chinaman along as chaperone."

"Smart guy." She looked as menacing as a howitzer when she was mad. "Why do you think I hired you to find Harry for me? Because there must have been something more than the poem. He was holding out on me. The trip East was his idea. Besides, Pop was picked up in New York."

"So you fed me that love yarn in my office to cover your wanting to catch up with him before he glommed on to the diamonds?"

"What else? Christ, Noon, do you need a diagram? I was double-crossed. Harry was holding out on me. There was something the old man must have given him that he didn't show me. I didn't lie to you, Noon. Harry fell for me. And I liked him too, no baloney. Pop must have shown him a picture of me. Even if he didn't tell him I was his kid. Pop was a great hand with the ladies. Harry could have figured almost anything."

I shook my head.

"Who killed Harry?"

"The Chink. Toy. Who else?"

"Okay. You say the Chink. I say—why?"

"I told you. It was a cross all around. Harry must have wanted the whole pie to himself."

"Yes, but why?"

"To get this poem, of course. Wasn't that the idea?"

"It should have been, Dolores. But Billie didn't get the map. Which is why I suppose he showed up at the Yale thinking you had it."

"Now you catch on, Noon." She tossed her big head. "But where are we now? Getting no place fast, if you ask me. What about this cop—this Kinney? Could he have been holding out?"

"Hard to say. I don't think so. It wouldn't have done him much good where he was going."

Reno suddenly let out a loud noise that wasn't nice. He pushed forward.

"What is this—word games? Okay, Dolores. Noon can't help us. Right? He hasn't got what we want. I say let's get out of here. Doc'll be fidgeting by this time."

Rocky came in closer too. I put my hand back in my pocket. Dolores smiled down at me.

"I don't know, Reno. Noon is a funny guy. You have

to understand a guy like Noon. There must be a joker somewhere in the deck."

I gave Alma a slight nod that told her not to worry. I was worried enough for both of us.

"Dolores," I said. "You mean to tell me you haven't figured that little puzzle out yet? You honestly can't make English out of that poem of your father's?"

"Now you sound like Harry," she sneered. "Why the hell do you think Harry was found on the museum steps? That was his cute idea. He was going to canvass every place in town where they have statues. It was his idea that the old man probably planted the diamonds by hollowing out the head of one of them."

"Then that pours a little water over your idea that Harry was holding out on you. If he had anything else, there was no reason for him to have to search in a dozen places for the stuff."

"I told you. He was stalling. And he stalled long enough to get killed."

The manure had piled up so high I was beginning to smell it. I got up from my chair and faced her across the desk.

"What do you take me for, anyway? The prize chump of America? You're the one that really is the chump, Dolores. That poem couldn't be any clearer. Considering who you are and what your father was, there was only one other big dame he could be referring to. It's a good thing Daniel Brand is dead. For a smart customer like him, a dumb daughter like you would be an awful disappointment."

It was so obvious that I was holding the joker now that she didn't give herself time to get mad. Her face was startled. Reno and Rocky didn't look any brighter either.

"What are you saying, Noon? You mean you got this poem figured? You know where the diamonds are?"

"If I don't, I'll eat my license without salt and pepper."

The change in her was miraculous. She leaned across the desk. Her breath came in slow, animal pants. To tell you the plain, unvarnished truth, she scared me now. The burn of her eyes wasn't normal.

"Tell me, Noon. Tell me quick. Before I rip this place apart. And you with it. This has gone far enough."

I put the fool smile back on my face. I picked my words slowly. Because each one of them was dynamite.

"Sure I will, Dolores. I'm surprised it hasn't occurred to you by this time. But we're still trading. I'll tell you where five hundred thousand dollars in uncut diamonds is if—" I drew a deep breath "—you tell me why you killed Harry Hunter. After hiring me to find him for you."

TWENTY

It's like this. You've been alive about thirty years, been all over the world, know your way around the toughest, biggest cities. You're no pushover. You've had lead dug out of your shoulder, fractured a leg here, and broken an arm there. You're tough, see? No lily-of-the-valley. A real hard guy. And yet with all that, you can be dumb. Real dumb. Like when you shoot off your mouth just because you have a gun in your pocket.

I'd forgotten about Alma. My Alma. But Dolores hadn't. Not by a jugful. Because the next thing I knew Dolores had put her big back to me and dug something out of her purse and aimed it at Alma.

"Okay, Noon. You want to play games? Well, how's this for a switch? I'll drill Alma where she's standing if you don't take that rod out of your pocket and dump it in the basket there."

The P 38 was already in my hand. Reno and Rocky had their hardware showing too. But I didn't need a dia-

gram this time. I could plug all three of them—maybe—but Alma would still stop at least one from Dolores' gun.

I had a hard time opening my mouth, I felt so stupid.

"Come on, Noon," Dolores grated. "Throw it in the basket. Or little sister goes bye-bye."

"Don't do it, Ed! She'll kill you, too!" Alma blurted. "Forget me . . ."

"No," I said. I tossed the P 38 into the basket. My aim was poor. A book of matches on the desk skidded into the basket ahead of the gun. As the P 38 bounced in, the sound reminded me of a head falling from the guillotine block. Mine, probably. "I wouldn't put sister-killing past her. Dolores is quite a girl."

"Ain't she though?" Reno chortled with admiration as he came toward me. I knew what was coming. The gleam in his mean eyes was unmistakable.

I rolled with the punch. But enough of his fist caught my chin to slam me back down into the chair hard. Alma screamed. Rocky caught her arm, twisted, until the scream trailed off into a moan. I reeled to my feet. Reno started another swing but Dolores' long arm brushed him aside.

"That's enough, Reno. For the time being." She towered over me. Tasting the blood in my mouth, I laughed.

"I guess I rate the door prize for this boner," I said.

Dolores' expression was funny again. Only I didn't feel like laughing any more.

"Noon, where is it? You're on the spot this time. Tell me and save yourself a going-over."

"No dice, lady. I tell you and the next thing I know I'm floating down the East River all shot up. Uh-uh. This way I figure I've got something you've got to keep me alive for. Kill me and you're out five hundred grand."

Her hand drew back, ripped across my face with stinging force. The blow rocked my head like a punching bag. The room swam around me for one crazy minute. I shook

my head, cleared it. But it was no good. Dolores' face refused to go away. And my poor jaw was on fire all over again.

"That won't help either, Dolores. Smack me around and I get stubborn. I get stubborn and I don't even raise my hand to leave the room."

Reno came into focus.

"Let's go back to the club," he snarled. "We can work on him there. This dump ain't safe. Aren't the cops' looking for this guy?"

Dolores was impatient but she made good sense out of Reno's advice.

"You're right, Reno. The club is better. Tie up that sister of mine so she won't be letting out any unlady-like yells. Noon'll open up all right. I've got some good ideas."

I couldn't resist the opening. "Like stabbing a guy a dozen times so it would look like the handiwork of a little Chinaman? Or were you just mad about Harry?"

"Shut up," Reno barked. He shut me up too. The last thing I saw before going down for the count of ten was Alma struggling in Rocky's arms as he whipped a handkerchief across her mouth.

Something hit me. Hit me hard. Like all the atoms in the world had exploded right on the top of my head.

I had one funny thought before the world got all black. It's Sunday, I thought. And I'm the only office open in the whole damn building. Which gave the big girl and her unsavory acquaintances a free road out of the place.

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was a pair of glasses. Tiny stars of light were bouncing off the lenses. My eyes hurt because the tiny stars, a million of them, were bouncing right back into my sockets. I heard myself groan. I opened my eyes again. The glasses were still there. Only this time something was holding them up, suspending them above me. I rolled my head away. A noisy

drum was pounding hollowly between my ears. I rolled my head some more. The pounding died down but didn't go away. Blood, I thought, what makes blood so noisy?

I stared at the glasses. Gradually, like a roll of film developing, the bland face of Doc Clarke filled out behind the rimless lenses.

"Oh," I groaned. "Give me a stick and I'll kill it."

A roar of laughter filled my ears. It made my head hurt more. As groggy as I was, there was only one person who could laugh that deep. Only one person who had the chest for it. And that was Dolores.

I tried to move. That was even funnier to Dolores. Her big laugh rolled around the room. Room, hell. I was a bit more oriented now. I kept my eyes open. I was in a basement somewhere but the ceiling looked bright and clean. I wriggled my fingers, tried to move my arms. No dice. I was tied up for overseas delivery. Tied down to something hard—like a table.

I felt cold in spite of the layers of rope that bound me like a pig on a spit. I lowered my chin and stared down at myself. I got a jolt. I was naked. As naked as the dame on the September Morn calendar.

That made me a little panicky. Also, it brought me awake a helluva lot faster. I forgot all about the throb in my skull and any other aches I had.

"Rise and shine, smart boy." I identified Reno's voice as his hand tugged hard at my scalp. "The party's just beginning."

Dolores suddenly came into view where I could see her. There was a look in her eyes that I don't remember ever seeing in any woman's face. I craned my neck. Doc Clarke was on the other side of the table. His *look* I had seen before. I didn't like it. Something funny happened to my stomach. I felt like vomiting.

"Where's Alma?" I choked. In spite of what I was thinking.

"Don't worry about her, Noon." Dolores' voice had an odd velvety sound to it. "Rocky's got her under his wing upstairs."

"Oh." I said. Worry about Alma left me for the time being. I worried about myself again.

"Noon, listen to what I'm telling you," Dolores said.

"I'm listening," I said.

Her face was right above me. I felt like a new-born babe the way I was, with her looming over me like a big, ominous-looking nurse.

"Listen, Noon. I'll give it to you straight. We could have smacked you around for hours without you telling us what we want to hear. But I'm convinced you're about as tough as they come. Even if we gave you lighted matches under your fingernails or the water treatment, you might not spill. And we'd probably overdo it and kill you before you were able to. And then what good would it do us? You dead and us not knowing where the stuff is buried."

"Get on to the main course." My head hurt.

"Let me finish. I don't care for Alma but she *is* my sister, so working on her to get through to you isn't it either. Also I don't know how far you push your tough-guy act. Maybe you'd let her take the worst to hang on to your pride. I don't know. But I do know that what Doc Clarke has planned for you won't settle so well with you."

"Let me guess." I gritted it out between my teeth. I had to catch myself before I jerked at my bonds like a frightened animal. I was scared plenty. The vomiting sensation hadn't left my stomach.

"Get out of my sight, Dolores. I'm going to spit."

"Noon, listen to me." She was breathing like an animal. "Those diamonds are mine. They belong to me. Think I liked being a side-show freak, sweating it out for years in that two-bit circus? I've got to have them. They're my ticket to Easy Street. I can get out. I can buy what I want. Come on, Noon. Save yourself a bad time."

I've got cop blood in me, too. Right up to the last act.

"So you killed Harry because you thought he was holding out on you? He didn't know you were Brand's daughter. He was just being cute with you but he signed his own death warrant. Because you did want the whole pie to yourself. But you couldn't figure out the poem for beans. Harry couldn't either. But you thought he had something else he hadn't shown you. Was that it?"

"Sure, that was it," she hissed. "He was running around to all the museums, the exhibits, trying to find a statue where Pop had put the stuff. How the hell did he know it was something like that—if he didn't have something else to go by?"

"All I can say is that Harry was a little smarter than you, Dolores. He figured it had to be an inanimate object. A feminine one at that."

"Come on, Noon. Quit stalling. Where is it?"

"One thing more. You had an appointment with Harry at the museum. But a few hours before that you hired me to find him. That was just to plant an alibi when Harry showed up dead. That way nothing could stop your search for the stuff. But why did you leave five grand on him? That's an awful costly way to make a story stick."

"It was worth it to me. Five grand is cheap just to make the story good. Five hundred grand is something else."

"Fine, Dolores. So you left the five grand and missed the poem. You'd seen that but you thought you'd missed something else on his body. Only you didn't. Because there wasn't anything else. The poem was everything. Is everything. But you didn't know that. So you hurried back to the Yale and started packing because you'd never killed anybody before. You were panicky. So in breaks Billie Toy who showed up at the museum only to find a large crowd gathering around what was left of Harry. He was only a Chinaman but he was good at arithmetic. He smelled a rat. And the rat was you."

"Why do you bother yapping with him?" Reno asked. "Tell him to give with what we want to hear. Or he gets the business."

There was the sound of a slap. Doc Clarke had slapped Reno.

"Keep quiet, Reno. In fact, go on upstairs. Dolores and I will attend to this matter."

"But, Boss, I wanta . . ."

"Did you hear me, Reno? Get out of here."

Poor Reno. I felt sorry for him. He certainly must have been looking forward to the shaming of Ed Noon.

A door slammed violently. I felt better. But not much better.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. I laughed.

"What's so funny?" Dolores rasped.

"I can't help it. Reno sounded so heartbroken."

"Noon," she hissed. "I'm giving you two minutes to talk. Then I'm going to sit over there in the corner and enjoy myself."

That shut me up. But only for about five seconds. I bit my lip.

"One more question. Why did you kill Toy?"

"Two minutes, Noon. And they started already."

"Don't tell me. It's not too hard to figure. One more witness, one more voice against you in court. So the big girl who never killed anybody at all knocks off two in the space of one crummy hour."

"Half a minute gone already, Noon. That leaves a minute and a half."

"You surprise me, Dolores. The daughter of Daniel Brand. And you couldn't solve a simple little rhyme."

"Times are bad, Noon. Your time is running out."

"You and Kinney would have made a great pair. He wasn't too great on figuring out things either."

"One minute left. Just one minute."

"For instance—what makes you think I'm going to tell

you where it is while I'm still tied down to this table as naked as the day I was born?"

"Meaning . . . ?"

"I mean get me my clothes. Get me decent again. Give me some fresh air. And you win. I'll tell you where the diamonds are."

Those diamonds meant an awful lot to her. Because, I'd no sooner opened my mouth about telling her when the cord around me started to pull away from me. She cut me loose with long, quick tugs of a sharp knife. I got to my feet, cramped and sore. The blood needled its way back into my body as I stretched. I took a good look around.

We were in the kitchen of the Pirate Club. Pots and pans hung in a neat line on the backboard above a long, sleek range. Dolores threw the kitchen knife down onto a wooden serving board that jutted from a dish closet. The point dug in with a thud.

Dolores flung me my trousers.

"Climb into those. And snap it up."

With my pants on, I was my own man again.

Dolores had a gun trained on my stomach.

"This better not be another stall, Noon, I'm way past my patience."

"Shoes and my shirt, please."

She made a face but I got them in that order. I tied my shoelaces and tucked my shirt in. I walked around the kitchen, still getting some of the kinks out.

"Well?" Dolores growled.

I looked at her. Looked into the business end of her gun. I looked at Doc Clarke, swung my eyes back to Dolores again. To this day I don't know whether or not I would have told her right then and there.

"Come on, Noon. I'm not fooling this time."

I say I don't know whether or not I would have told her because just at that moment, somebody started shooting up the place upstairs.

I counted six shots in rapid succession. Talk about sweet music to your ears—those six shots sounded like the opening bars of *Custer's Regimental*. No matter who was killing who. Because Dolores gave Doc Clarke her gun and headed for the stairway on the dead run.

"Watch him!" she bellowed. "I'll see what's up." She sounded worried. For a second, I thought she was worried about Alma. But remembering how she felt about diamonds, I skipped the notion.

She moved awfully fast for a big dame. Doc Clarke and I were alone. The gun looked like a cannon in his small fingers. I cursed. Because Doc had that look in his eye again.

TWENTY-ONE

Upstairs sounded like a shooting gallery. More shots rang out. Then there was a short silence that didn't last long. Another volley seemed to rattle the orderly row of pots and pans behind Doc Clarke. He started to fidget but he kept his eyes and the gun trained on me. He licked his lips. The same expression was still on his face.

I had to move fast. The picture was changing again. For better or worse, I didn't know. But I had to give myself a new deal.

I reached for my coat which somebody had flung over a chair. Doc jumped nervously at the boldness of the move.

"No tricks, Edward," he warned. "I wouldn't like to shoot you."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, Doc. I'm just getting dressed, that's all."

"See that's all you do, Edward."

As I ran one arm through a sleeve, I allowed my other

shoulder to hang back the way a guy will let it when he tries to find the other sleeve without looking. I had one thing in my favor. Doc's face looked less bland every time a shot echoed down from the upper environs of the club.

I found the other sleeve while I was still looking at Doc. I hoped I had judged the distance correctly. I had. My hand closed around the handle of the carving knife that Dolores had knifed down into the wood of the serving board behind me. I palmed it and straightened.

Doc was smiling again. For a second, fear butterflyed in my chest.

"You certainly are a handsome specimen, Edward. Very vital and strong-limbed. I wish you had reconsidered my offer last year."

I made a show of shifting my shoulders in the jacket.

"You don't need a bodyguard, Doc. You need a psychiatrist."

His smile vanished. "I don't care for that type of talk."

"What do you expect me to say?"

"I expect you to realize that all men are not made the same way. That there are basic differences in all of us. There are artists and there are dull people. Surely, a man like you . . ."

I wasn't listening any more because I was set for my play. I measured the distance between us. I had never gone in for knife-throwing. I'd never had to. Guns were more my meat. But the time had come when a thrown knife meant all the difference in the world.

He was somewhere in the middle of his long-winded essay on morals when I picked my spot. But something happened. He gave a slight start, and the gun that had lowered slightly in his fingers came up with a wild spurt. I had tipped my mitt somehow. It was then or never.

It was just as well. This gave him a fair shake. If I had had any qualms about using him for a dart board, the decision was taken out of my hands.

He was on to me all right. But his eyes told me a second before his reflexes responded.

I whipped it sidarm just as the haft settled down into my fingers. There was no time for a fancy overhand. I followed the arc of my arm and rolled to one side.

Noise filled the room. The line of tin pots cupped the sound, rang it out like a carillon. Burnt powder in my nostrils told me how close I'd come to never getting any more tax returns from the government.

There was a strangled cough from Doc Clarke's direction. That told me plenty too. I heard a dull clang as the gun bounced off the stone floor.

I raised to a sitting position and peered over the top of the table I had ducked behind. It was a funny thing, I suppose. Me peeking over the tabletop and Doc Clarke walking crazily around at the other end of the room with the carving knife sticking out of his soft middle.

I got to my feet.

"End of the road, Doc. You or me. One way or the other. I guess your number was on the board."

He stared at me. His expression was silly. His tiny mouth was trying to say something. His little eyes looked like marbles behind the big windows of his glasses. His tongue poked out on a long cough of sound. Blood ran out of the corner of his mouth. A giggle ripped out of him suddenly. A high, hysterical bubble of something that was all mixed up with dying and amusement.

He had to die funny, too. He sat down, his fingers clasped across his middle. Slowly, his eyes closed. A lock of hair fell across his childish face. His famous white carnation slipped from its lapel bed and rolled down his body. He followed it to the floor.

I retrieved the gun in a hurry, checked it. The silence from upstairs had lasted. I figured five minutes since the last shot had rang out. I ran past Doc and took the steps going up, three at a time.

The door ahead of me flew open. Reno came hurrying through. His eyes were wild and his blue-black face was ashen. He was in an awful hurry. We nearly ran into each other. But I had the biggest advantage. He was coming down and I was going up.

I hugged the railing and twisted. Reno's gun kicked up a houseful of noise and the slug went whining past my ear and buried itself in something soft down behind me. I snapped off a shot up his way without aiming. I didn't have to. His downward hurtle was too swift for him to check his own momentum.

The slug met him halfway and lost itself somewhere in the upper part of one thigh. He screamed like a high school girl getting goosed in the auditorium. His leg telescoped under him and the stairway did the rest. I got out of his way.

He stumbled and lurched. I stuck a leg out, hooked it behind his heel. He made an awful racket rolling down the thirty-odd steps to the bottom. A choked moan. And then he was pretty quiet too.

There was a lot of yelling now from the other side of the door. All the lights were on in the place. I whipped the door open, held back for a minute, then dived into the other room. I could have saved myself the trouble.

It was the main hallway. And coming down the stairs wearing a big grin was the one and only Lieutenant Monks.

"Hold on, Bartlett," he called out to someone at the opposite end of the corridor. "It's Noon himself."

I met him at the foot of the stairway. He holstered his service revolver and waved an arm.

Bartlett emerged from the shadows of the doorway. His grin was nervous as he joined us.

"You took an awful chance popping out of that door, buddy. Good thing the lieutenant saw who you were."

"I'm lucky that way," I snapped. I rammed my gun into my waistband and turned to Monks.

"Where's Alma—is she okay?"

Monks jerked a thumb.

"Upstairs. Cassidy's playing nursemaid. Somebody bruised her pretty bad. Probably the big ape I plugged."

"What do you mean? Where's Dolores?"

He smiled at me tolerantly.

"If you mean that female giant again—you got me. All we found was the Wheeler gal and one of the roughest mugs I ever saw up close. Plus a pretty scared caretaker who was hanging around in the back. Says he's the cook. Now, I got some questions for you, Noon. Where's Doc Clarke?"

I pushed by him. "Downstairs in the kitchen making out a recipe for an afterdeath meal. You can book me on two counts. Self-defense and resisting improper advances. I'll tell you more later but right now I have to see Alma."

Bartlett grabbed my arm but Monks signaled him with his eyes.

"Let him go, Bartlett. It's his girl friend. Let's check that kitchen."

I made it to Alma in five seconds flat. I knew Cassidy. I'd had coffee with him and the lieutenant once. He let me take over.

I stepped over Rocky going into the room. His white shirt front had three holes that looked like buttons in the wrong places. The expression on his mug hadn't changed at all. Rigor mortis was making him uglier than ever.

Alma was on the bed. She grinned feebly as I bent over her. The way she looked scared me. Her jaw had an out-size bruise on the left side, and her right eye was starting to purple from the effects of a pretty hard punch.

It was the second time I had seen her with her clothes all torn.

"Hello, Wheeler," I said. "Your boy friends play pretty rough."

She was a real champ. Her blue eyes gave me a big smile.

"Don't they though? That big crum started to get romantic. He wasn't my type. I guess I put up a big fuss. Next thing I remember was all those fireworks. What happened?"

I put a cigarette to her lips and lighted it for her.

"The cavalry's out of date. But Lieutenant Monks pinch-hit for them. He's downstairs now looking over the remains of Doc Clarke. Reno's banged up a little but he'll live."

I could see she didn't have the heart to ask me what was really bothering her.

"Dolores is gone with the wind again. For the biggest girl in captivity, that sister of yours can sure move. We've lost her again."

"Oh, Ed." It was kind of a sob. I rubbed her cheek.

"Easy, Alma. We haven't seen the last of her."

"What do you mean, Ed?"

"I mean she must be getting around to the idea of what your father had in mind with the poem. Hell, it has to come home to her sometime. Your father wouldn't have loused her up with something she couldn't ever understand. I don't really think the solution is a case of Dolores' IQ. It's a case of how good a memory she has."

She didn't say anything to that. Just puffed deliberately on her cigarette.

"Wheeler," I said. "I've got a pretty good idea where it is."

She still didn't say anything.

"I also think that you've got a pretty good idea too."

That snapped her head back in my direction. I smiled at her gently.

"No, Alma. I'm not mad at you for not tipping me off. It

might not have come so quickly to you either. And I know that you might have just enough loyalty to Dolores because she's your sister not to have mentioned it. You've always felt sorry for her because you happen to be just human enough and nice enough to appreciate how Dolores might have felt to be such a freak."

Her eyes thanked me. But she still couldn't say anything.

"Alma—what is it? What's the clue that would eventually put her on the right track if she thought of it?"

She brushed her eyes. "I don't know but—I remembered something from the time we were kids—a *nickname* Pop had for her. She never liked it because it was rubbing it in. About her size. Pop wasn't smart enough to understand about that. Maybe that's what will tell Dolores."

"What was it?" I asked. I'd somehow felt all along it had to be something like that. Something that only a father and his child can know. A special code or name or game that will be Basic English to either one but pure Greek to an outsider.

Alma took a deep breath.

"Pop used to call Dolores—*Torchy*."

"It figured," I said softly. "It figured."

"In here, Lieutenant," Cassidy called out behind me. I straightened up but I kept one of Alma's warm, slender hands in mine.

Monks' face was as happy as a kid's on a picnic as he shouldered into the room.

"Full house," he rasped. "Since when do you go in for a knife, Noon?"

"Since the time when it's the only thing around that's deadlier than a can opener. How's Mean Eyes?"

"Reno?" Monks grunted. "Cursing you from here to Christmas. You certainly make yourself some enemies." He smiled at Alma, winked, and dug something out of his pocket. I laughed. It was a slab of raw steak for Alma's

shiner. "Here's a present for you, Alma. I guessed you could use it."

I kept a straight face as Monks tried to keep from blushing at Alma's gratitude.

"I make some friends, too, Monks. What brought you champing up to the rescue? You're the last guy in the world I expected to see in the Pirate Club."

He laughed. It rolled out of him like a wave.

"It's a scream to tell you the truth. When I got back to headquarters to see if anything had come in on Kinney, the back room was all set to have a party with your three cartons of Camels. All the boys. That kind of rubbed me the wrong way. We cops have been getting a rough treatment in the taxpayers' thoughts. I got mad, took the smokes, asked some questions. I found out that your office had been turned upside down besides. And your car was still in the police garage so . . ."

"Why, Lieutenant." I was amazed. "This could be the very beginning of a deep and lasting friendship."

The smile vanished like lightning from Monks' face.

"Well," he growled. "I thought of our arrangement and what you said about how the department operates, so I wanted to show you a cop could be a right guy. After I made out a report on Kinney, I took the smokes and drove your car over to your office. I found the door open and the lights still on. Well, when I saw the joint all shipshape again I realized you'd been there and left. That would have been the end of it but when I spotted this in the wastebasket . . ." he dug my P 38 out of his coat pocket and handed it over. Along with the book of matches that had the words "Pirate Club" splashed across it in big red letters. "I picked up Cassidy and Bartlett on their rounds and high-tailed it over. Good thing, too."

"A very good thing," I said. "You ought to get in touch with the Reynolds people. It'd make a swell testimonial. Camels saved this private detective's life . . ."

"Clown," he hissed. "Just a clown. Now how about this Dolores business? This writes off the Pirate but it doesn't write off Harry Hunter and the Chink."

I brought him up to date. Right up to the Pirate Club and to where we were, standing around over Alma making small talk. He whistled with appreciation and rubbed his rough chin.

"I've heard of everything from mob rubouts to phony seance rackets but this one is a lulu. Five hundred thousand bucks hanging by a slim thread like a crazy poem."

"Not so crazy, Monks. When it makes sense to two people. The guy who wrote it. And the girl it was meant for."

"Yeah, but how come she didn't understand it right off the bat? That don't make sense."

"It's a long story, Monks," I said for Alma's benefit. "I'll tell it to you someday over a cold beer."

He made a funny face.

"Well, give. You say you know where the stuff is? Tell me and I'll get a detail over there in a hurry."

"Not so fast," I said. I looked at Alma. After all, Dolores was her sister.

She nodded. "It's all right, Ed. He's a policeman. She's a killer. She'll have to pay the piper sometime. Tell him and get it over with." She looked kind of teary when she said it.

I turned back to Monks. He was doing his best to control his patience.

"Okay, Monks. You heard the lady. Meet me at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Wear your overcoat. It's liable to be pretty chilly out there on the bay."

"What the hell are you planning, Noon? An ocean voyage?"

"It's a short ride, Mike. People ride out there every day all year. You'll be back in time for a hot meal."

His eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Where are we going?"

"Bedloe's Island," I said. "To the *Statue of Liberty*."

TWENTY-TWO

Everybody or anybody who makes a date with Miss Liberty has to go about it the same way. Because she's always in the same place. She stands waiting for you about three thousand yards southwest of the Battery come rain, shine, or murder.

She's the only woman in the world who never changes her mind. She's the Yes Girl of every nationality, color, and creed. And she waits for you when you make your date. Standing for you in the same dress she wears on all her dates, towering three hundred feet or so above the water line. Holding that proud torch of hers high up into the sky of New York harbor. Torchy to the millions, a welcome sight no matter who you are. Solid symmetrical stone with a copper lining.

The lady who's always got the lamp burning in the night for you.

Daniel Brand had made a date with her years ago. He had kept it, too. And because of that date Dolores had an appointment with the lady. And because of Dolores' date, Ed Noon had one, too. And Lieutenant Monks and a handful of clean-cut-looking boys from the homicide squad.

We took the ferry like everyone else. Things were going to go on like usual. A boatload of sight-seers overrunning the big-hearted lady was the best covering possible. Dolores would have to work fast now. And we weren't going to scare her off with a big police show and a mess of blue uniforms. Business as usual was the general idea. For once, Monks and I saw eye to eye on *modus operandi* as they say in better police circles.

Monks and I shared the rear railing of the ferry. The rest of his boys were scattered among the pleasure crowd along the decks. A bunch of noisy school kids clamored at the top of their lungs as a serious-looking guy with glasses tried to quiet them down. Monks spit sourly into the churning wake of harbor water.

"Just our luck. School's out. Those brats might get in the way."

"It isn't good," I admitted. "But there shouldn't be any gunplay. Besides, Dolores probably likes kids."

"Do you mind if I don't count on it? You aim at a cop that's after you and you hit a kid. You wanted to hit the cop but the kid stopped it instead. See what I mean?"

He was right, of course. I didn't say anything and eyed the Colossus sticking out of the water. Every churn of the big paddles was bringing us closer.

Bartlett suddenly joined us. Monks glanced at him, searched his face, grunted under his breath, and turned away again.

Bartlett looked at his watch.

"Nine-thirty," he said, without anybody asking him.

"I take it you drew a blank," I said.

He nodded. "Nobody on board that even looks like her. Just that school bunch and a lot of older people. Mostly out-of-towners I guess."

I grinned. "You're right there. The average New Yorker has never been to the Battery, never stood on the top of the Empire State Building, and never been to see the Statue."

Monks looked sheepish. "This'll get a laugh. But it's my first trip."

"Likewise," I said. "Only time I saw the lady was coming back from the ETO. She looked good."

"Same here," Bartlett dittoed. "Funny world, isn't it?"

"Ain't it?" Monks snapped sarcastically. Bartlett sidled away discreetly.

Ain't it? I thought. The Goddess was suddenly a Mecca for the police department because a smart con man had decided to use her as a hiding place for five hundred grand in uncut diamonds. Daniel Brand had a sense of humor all right. And the tallest daughter in the world.

"Suppose you're wrong, Ed? Suppose this Dolores doesn't have the riddle figured out?"

"We haven't lost a thing. Don't forget. The main thing in this little jaunt is to recover the goods. If Daniel Brand isn't giving everybody a great big horse laugh."

That sobered Monks up. He didn't like the idea. I know how he must have felt. Police lieutenants don't like to look like chumps on the record. Monks' morning requisition for a detail out to Bedloe's would look awfully silly if nothing came out of it.

We had nothing to talk about the rest of the way in. The ferry eased into the slip like a heavy dame getting into a girdle that's just big enough.

We let the boat empty out and watched the passengers clamber up onto the high ground surrounding the base of the Statue. There was no sign of Dolores. Like Bartlett had said. A bunch of school kids and a flock of grown-ups in pairs. There were a few smart-looking dames all by their lonesome but not one of them was anywhere near the Glamazon category.

"Let them run through first," Monks said on shore. We were at a halt near the steps that lead upward to the eleven-cornered base that housed Miss Liberty. "Then we'll take our look-see. I'll go tell the skipper what's up and have him hold the boat for us when everybody else is back on board."

I said I'd wait for him. I lit a cigarette, dug out a guide I'd picked up, and thumbed through it. It was all about the Statue, its size, dimensions, and building history. And the French government that had presented it to the

United States. And the artist Bartholdi who had used his mother's face as a model.

I stared up at the stony profile that thrust out high overhead. She looked pretty impressive with the early-morning blue of a summer sky for a background.

A classic-faced dame, I thought. I had the crazy notion that she resembled Dolores slightly. But I suppose the idea was in my head to begin with. Notions are usually something like that.

I thought about Alma waiting back in the office. She'd wanted to come along. But I'd nixed the idea. Dolores might get shot up. And it wouldn't do to have Alma see it.

I took my hat off and mopped the sweat band. It was a hot day all right. A regular summer scorcher just like they always were. The season had just begun really, but I could see it was going to be the sort of hot day you get during the last throes of summer. No pun intended.

Monks came back from his little talk with the ferry skipper. He was feeling the heat now, too. His rough face was sweaty and grim.

"How long will this mob take?" I wanted to know.

"Twenty minutes--half hour maybe," Monks said. "Then we'll run through. Find out anything?"

I held up the guide book. "According to this thing, only twelve people are allowed in the head at one time."

"Is that where you figure Brand planted the stuff?"

"There or the immediate vicinity. If I read his poetry right." I quoted: "*Diamonds go to her head.*"

Monks grunted. "I hope you're right."

I took another look around. I was sure I was right about Brand. About Dolores, I could be wrong. Maybe she might not be able to figure the thing out. But I couldn't see that. Her old man couldn't have misjudged her that much. But even if she did figure it out, there was no guarantee she would show on the very day we were here. All

I did know was that Dolores knew that I knew. Which meant that time was against her. She had to work fast or lose the grand prize.

Monks was right. A full half hour passed before the excitedly-jabbering school kids came scurrying out of the entrance with the serious-looking teacher clapping his hands for order and quiet. I tabbed the other couples as they came out and started down the stone stairway that ran from the feet of the Statue.

"Let's go," Monks said. I followed obediently.

Monks left four of his men outside the entrance. Another two remained down by the ferry as it loaded for the return. Bartlett and Cassidy and another dick, a short, pudgy guy I didn't know, trailed after us.

The lady's intestines were what I had expected. You went up so many steps to the pedestal, got inside, and puffed up what seemed like a million steps up to her heart and past it into her head. I thought of a gag for no good reason.

"The way to a woman's heart is through her stairway."

Monks didn't think much of the joke. His face told me as much. Bartlett and Cassidy shared his opinion but the short, pudgy guy I didn't know, snickered.

We stopped inside the head. Off to the right, a spiral stairway corkscrewed its way up into the arm. According to my guide book, it had fifty-four rounds and led up into the torch.

"Well, this is the place," Monks said. "But where do we look?"

"Questions, questions," I mocked. "Suppose we all look around?"

Monks wagged his head disgustedly at the circular room with its smooth walls and box-shaped openings that permitted visitors to look out.

"This thing gripes me, Noon. Brand with his crazy poem, Hunter pasting it on the back of a fifty-screwiest

case I've ever been on. Give the joint the once-over, boys. But from here I can't see a place where you could hide a hairpin."

"Haven't you figured out that fifty yet, Monks?"

He said no with a violent shake of his head.

"Hunter had an angle. The number '50' is repeated ten times on the face of the bill. Ten times fifty is five hundred. Five hundred for five hundred thousand dollars. It must have been because Hunter could have picked any other bill but he didn't."

"It's a screwy way to remember something is all I have to say," Monks growled.

Bartlett, Cassidy, and the short, pudgy guy did everything but stick pins in the walls to find what we were looking for. But it was no dice. The lady didn't have a thing in her head except the space to walk around in. I was beginning to feel a little foolish about the whole business.

Monks cursed. "Well, I guess I'll rate a horse laugh down at the station for this." His subordinates looked a little uneasy. I rubbed my jaw. It must have started a chain reaction because I started thinking a little harder.

"Wait a minute—I'm getting old and senile. Mike, remember the poem? 'Diamonds go to her head—in the old fashioned way. . . .' Come on! Up into that arm!"

Somebody was there ahead of us.

It was Dolores.

We all halted as if somebody had turned our motors off. Because she was laughing like all the hounds of hell were locked up in her throat. Just standing there in the opening. Laughing and laughing and laughing.

TWENTY-THREE

None of us moved. We didn't have to. Because Dolores didn't look as if she had any place to go except the nut factory. Monks held his boys back and signaled me to take over. I nodded. It was still my case at that.

I waited for her fit to die down. She was leaning helplessly against the wall, her face twisted with that mad laughing. Then she stopped—as suddenly as you can turn a water faucet off.

She seemed to see me for the first time. Her face went tender. Almost as if she were going to tell me a deep, dark secret. I tried to smile. But I couldn't. Her face was still snarled in an expression I hope never to see outside of a Horror House at Coney Island.

“Noon—guess where—where do you think that wonderful old man of mine put the stuff?—g'head. Take a guess. Take three guesses. It's a scream. It kills you it's so funny . . .”

She started howling all over again. But this one didn't last as long as the fit. She choked off on a sob. Bartlett and Cassidy and Monks were gawking at her like those schoolboys we had seen a while ago. I couldn't blame them. I've said it often enough. But it still goes. She was one big girl.

“I can guess right the first time, Dolores.” I said it so quietly her head jerked toward me. Her expression was almost defiant now. As if I had a lot of nerve telling her something she had said I couldn't possibly guess.

“It's right on top of the lady's head. Somewhere behind the rim of her crown. Where diamonds are worn in the old-fashioned way. In the hair. Where all beautiful women used to pin their jewelry like queens. Where Dan-

iel Brand must have tossed it from a spot in the torch. He was quite a guy, your old man. He must have figured he'd be back soon enough to pick it up. But he wasn't. And you were sent instead. But you can't possibly get to it. Unless you can perform stunts while hanging from an autogyro. Or a helicopter. Daniel Brand had a sense of humor all right. But this is his best joke. And his worst. And he's still giving you the rib, Torchy. Even from his grave."

I talk too much. And too long. And say the wrong things sometimes. Because all of hell in the person of Dolores broke loose. None of us were ready because Ed Noon, the valedictorian of his class, was shooting his mouth off.

She was on us before a gun hand could come up out of a pocket. Bartlett got in her way first. He flew back from an open-hand shove that sent him into Cassidy like a perfect strike down the alley. Monks clawed, got his gun out in time, but not up. Dolores' big elbow caromed off his solar plexus, doubled him into a helpless mass on the floor. She'd wasted too much time on the rest of them in spite of her whirlwind speed. My .45 was out and she was lunging at me with murder in her face.

I'd never gunned a woman before. But there had been a lot of firsts on this case. I aimed low and thumbed the trigger. I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. The hammer clicked dully and her breath was in my face.

I rolled, kicked away from her, and brought the gun barrel up defensively. But I got just one more surprise. She was on by me, running like a bull elephant on the loose, heading for the stairway. And what she thought was freedom.

I lit out after her and gained the top of the steps. Her big body was rocketing down the stairway, her heels dynamiting each step with sound.

"DOLORES!" I yelled. "YOU CAN'T GET AWAY! THE JOINT IS SURROUNDED!" I checked the .45 and cursed. The maga-

zine had been minus a cartridge. It was all right now.

I aimed down the stairs. She couldn't get away but there had been too many broken noses already and too much pushing around. She wouldn't come quietly, that was for sure. And the boys hanging around outside would get their lumps. My mind was made up.

I sighted down the long line of stairs and drew a bead on one of her legs as it kept poking out with each jerky movement of her big body. I aimed for the fleshy part of one thigh. I squeezed the trigger, hoping for the best shot of my life.

It was probably the worst.

Because Dolores suddenly stumbled, pitched headlong, caught herself again.

Just as the steel-jacketed slug from my .45 lifted the back of her head off.

I'll never forget the sound her big body made as it bounced and banged the rest of the way down. I cursed. I cursed hard.

TWENTY-FOUR

I stopped in Benny's soft drink emporium before going up to the office. I had to. It was too soon after everything. I needed a pick-me-up bad. How was I going to tell Alma?

"Hi, Ed," Benny came over, rubbing down the bar on the way. Benny was proud of his bar. He kept it clean.

"Lo, Benny."

Normally, Benny and I chewed the rag to shreds. But, somehow I didn't feel like talking. That was another nice thing about Benny. He could tell when you didn't feel like talking.

"What'll it be, Ed? The usual?"

I looked at him. Stared past his friendly mug into the wide mirror over the bottles. I saw myself. My expression was peculiar.

"Pour me one, Benny. I'll have a *Tall Dolores*."

Benny has mixed everything from Singapore Slings to Pink Ladies. But all he said was "Come again?"

"Sorry, Benny. Martini. Drier than you've ever made it before."

I thought of things while I was waiting for my drink. Things that will pop into your noodle on a hot sticky afternoon. I thought of Daniel Brand and his warped intellect, of Kinney and his special brand of the Pursuit of Happiness, of Monks and his doglike fulfillment of the law that had been turned over to him by the city. And Sam Foley who never harmed a fly but was being buried this very afternoon.

But I guess I was thinking most of all of Dolores. With her pituitary gland that was out of order. With her mad worship of the Almighty Dollar. With her ability to tell baloney yarns. With her body with the back of her head blown off. Dolores who was Alma's sister.

I got the martini down very slowly. I let it burn me out inside. Till I was feeling hollow. I waited for it to settle in my stomach which had gone without food since early morning. Waited for it to paralyze me.

When I was pretty certain I had all my soft nature drowned thoroughly, I paid Benny and left.

Then I went upstairs to tell Alma.

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6 Feet 3 of Female Hell

Dolores came around the bed — fast. She was still half undressed. I brought up my arms to ward off what I saw in her eyes. It wasn't nice. Then something exploded against my jaw and my next thought was black and dark and full of nothing. A great big black nothing . . .

...

The shadow that Dolores cast on the door lettered *Ed Noon — Private Investigations* was gigantic. Dolores in the flesh wasn't much smaller: six feet three inches of inviting female flesh. The circus where she worked headlined her as *The Shapeliest Amazon in the World*, and she towered over Ed Noon as she hired him to find her fiancé, Harry Hunter. He'd disappeared with \$5000 that belonged to Dolores. Men six feet six are scarce and Dolores wanted Harry back — wanted him bad. But when Noon found him he'd never be any good for Dolores again; Harry Hunter had several neat slashes in his dead body . . .