



By Colin Deerwood



Lackland Ask is the name. *'Lack'* to my friends, *'Don't'* to those who think they're funny. You might have seen my portrait on the cover of Black Mask, the crime fiction magazine. This is my story. It starts with a blonde. This kind of story always starts with a blonde.

I was wearing my only suit, a barely stylish, casual lapel pinstriped black coat over a high vest and loosened at the neck a small knot red, blue and gold school tie. The frayed cuff of my white shirt at my left wrist nudged the square crystal of the watch held there with an alligator hide strap. That hand rested casually half out of the pocket of the matching pinstriped trousers. My other hand held a police special, finger on the trigger, pointed in the general direction of the sawdust and dirt floor.

I let go with a single round. It shattered the calm of the tumbledown roadhouse where I had stopped in for a mint julep. All they had was sipping corn. It also disturbed the concentration of the two hayseeds whose hands were doing a thorough job of roaming all over the pink parts of the blonde in the black spaghetti-strap dress. They turned their heads, hands poised, to look at me with sorrowful puzzlement.

I twitched a corner of my thin, neatly trimmed moustache and drew my left hand out.

They were real attentive to the meaning of my thumb and scurried sideways into the mismatched collection of barrel stave tables, chairs, and benches

I moved my slick combed head just enough to let the blonde know what I wanted. "Now you and I will take a ride. Chevy coupe, out front. Get in it."

She stared at me, uncomprehending. I emphasized with my thumb. She clutched her small black handbag to her breasts and brushed past me.

The bartender looked like he was trying to decide whether to make a foolish move with something from under the bar.

"You're a dead man," I said evenly.

He froze and I stepped away, keeping the pistol in front of me, waist high, still pointing toward the floor. I indicated the dollar bill next to my empty glass. "Buy these gents a drink on me."

I gave them the benefit of one of my smiles, lips over bared teeth. Their mouths gaped like the knees of worn overalls.

I stepped sideways in three steps and was out the door to a gray evening in early May, North Carolina, just outside of Raleigh.

The blonde was sitting in the passenger's seat. She thought she was being nonchalant looking at her face in a hand mirror and passing a puff over her cheeks. Getting in on the driver's side I caught her knees trembling.

I fit the key in the ignition and turned the machinery on, working the gas. The yokels had obviously decided to have that drink. In gear, up on the clutch, and gravel spewed out from under the rear wheels to pepper the tin siding like buckshot.

I was listening to the engine purr as it lapped up the macadam and glanced over to see her clutching the purse nervously to her lap. My hand to the dash radio made her flinch. I tuned in one spark of reception after another but out in the wet green hills, no signal had the strength to be heard, not even the high powered stations from Memphis or West Virginia. Music might have relaxed her, dispelled her fears, soothe the savage breast. She must have had an inkling of who I was, what I was doing, and where I was taking her. It couldn't have been the first time. I figured I should answer her unasked questions

She beat me to the punch. "Who do you think you are?"

I reached inside my jacket and slipped out the faux gold cigarette case, placing it on the seat between us.

"Relax. Have a smoke." I thumbed the catch and the case snapped open revealing the cigarettes, Luckies, the reefer I had rolled especially for her, and my card.

She weakened visibly when she caught sight of the brown paper cigarettes. "Who are you? Anyway?"

"Go ahead, light up."

She snaked a red nailed hand out to the case, and paused, curious, a finger on my card. She read it silently, and with an uncomprehending smile, the flip of her blonde hairdo bobbing, half asked, "Lackland Ask, Confidential Matters Investigated?"

The green and chrome point of the Chevy coup ate up the gray ribbon of roadway on its way back to the Bad Apple.



She was the boss's daughter. The boss was a stubby Serb by the name of Yan Kovic with crossed green eyes and a shiny pink bullet for a head. He liked to be called "Yan-K" or Mister K by his warts and wiseguys. He was a small caliber hood in the way of a lot of smarter, more ambitious Italian punks. His kid was just another worry.

I gave him my account of how I had traced his daughter to Raleigh and her slick talking country boyfriend who had just thrown her over for the deputy sheriff's spit-curled waitress.

"You waste da punk like I telling you?"

"Yeah, he's dead." I didn't bother to add that the deputy had done the job for me with a double barrel shotgun.

He folded his hands on the desk in front of him. I watched his knuckles go white.

He nodded his skinhead. "Good, good." A finger called over one of his Polish sausages, a washed out, pimple faced blonde with dumb eyes and a white tie over a black shirt.

"Give to Mr. Ask, Confidential Matters Investigated, his fee," he laughed with a cough. "A C-note, was it not?"

I tapped a Lucky on the cigarette case, fit it to my lips and lit it. I said, "Yeah," let the smoke out, and turning my attention to Mister K's kielbasa. I watched him reach inside his suit coat, a garish mauve with pinstripes, and extract a long black leather wallet. He folded it open and I caught a glimpse of the sheaf of bills. That much money made me nervous. His large fingers flicked through the stack expertly and shoved a crisp specimen in my direction. The sight of Ben's likeness in the oval hypnotized me. I reached for it and it fluttered, just missing my fingertips, towards the plush red pile of the carpet under my feet. I crouched to catch it before it landed. As I did, I realized my mistake. The red pile exploded into blackness against my cheek.



I didn't like groaning out loud. But I couldn't help it. The lump at the base of my skull throbbed in pain. I should have been dead. The Polack was a stupid careless son of a bitch and he didn't have long to live. I'd come to that conclusion over the last five hours since I dragged myself out of a ditch upstate. A good Samaritan, I didn't get his name, dropped me off at my apartment.

I let my head fall forward. It didn't hurt any more or less in that position. My forearms across my thighs, I stared at the butt and ash stuffed saucer next to the ringed tumbler and the stained coffee cup on the otherwise cluttered table. I'd given the cleaning woman the month off and she'd taken a year. I splashed more rotgut against the sides of the tumbler and knocked it back.

The Polack was going to die very simply because I was going to kill him. First, I had it all planned out, I'd burn his ape and relieve him of his bank roll and then I'd split the Slav's melon. My reward would be an extended vacation in some place like Chile. I heard they had a climate just like California down there. It was an ideal place for a gringo with cash, that is, if you didn't mind Christmas coming in the middle of summer.

I felt around in my jacket pockets for the pack of Luckies I hoped would be there. My luck was still breaking bad. Not a smoke left and it was five blocks to the all-nite deli, five blocks I wasn't going to make easily.

I'd gone to a lot of trouble finding that slate-eyed hophead kid of his. He was real small time for that trick. It steamed me. I knew the jerk wasn't worried about a measly hundred clams. He had just wanted to show off that he was still a tough guy to his troops, show them the old general still had it in him.

Fatal mistake. They should have made sure I was dead. I'd be doing the younger hoods a favor. I could charge for it but this one was going to be on the house. Besides, I don't like doing business with wiseguys. I don't like their ethics.

I stood up but sat back down.



Sipping my supper in a little dive on the edge of Chinatown, I went over my finances. A broken ten spot: a fin, four fish and change. The prospect of what I had to do to get more was competing with the dull throb at the nape of my neck.

My pal Al worked in the kitchen. The wrinkles on his brow made steps up to his receding hairline.

“You don’t look too good, Lack.”

He was a little rat of a guy. The sleeves of his dingy grease stained white shirt rolled up to his elbows showed off the graffiti of tattoos up and down his forearms. There was an unusually elaborate round design just below the crook of his left elbow that always got me wondering. Next to the palm trees, martini glass with naked woman as olive, assorted half clothed shapelies, parrots, and slogans, the emblem was real artwork. When I asked him about it once, he had just shrugged and said that it was something he’d got one night when he was drunk. In Bombay. Or Calcutta. Some place exotic I’d never visit. It wasn’t the kind of answer I was expected to believe but I knew that was all I was going to get.

He pulled himself up on the stool next to mine. He ogled the gash over my eyebrow. “Take a fall? Or maybe you was tripped.”

I nodded and set the glass to my lips. The alcohol still stung where my lower lip had been forced against my teeth by a knee or a shoe. It brought back the moment in a series of painful images and I almost whimpered remembering.

Al was good at reading expressions. “I tol ya before, if ya ever need any muscle, ya should come see me. I ain’t too big myself, but I got friends, connections.”

Once I pressed him on who his connections were but he changed the subject saying, “Don’t ask about it until ya really need it, kid.”

“No, this is something I’ve got to take care of myself.” I said. I watched myself say it in the mirror behind the bar. The right side of my face was puffed up and that corner of my moustache turned slightly upward. It wasn’t the way I ever wanted to look. I touched it gingerly and closed my eyes. Even the dim interior made them ache and water. Or maybe it was the damn incense. The whiny music really got to you, too, if you closed your eyes and had a few drinks.

I began to tip backwards but Al grabbed my arm and I opened my eyes.

Madame Chi was standing behind the beaded entrance to the backroom. She wasn't smiling.

"I gotta get back to work, Lack," Al said in a whisper, "whydoncha come back 'round midnight when I get off work? I wancha should meet my sister."

He gave me one of those smiles that showed me he wasn't wearing his choppers.



I killed some time at a movie house in midtown that ran three features continuously. One was a grade B white hat western I just caught the end of. . .riding off with a wave over the shoulder while the gal's left behind with an empty feed bag and a yearning in her heart. Then I dozed through a Robinson cops and robbers, tuning in and out from one dream to another. Finally I was awakened by the unmistakable sound and smell of someone getting sick off of a sweet wine drunk. Sailors on shore leave, kids playing hooky from night school, maybe. I didn't stick around to find out.

The bathroom was one flight below street level and reeked, dimly lighted. A few seedy characters shuffled around in front of the half dozen splotched urinals and looked out from the corners of their eyes appraisingly. I threw some water on my battered burning face and tried to shake the tired throb out from behind my eyes. Even the water seemed repelled by my mug and dripped from my cheeks in huge greasy drops.

An old black man in a battered sea captain's hat had come in behind me. Now I saw him in the mirror looking at me, the pockets of his gray smudged smock bulging with rags, brushes and polish cans. He had his weight on one foot, frame and face like a burnt wood match.

The shoeshine man emitted a low whistle as I brushed past him, his brow furrowed with obvious concern. "You shoulda seen the other guy," I told him.

I decided to try another part of the theater, away from puking teenagers or swabbies, and settled in a seat in the middle of the middle row, no one in close proximity.

I focused on the large black and white images flickering across the big screen. Walter Brennan pours a drink for buckskin clad Gary Cooper and some of the redeye slops over and eats a hole in the bar top. The image directly passed on to my stomach where nothing resembling food had made an appearance in twenty-four hours and blistered a hole in my empty gut, too.

Just about then I detected the scent of fresh popcorn and the not-so-subtle displacement of air as someone sat in the seat next to mine. My stomach growled, unashamed. Then it did a backward flip at the whiff of cheap cologne. A groper.

I tried to keep my focus on the screen but caught myself nodding off, drool trickling over the rim of my swollen lip.

The next thing I knew I had a lap full of popcorn. Then an earful of sour breathed apologies as he made to brush the spill onto the floor. He bent forward, his hand stopping on my leg. I jammed my elbow into his face, suddenly wide-awake. The adrenalin pumped through me. I could hear him choking and sobbing. I had easily broken his nose. I imagined him inhaling blood as I burst out into the exploding neon night of midtown.



I was surprised. Al's sister was a real looker. Al was the oldest of twelve kids and she was his baby sister. She was still older than me. A looker all the same, the kind of dame who knows how to keep herself up. She could have been thirty-five, more like forty, and right away, from the expression on her face, I could tell what she thought of me.

She didn't waste any time. "Jesus, Al! How many times I gotta tell ya I don't want to meet any of your creepy friends! You tell me a nice clean cut kid I don't expect a runaway from the morgue, a goddamn zombie, for crissakes! Look at that face! I've seen better faces in an ashtray!"

She had spunk, that much was obvious, and her carrot colored hair had been permed to give it that Orphan Annie look.

"Now don't start in on him, Della. Lackland, he's a nice guy, he's just in a rough line of work. He's a . . . confidential investigator, you know, a private eye. . . you stand a chance of being pushed around. . . ."

She stopped in the long shadow of the light pole and fetched a cigarette from her purse to her lips. She glanced back at Al and then at me. "This guy?" she asked in disbelief pointing her cigarette at me.

I offered my lighter and she took the flame, eyeing me as she sucked in.

"Yeah, this is the guy, like I tole ya, maybe he can help you out."

That made her smile. She blew a ball of smoke with practiced ease. At second glance, she did have a lot of make up on, a flesh-tone paste, rouged at the cheekbones, and a sort of green grease lining her eyes. Her eyelashes were unbelievably long, and her eyebrows, much too precise and too thin.

"Yeah, maybe. . . ." The lipstick was a deep red but it didn't altogether mask the tiny lines that indicated that those lips had been puckered to the limit.

"What's this all about?" I wanted to know.

"I want you to find a man for me, and before you go suggesting that I look no further, the man I'm looking for walked out on me and took. . . ." She drew on the cigarette and appraised me with one eye shut. "Let's just say he took some of my valuables and money." She let that sink in, and then, "I don't care about the

money but there were a few items of, uh, sentimental value, and I'd like to recover them."

I nodded my head, stifling a yawn.

Al suggested we all go have a drink and we went down into this little joint with a yellow and green neon palm tree in the window and a pale varnished bamboo interior. It was one of those places where you could order fancy exotic drinks with umbrellas in them. Too fancy for me so I ordered the usual, Al a beer, and Della something in half a pineapple when it came. The bartender was a seedy looking oriental in a Hawaiian shirt I thought I recognized from the track. He too took a long look at my mug.

It seemed that Della was more interested in getting her man back than the money or the jewelry. I was supposed to find him, find out where he'd moved to, and if he was living with anyone, female, for instance. She would take care of the rest. All she wanted to do was talk to him and she was positive she could convince him that they could work out their troubles. She sipped on the two tiny straws poking out of the pineapple and blinked her long lashes at me.

Maybe I looked like I had just fallen off the turnip truck. "You got a pair a socks or something I could use to track him down. I just feed 'em to my bloodhounds and away we go!"

I got a cold stare. She reached into her handbag, a tiny green thing that matched her shoes and, incidentally, her eyes.

"This is the garage where he gets his roadster worked on."

She handed me an old work order. "And he makes book in the barber shop down on Mulberry, the Italian's"

I touched a finger to the swollen side of my mouth. "If you'll pardon me for saying so, this guy is starting to sound like some kind of pimp."

The green eyes glared. Al coughed nervously into his beer. I tried to smile but it hurt to move my mouth that way.

"Don't make that any of your business, crumb. Find him, if you can, and stay out of his way because if he gets his hands on you. . . ."



The barbershop had a bell over the door that sounded when I walked in. The man in the polished hair behind the chair looked up from the array of combs in his hand. He chose one and pointed with it to the door behind me.

“Get outta here!”

“I’m looking for Eddie Cartucci. I got a message for him.”

“Wad I say? Get outta here, I doan need your kinds!” He bared his teeth beneath the dark sliver of hair on his upper lip. “Gedout! gedout!”

A couple of toughs slid through a crack in the door at the back and hunched over toward me.

“Hey, creep, you heard the man, beat it!”

I caught a look at myself in the mirror behind the barber chair as a big hand slapped my shoulder and I was spun around and lifted out through the door, my shins slammed into the concrete steps leading up to street level.



I walked to the diner down the street and over the tracks by the row of warehouses. I sat on a round stool at the counter and ordered a cup from the chef in the sweat trimmed white paper hat. He drew the coffee from the huge steamer tank like a bartender drawing a beer from a keg. The air was sweet, thick, and greasy. I'd taken a sip and passed my hand over my head to slick the hair back before I noticed him.

He pretty much matched the description I had dragged out of Della. Broad shouldered, well dressed, patent leather hair, tanned features, and narrow, mean eyes. He was leaning over the table of the booth at the far end of the diner and talking to a couple of his employees like he meant business.

By the time I tuned in, he'd changed his tone and was saying something jokey like "you'll know how long it gets when you get it up." One of the girls, a pale frail with a bright red smoocher, offered her cigarette for him to light. He snapped the flame to the tobacco and she blew out a puff with a knowing smile.

On the way out he gave me a sidelong glance, which immediately suspicioned me to the probability that this gent was slick enough to be checking over his shoulder, and that following him to his address would be dangerous to my life, limb, and safety. I chose a much pleasanter option.

I walked over to the booth, cup in hand.

"Buy you girls a coffee?"

The blonde with the soda took her mouth off the straw only long enough to say, "Take a walk, buster."

The pale brunette held me with her eyes, cigarette in her hand poised by her chin, a sheer light blue neck scarf tied to one side over the shoulder.

I addressed her. "Come on, sister, nothing wrong with buying a cup of coffee for a couple of hard working ladies, is there?"

The blonde was doing the talking. "Ok, so what do you want, tough guy? Obviously we ain't the coffee type. Maybe you think we ain't nice girls or something."

With that the brunette smiled her smile. It had a thrilling effect on me. I wanted to find a place for both of us to lie down and let her do her nasty stuff.

"No, no, I certainly wouldn't think that of you ladies. I was just wondering about that friend of yours, the one who just left. He

looks an awful lot like a guy I went to school with. What's his name?"

The blonde sneered at me, the brunette still smiling. "You never went to school, fat head. What do you really want?"

I decided to play it straight and lay it on the line. What did I have to lose?

I leaned over the table and got confidential. I told them I was a private dick. That raised a chuckle. And I told them about the bump on my head. I told them about Al's sister and about their man. They laughed at everything I said. The details had them in stitches. Pretty soon I was sitting down taking a refill from the chef, lighting the brunette's cigarette, and making small talk with the blonde. She was interested in Al's sister. It wasn't inconceivable that their man was traveling with a straight woman. She wanted to know more, and we traded information in an off the cuff fashion bit by bit.

I left the diner pleased by my audacity and, best of all, with the information I wanted. I felt a little less stupid though the bruises on my face still ached and my shins smarted.



The brownstone was on the Westside and easy enough to find. So was the mug's yellow roadster. It stuck out like a new shoe in a cobbler's shop. I was being a sap again.

Al's sister had me come up to her apartment after I'd called her to say that I'd got a line on her Eddie's new address. She was sociable this time, maybe a tiny bit seductive. She didn't object when I asked for an advance and gave me the fifty bucks I wanted. Then she smiled a smile that seemed to say everything.

"Lack, I want you to go to Eddie's place for me. Ask him to return my things, tell him I still love him, tell him I want to see him soon, ask him to call or come by."

I looked at the drink in my hand. Drugged? I shook my head even though that made it hurt. "That's a good way of getting myself killed, lady, not on my life am I gonna do that!"

She didn't blink. "I'll add another hundred to your fee."

I blinked. I started to think but stopped at the dollar sign. "What is it you want. . . returned? I could leave a note, you know, saying 'Della really misses you and she wants you to call or come by or something, and by the way, I'm taking the. . .what was it again?'"

"A jewelry box, a black lacquer jewelry box." She mimed the size and shape with her hands.

"Jewelry box. Ok. Do you get my drift? I can get the jewelry box back, but I don't particularly want to be anybody's messenger boy." Maybe it was the drink, but I felt dangerously close to being a messenger boy just then.

She smiled thin. "Suit yourself."

Then I stopped in at McCauley's to pay off my tab. The bartender asked me if I was practicing to be a wino as he took my money. I had to order another drink after that crack. I put it on my tab. And another after that. And another so that by the time I stood in front of the brownstone, my face didn't hurt anymore, it only looked like it did.

I hadn't sent for the ambulance, either, but there was one there, parked out front of the brownstone and flanked by squad cars of the city's finest. There was also a fair sized crowd gathered around the entrance to the building. I weaved through the throng, easy enough in my condition, and up to the uniforms holding the on-lookers back. They were just wheeling the stretcher out followed by a couple of plainclothes guys and a blonde dame who

looked awfully familiar. Then it all came together as she caught my gaze and recognized me. She was one of Eddie's girls, the one I had entertained at the diner. Her finger was pointing at me and I knew then that that was Eddie with the sheet over his face. The thing that struck me funny was that these plainclothes cops were wearing exactly the same kind of fedora. The guy behind me was craning around me to get a better look and didn't understand that I wanted to get back through. He didn't like it when I shoved him, but he didn't get a chance to shove me back. I had a hat on each arm leading me aside.

“Hey, what's going on, boys?” I said nonchalantly.

“Let's go downtown and talk about it,” one or the other said.



Hogan looked in on me cooling my heels in the holding tank.

“Whatsa matter, wisenheimer, vagrancy again? Or is it drunk and disorderly?”

“Murder,” and I watched his bulldog face turn to mud.

“Ya don’t say?” He had his fists on his hips, sheaf of papers in one, tie loosened around the collar, sweat darkened yoke and pits, cuffs rolled up to the elbows. If it weren’t for the revolver on his hip, you’d swear he smelled just like a parish priest. Now he was interested.

“I always took you to be dumber than that. Murder takes guts. And some smarts. You got neither.”

“Thanks, Hogan, I really appreciate your concern but don’t bother. I know you think I’m a good for nothing asshole and you’re probably right. . . .”

“Not probably, positively. What happened to your face?”

“I fell down on some guy’s knuckles or the toe of his shoe, something like that.”

Hogan was starting to bore me. He must have got the hint because he left after razing me with a long pitying look, the kind you get from the padre when you tell him you don’t care if you go to Hell.



Della didn't answer. When I got through with the doorbell I started in on the door. I thought I heard the wood crack, but that could have been my fist. A woman in wire curlers stuck her head out the door down the hallway.

"She left about an hour ago."

"Thanks," I said, "I'll bet you say that to all the boys. Wanna try for the sixty-four dollar question? Any idea where she might have gone?"

I got a slammed door dead bolt triple lock chain rattle for my answer. I cursed loud enough for the entire floor to hear. First I'd been beaten to a pulp by some no-bit hood and then set up by some ball-busting torch. I stood there on the moth eaten carpet in the hallway not knowing which one was worse. That the cops had bought my alibi was about the only bright smudge in the whole dismal chain of events.

I dragged myself down the three flights of stairs to the street below. A cold rain had begun to fall, the failing light failed even more, and me without an umbrella. I paused in the foyer before making a dash for it. The row of mailboxes caught my eye. Hers was number thirty-four. It had a little paper strip fastened to the front with "D. Street" written in a neat hand. A mother and her daughter rushed by on the sidewalk sharing an umbrella. I dug out my pocketknife and pried the box open. Advertisers, bills, a reminder from her dentist, and a pink slip from the post office that had the "article too large for box" square checked. I put everything back except for that.

I stepped out into the rain, out into the slick dark street, out in front of a yellow cab that screeched to a halt a few inches from me. I got in and gave the driver my address. He screamed at me, said he was going to strangle me, beat me to a pulp, kill me for that stunt.

"Why'd ya stop?" I shouted back. I thought his hat was going to blow off the top of his head.

"Where'd ya say, chump?" A true cabbie.

I unlocked the door to my office. It smelled wet. I figured the leak down the outside wall still hadn't fixed itself. I switched on the overhead light. A mess, from the bed and the dingy sheets piled up in the middle like a tower of fungus, the reek of stale tobacco, garbage over spilling the can, butt crammed ashtrays on the table, to the unmistakable scuttle of tiny insects hightailing it for

the shadows. I should have been disgusted but I was too preoccupied.

I had revenge on my mind and there wasn't room for anything else. I reached under the mattress and pulled out a bundled oily rag wrapped around an old .38 Smith & Wesson with the serial numbers filed off. It was something that had come my way a few years earlier and I had stashed it away for just such a time. I dug through a box of papers on the floor of the closet. No bullets there. I went through a couple of coat pockets and found one .38 caliber bullet. Then I remembered I'd been using one to add up expenses and it was still on the table among the bottle caps and paper matches. That made two. I stood on a chair and reached my hand into the dark recesses of the closet shelf. Nothing but an old suitcase I'd all but forgotten. Full of old papers from a novel I was going to write. And yes, one lone bullet rattling around in the bottom. I had no idea how it got there.



I took the bus cross-town. I rattled around in the dim interior or like a wooden pin, the only passenger. Raindrops slammed and squirmed into the black window reflecting my battered mug. The swelling had gone down and the bruises on my face were beginning to ripen. The egg on the back of my head had shrunk down to “over-easy.” I had to take care of first things first. Della’s problem had sidetracked me. I had to get back what little self-esteem I had started out with and that meant I had to settle my score with Kovic and his goon.

There was a little Polish eatery over on 10th that Kovic frequented. Rain was still pouring down when I got off the bus and opened the umbrella. Occasionally a flash of lightning would send a clap of thunder rebounding down the brick canyon. I kept my hand on the butt of the revolver in the pocket of my overcoat. The drops were bouncing knee high off the sidewalk. I found a dark doorway across the street with a good view of the restaurant and settled down to wait.

It wasn’t long before Kovic’s limo swung into view followed by a big blocky sedan carrying the troops. They all hurried inside except for one guy who stayed in the car as a lookout. He wasn’t the one I wanted.

I waited. The rain kept up. The night passed. There was a street light about two doors down. It illuminated the scene in some places. In others it made long shadows. Finally I recognized the shoulders and square head of the gorilla I wanted. He ducked into the sedan, which rocked with his weight. Then the driver’s door swung open and the other mug got out and made a dash for the restaurant.

I waited till the door to the eatery closed and then stepped out of the shadows. I walked up behind the car and knocked on the window staying just behind his shoulder. He had to crane his neck and wipe his breath off the window. Finally he rolled it down.

“Whadyawant?”

I showed him the cigarette in my mouth. “Gotta light?”

He scowled and gave me a hard look. That must have been when he recognized his handiwork. He startled, eyes splayed open and his mouth followed seconds later.

I popped a slug into the dark cavern of his jaw and he slumped forward. I reached into the inside pocket of his coat and extracted his wallet. It felt as thick as a pocket dictionary. My um-

brella had shielded the muzzle flash and as I edged away, I dropped the pistol into his lap. Maybe they'd think it was suicide.

I walked away pulling off my gloves. I made it around the corner before anyone came out of the joint to investigate whether it was a backfire, thunder or a gunshot that they'd heard.

My luck seemed to be changing. A yellow cab was dropping off a fare. "Grand Central," I told him. We were there in no time at all. I pulled a page of currency from the wallet and told him to keep the change. He wasn't sure.

"Whatsis? A gag? I want some real money."

No matter how much I assured him, the cabbie wouldn't take the hundred-dollar bill. I had to fish through my own pockets for the right change. I came up a nickel short. The guy was giving me the mean eyes.

"Gedoudayer!" he said finally.

Day and night Central Station is packed. I shifted from foot to foot in line to the ticket window. I kept glancing back at the revolving doors expecting an army of Kovic's goons to come charging through, Tommy-guns at the ready.

The clerk wore a mask of complete indifference. He leafed through the pages of the large book at his elbow and quoted me the fare and departure time. I spread the bills on the marble tongue of the ticket window. He, in turn, folded, stamped, and inserted the ticket into an envelope marked with the Railroad's insignia.

I walked out onto the platform. The din was incredible. People on the platform pushed by each other, maneuvering around clots of humanity standing in one spot, saying goodbye and trying to make themselves heard above the noise of locomotives shuffling and bumping cars around. The railroad men signaled with their lanterns and the engineers answered with a nod of the head or the wave of a hand.

What I first recognized was the back of her head, the way her hair, a shiny lustrous blond, defined the shape. I pushed past a family bidding farewell to their uniformed son and caught up with her.

"Grace?" I was positive it was her. I wanted to tap her on the padded shoulder of her fox fur.

She turned a sidelong glance on me. It was Kovic's hop head daughter. I couldn't believe I'd made that mistake. I felt as if I should rub my eyes, but I just blinked. Then she was Della and she turned to me with a slow seductive smile.



I woke sitting straight up, sweat pouring out and over me, my undershirt drenched. I was going to have to change my shorts. Some dream.

I untangled my legs from the sopping bedcovers and threw them over the side. The cockroaches weren't expecting me and scurried off to the corners when I pulled on the light. I looked at my face in the discolored mirror above the cracked, stained basin that often doubled as a urinal when the urge was too urgent or I simply didn't have ambition to make the trek down the hall. My face didn't look any better. But it was returning to normal.

I thought of climbing back into bed. A pale light was leaking in through the rips and tears in the blinds and around the frayed edges. Morning. No going back on what I had decided to do. I was determined to get my life back on track. First, the matter of Kovic and his wise guys. Then, Al's sister.

I threw my arms into the sleeves of my burgundy bathrobe and headed down the hall to the shower. I was gonna start off clean.



Occupied. The sound of rushing water, steam curling up from under the door. Oh well, on to the next option.

My old man, he was a seaman and knew about these things, said that just like any other animal we're always on our guard against predators, be they physical or supernatural. We're all predators so we should know. And we're the only ones who prey on the guts of our own species. He was a philosopher of sorts, my old man. He said that this caused us to close up the unconscious so as not to allow the real and secret self to be vulnerable to predation. There are these shields around our unconscious that don't allow our real selves to come out unless we're drunk, stoned, sleeping, or hypnotized, he said. He liked to repeat himself, my old man.

There are an infinite number of ways of expressing yourself, he'd say, why not try it. Repetition is the pulse of the universe. It's so awesome that it terrifies us, which is where we get the word "repulse."

Once you got my old man going there was no stopping him. No matter how far afield he wandered, he always came back.

"Only one other instance when we let those mental shields down," I could hear him say. He would pause for effect at this point. "Yup, only one time. 'ats when you got your dick in your hand and gonna pee. Or when you squat to shit.

"Just working the release on the old sphincter or bladder requires all your concentration. All of a sudden your guard is down and all this stuff comes pouring out. Great ideas, improbable inspiration, solutions to problems, all sorts of things. The greatest minds have all had their inspiration while sitting on the pot. Luther, Einstein, Picasso, Ford, Pythagoras, Archimedes. The great dialogues of philosophy were all conducted on the way to or from the shit house!"

He liked to exaggerate, my old man. He was always saying we should use language to its fullest capacity. Fact is but a seed from which the truth will grow. He was full of shit, my old man. One day he flushed the toilet and went down with the rest of it.

I watched the waters swirl in the yellow, blotched bowl. I knew what I had to do. Shave.



I pulled on a heavy peacoat and fit a stocking cap on my head. A pair of my rattier shoes and I looked like any mug that'd likely be drifting around the riverfront docks and warehouses.

Kovic's turf was the waterfront. He ran the longshoreman action. He was king rat on the East River. And that's where I headed. On the way I ran into Alice.

She was coming up the steps from her basement apartment. She had a thin hand on the black pipe railing and was stepping up onto the sidewalk. She fixed me with those deep sad watery eyes of hers. "Hi, Lack, where you off to?" So much for my disguise.

We went for coffee down at Hopper's Diner. Her long pale fingers wrapped around the thick white cup. She stared into the depths of the black coffee. It was a while before she said anything. But when she said it, I knew what she was going to say. "Have you heard from Grace?"

Grace was my ex. Alice and she had gone to school together. Alice had married Grace's brother, Ted. Then he died. That made Alice a widow. Then I died for Grace. She moved to Hollywood. That made her a divorcee.

"No."

Alice gave one of her sighs and lapsed into more silence. Sipped from her cup, pensive. Her bobbed hairdo fell around her ears like the puff of pantaloons and she was gazing out the window when she said, "I was more alone than I could have ever imagined when Ted died."

Ted was one of those starving artist types, a small time painter who designed calendars and repaired furniture. He sold bits and pieces of himself just to survive so he could continue doing the same thing over and over again. I never saw any point in it. He also liked to take pills. Something else I never saw any point in. Alice wasn't an artist. She was a starving widow.

I was depressed enough as it was. I held her limp hand in mine as I got up to leave. I slipped her a fiver. "Pay for the coffee, will ya?"



The Bucket Of Blood was the watering hole Kovic liked to operate from. It was a waterfront dive. The floor was covered in sawdust. The dominant cologne was obviously eau d'urine and essence de fart, and was favored by most of the splinter faced denizens. A haze of cigarette smoke topped the atmosphere like foam on the surface of fermenting juice. The din created by the inhabitants of this festering tide pool was about as soothing and pleasant as a herd of lovesick sea lions, and just as loud. I ordered a beer and found a corner in the shadows where I could keep an eye on the door at the top of the stairs where Kovic had his office. I'd been there before. I knew if I went in I'd recognize the red shag carpet. I didn't have a plan. I just wanted to get even. I'd play the rest by ear.

I was just about to drain the last of my beer when they walked in. They stood out like terriers in a cat show. They were feds. None of the local gendarmes had the money or the taste for those suits. First there were just two, then six. I caught the bartender reaching beside the cash register for the alarm button. The hubbub had subsided to a murmur. The guys had obviously not come to drink. I spilled the rest of my beer down the front of my coat and staggered to the door. The clot of feds parted to let the drunk pass.

Outside, the street was crawling with suits. I brushed past one and he called to me. "Hey! You!"

Since that wasn't my name I continued my stagger down to the alley next to the saloon. Once around the corner and in the dark between buildings, I put on speed. The alley was a dead end, a high wooden fence blocking my escape. Over the top went to the East River. Off to one side of the fence was a ladder going down through a square opening in the boardwalk. The fed was being a bit more insistent. "Hey, you, stop! I want to talk to you!" He had his flashlight out and shined it on me as I hesitated before dropping down through the deck. As I did, I heard shots come from the saloon. The feds had not met with a friendly reception.

Under the wharf there was at first darkness. Then the glow of a red bulb showing toward the outer pilings, and a speedboat parked under it. There was a guy in a watch cap and peacoat standing by it, ready to cast off the line. He didn't hear me behind him. I used my gat on the back of his head. He slumped to his knees and I rolled him off the catwalk into the water. I climbed into the boat and found the starter. The water bubbled up under the stern as the

inboard motor rumbled to life. Then I had visitors. There were five of them. "Ok, ok, shove off!" a voice I recognized ordered. I pushed the throttle to full and the boat shot out of its berth. As I steered the craft out into the river, I looked over my shoulder just to make sure. It was Mister K.



I never expected to be drinking gasoline and water. I'd had just as bad before, but this was East River water, and the gasoline, diesel by grade, was from the overturned powerboat. It had happened all so fast.

Kovic or one of his goons was yelling something at me. I couldn't tell what—they all sound like they're clearing their throats. I realized they were yelling at me about the same time they realized I wasn't the guy I was supposed to be. What they were trying to tell me in that gargled tongue of theirs was that I was on a collision course with a tug pulling a barge. At the same time, the discovery that I wasn't one of them got two toughs up on their feet lurching toward me, guns in hand.

The barge loomed closer. I hit the throttle and a hard left on the rudder. I didn't know what I was doing but it seemed like the right thing. The powerboat sleighed on its gunnels as it performed a tight arc away from the barge. The wheel spun in my hands as the boat rolled back to an even keel. Now I was headed back the way I'd come. There were red flashing lights and sirens approaching. The floodlights of the patrol boat illumed me.

I looked back at my passengers. There were only three of them now. And they all guns aimed at me. I'm a quick study. I throttled up and gave a hard right rudder. I was sure they couldn't get off a straight shot as I busted my wake. The bulk of the barge loomed ahead, a dark behemoth hauling its tons of garbage to a landfill in the next State. A shot careened off the dashboard a foot too close for my comfort. I turned and saw that I still had three men in my tub. The one lunging at me had a very familiar face. It was the one I'd been looking for. He led with his chin and I caught him in the windpipe with a full set of knuckles. He choked in my face as he landed on top of me and knocked me to the deck.

He had a gun in his hand. I had my hands on the gun in his hand. He was stronger than me, but the fact that he couldn't breathe was in my favor. It was a draw until the impact.

The gun went off. He went limp. We both went flying into the drink. I was tangled up with him otherwise I would have made my own splash. We sank like rocks in men's clothing. My peacoat was sucking up water like a wino after a three-day bender. Friend and I had to part ways and I was about to remove my arm from under his when I had the presence of mind to reach inside his suit coat and extract what felt like a small brick, the wallet I had

watched him peel the C note from. I shed the peacoat, a veritable anti-life preserver if there ever was one, and scrambled upward till my head broke the surface.



I had never learned to swim. What I was doing was called splashing, and gasping for air. I had the memory of doing that once before revisit me. I must have been ten. It was at the Municipal Swimming Pool. I was one of those skinny little kids in the baggy trunks that hung out in the shallow end. I liked playing in the water, splashing my friends and being splashed back. But I hated getting water up my nose. I had water up my nose now and I didn't like it.

I was also the skinny kid in the baggy trunks who was always getting yelled at by the lifeguard for running around the slippery edge of the pool. I was hearing that yelling even now.

Once, when I was playing up around the deep end of the pool, someone came up behind me and pushed me in. I splashed wildly as I began sinking. There was an older kid nearby who swam to help me. I remember the dull roar of the watering rushing into my ears as I went under, much like the throbbing roar I was hearing now. As I sank to the bottom of the pool, I remember grabbing onto the trunks of the kid swimming to help me and dragging them down around his ankles.

I also remember his foot kicked me in the face. It was a lot like the pain I was feeling now as a big white donut hit me on the side of the head. There were people on the tugboat yelling at me over the roar of the engine to grab the life ring.



They worked me over, demons in dingy cable knit sweaters. They pumped my arms and peered in my face with eyes as black as eightballs. They jumped on my back and grunted incomprehensible demon words, expelled by breaths that would have pickled a squid. They kept it up until I gave in and released, in a gush, the river I had swallowed. I had not meant to take it, it was all part of the process of drowning, but still I was being punished. In this particular hell, large steel cables and giant coils of rope made up my limited horizon. A steady growl vibrated up through the deck pressed against my face. It was the machinery of hell.

Just as I choked and coughed up the last of the East River, the rain began. It was a hard rain and it hit the scrubbed wood planks of the deck with explosive force, as if each drop were a spark launched upward in the dim amber of the demon lanterns. I was peppered by its force, wetting me more thoroughly than my baptism in the river. I resigned myself to the fact that my hell would be a soggy one. Then the demons rolled me over on my back and teased me with the vision of an angel, a beautiful, blue-eyed angel with red gold wings protruding from her temples. Her luscious full red lips parted ever so slightly to reveal the pearls of paradise. I felt her sweet breath on my face and heard her melodious voice.

“Take the lubber down below.”



The cup held something hot, and every time I sipped from it, my shivering lessened. It wasn't broth, it wasn't tea, it wasn't even coffee. Whatever it was, it had a bite that spun through my insides like torrid devils from Tasmania. Just what the doctor ordered. I was slowly making sense of my surroundings, wrapped in a coarse square of gray blanket at the edge of a bunk in an oily stinking noisy space in the innards of some kind of boat. What didn't make sense was the vision of beauty before me.

In dungarees, stained by grease and paint, with a wide leather belt that cinched just enough of her waist to accentuate her curves, she filled my narrow horizon. A rough shirt hung squarely from her wide shoulders, sleeves rolled up to the elbows to reveal the dingy white of a long undershirt down to her wrists. Her dusty red blonde hair was pulled back in a knot, loose strands dangling at the temples.

The voice, harsh but with a hint of playfulness, didn't go with the vision. "So Mr. Yamatski, how did you end up in the drink?"

She was holding a book in her hand and she seemed to be reading from it.

"You work for Kovic?" Again, her way of speaking, rough, unpolished, a sharp contrast to her pin-up looks.

I shrugged. "I can't remember."

She made a face. It was a more mature face than I first realized. There were lines, shiny cheekbones.

"Convenient. Maybe you got water on the brain." I placed her accent. Coaster, from further south.

A dark dwarf at her side muttered something foreign. She laughed a laugh that tore me in half and replied in the same guttural tongue. "Diego thinks we should throw you back." She smiled bewitchingly. I wanted to explore her like an ant in a honey pot.

"Ok," I lied, "I used to work for Kovic. But I made him unhappy so he roughed me up," I pointed to the bruises on my cheek, "and tossing me in the river was his way of letting me go. I guess he was too much in a hurry to fit me with a pair of cement blocks."

The dwarf said something else, stepping from the shadows, half addressing me. I saw that he wasn't really a dwarf but a truly short stocky man with a thick mass of graying curly dark hair under a well-worn stocking cap. He was dark enough to be African but his features said maybe Arab or Portuguese. The dim light of

the bulkhead lamp glanced off the small gold loop in the lobe of his right ear.

“Diego is wondering if they were just going to toss you in the river, why they would have rammed into a garbage scow.”

“Well, I think that them being chased by the cops had something to do with it. And Kovic’s mugs ain’t exactly sailors. They got a little excited and lost control of the powerboat. That’d be my guess.”

“Kovic is a rat. Anybody on his bad side is on my good side.” She tossed the book in my lap. It wasn’t a book. It was Yamatski’s wallet. I thumbed through it, a little disappointed. There were a few large bills, but I was mistaken again. It wasn’t a wallet. It was an address book!

She mistook my expression. “You’ll find everything in your book as it was. I didn’t take nothing. Just looking to see who you might be. You had a death grip on that thing. Figured it must be pretty important to you.” She looked over at her mate. “You can ask around, they’ll tell you, Captain Annie Bassinger and the crew of the tugboat Narcissus is square.”

I nodded. “No, no, everything looks fine. Thanks for fishing me out of the river.” I proffered one of the C notes in an act of suicidal generosity. The Portugee was about to step forward to take it but a look from his captain stopped him.

“No need for that. I can offer you some dry clothes and put you ashore as soon as we get back from down state.”



The cops were waiting for us when we docked. They were Feds and the local gendarmes. I saw Hogan among them. They wanted to question Annie about the barge accident. It happened right as the Narcissus was coming down river. They had a witness who said they thought they had seen her crew fishing a body out of the water.

Annie nodded. “Yeah, I thought it was a body too, but turned out it was just a waterlogged tree trunk floated down from upstate. What are the chances, huh? You see people in the water and you go to save one of them and it turns out to be just a hunk of wood.”

The G-man didn’t change expression. “I’ll have to see everyone’s identification and their seaman’s cards.” I felt a certain tightening where the sun don’t shine.

Hogan butted in. “What’s this bum doing here?”

The agent didn’t like being distracted. He was the one in charge. I’d heard of him. His name was Neckker. “What are you talking about?”

“I know this bum.” He was pointing at me, “I know this bum. Whadaya doing on this tub, wisenheimer? Don’t tell me you decided to wise up and take up honest work.” He turned to the fed. “He’s a no-bit wannabe gumshoe. His name is Lackland Ask. He don’t run with the class of criminal we’re after.”

Neckker was taller than Hogan. He used it to his advantage to look down on him. “Just let me do my job,” he spoke crisply.

Since I had become the focus of attention, I was first. It went by the book.

“What’s your name?”

“Like the cop said, Lackland Ask.”

I could see Annie was frowning.

“Let me see some identification.”

I handed him my wallet.

“What are you doing here?”

I glanced over at Annie and caught a barely perceptible nod.

“I’m one of the crew.”

Neckker leafed through the odd scraps of paper, not much of it money, my driver’s license, and my PI permit. I’d had a guy over in Chinatown make it up for me. It looked real official.

He held it up to me. "This is worthless. Where's your seaman's card?"

"I got his papers in the works, chief." It was Annie. "I needed a body in a hurry so I hired this guy while they process them down at the hall."

I got my wallet back and a raking glare from Hogan as they moved on to check the others.



I had gone through Yamatski's address book on the trip down to the landfill. He was pretty organized for a thug. There were the names of dames accompanied by phone numbers and a system of stars next to each that was fairly self-explanatory. There were other numbers that probably belonged to his associates: Zsebo with a Butterfield exchange, Mikkel with a Melrose exchange, and so on. Then there were pages with what appeared to be some kind of code, strings of numbers and letters, and writing in an alphabet I wasn't familiar with. Some sections were underlined with exclamation points. There was also a business card stuck in the front cover that stated simply *if found return to Milosh Yamatski for a reward* and gave an address on the Eastside and his phone number, a Cedar exchange. Feeling the slowly diminishing lump below my right eye, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of reward he might have been offering. The cash that came with the address book amounted to three 100-dollar bills. I figured that it was my payment for the job I'd done for Kovic and a little extra for my trouble.

I'd slept a good part of the trip down to the dump site. Whatever it was in that grog Annie had fed me did the trick. The crew, Diego and his counterpart, a tall lanky type by the name of Robal, avoided me. Together they were right out of the funny papers, Mutt and Jeff.

Annie had been coiling hawsers when I came up from down below. It's not exactly woman's work, but she made it look easy. And sexy. With someone like her, I could begin to forget about Grace.

I bummed a smoke, dawn showing at the dark, faraway edge of the Atlantic. She cupped the match to my cigarette.

"You don't look like the Kovic type."

I gazed through the smoke at her bright blue eyes. "You don't look like the tugboat type."

She smiled. It was painful, like staring at the sun. "This boat belonged to my uncle Wally. I spent most of my life on this tug, and others like it. My folks died when I was just a baby. He raised me out here on the river." She took a deep drag and then let go a shapely puff. "He left me the business when he passed. . . ."

"Harbormaster says we got company waiting for us at the docks, Cap," Robal had called down from the steering house.

She looked at me, gauging my reaction. “The law, maybe? Suppose they’re looking for you or somebody like you, what should I tell ‘em?”

“That’s up to you,” I replied, feigning nonchalance. “I don’t have anything against coppers, but I’d like to avoid any official business with them. If you know what I mean.”

I replayed that scene over and over in the taxi back to my room. She didn’t have to cover for me, but she did. I wondered if it might have been my battered and drenched lost puppy dog look. I considered the more remote possibility that she might have taken a liking to me. Even when I was being questioned by the fed and my real name came out didn’t seem to make a difference. She had stuck by her story and the cops had left and soon after so did I. I should have turned and waved as I made my way down the dock. I hailed a cab instead.



I know the difference between my mess and someone else's. This was someone else's. The room had been turned upside down. Someone had been looking for something. I would never turn a room over like that. My way of looking for something was to move things around, not upend them. The drawers to my bedside dresser had been yanked out and overturned, socks, underwear, ties, cufflinks in a pile on my desk. Paper clips, pens, pencils and papers scattered all over the floor. The mattress was set on edge revealing a hutch of assorted dust bunnies as well as my private library of French Art magazines under the bed frame. I stared down at the big red *bouche* of the brunette on the cover of *L'Etoile*. Amazingly someone hadn't disturbed any of the magazines. I reached down and pulled out a buried copy of *Seins Marveilleux*. The pink postal slip still marked the page where Yvette displayed her substantial endowment. Maybe that's what someone was looking for. I folded it into my wallet. Then I went downstairs and banged on the super's door with the edge of my fist.

Curtis opened the door and the stench of stale decay hit me in the face. He was attired in his usual sweat stained undershirt and matching slacks, one suspender off the shoulder. The two-day growth of beard didn't make him any more appealing. He blinked in the light of the hallway, eyes veined red with the road maps to perdition. "Wadyawan?"

"Curtis, did you let anyone into my room? Somebody's been in there and undone all my fine housekeeping. And I'm missing a cufflink."

I stared over his shoulder into the brown dimness of his apartment. A kid was sitting knock kneed on the couch, a glass of something in her hand.

"Yasister come lookin forya. Sheyada message forya. I letterin."

"I don't have a sister, you gas bag. What did she look like?"

"Older broad. Wearin sunglasses, scarf over her head, like she come from a funeral. Red head, maybe."

"Right, my older redheaded sister came looking for me to tell me about a death in a family."

The kid threw a glance at her elbow when she saw me give her the onceover. She was all of eleven acting like she was older, twelve or thirteen. I wouldn't put it past Curtis. His fly was down.

I could have let it pass. “What, you a babysitter now?”

He frowned and then grinned, showing me an uneven row of marbled Chiclets, his pallor growing faintly dark. A strong wind could have knocked them down his throat. I just wasn’t that wind.

A female voice shrieked a name from a few stories up. The kid jumped to her feet and ran to the door. I walked away.



I was being followed. I had just pushed out from the brass and glass doors of City Bank where I had gone to break down the c-notes to more expendable denominations. A high crowned fedora with the brim turned down topped a slight figure in a long gray overcoat with the collar turned up. I dropped to one knee in front of the entrance to the jewelry shop next door. I retied my shoe glancing up at the reflection in the display window mirroring rings, jewels, and watches. The shadow hesitated, dark goggles and wan cheeks peeking out from above the V of collar. I knew I could probably take him. Unless he had a gun in his hand in those deep overcoat pockets.

I rose and turned abruptly, striding in his direction. He spun and walked hurriedly out of sight around the giant granite cornerstone of the bank building. Just as quickly I turned and ducked into a cocktail lounge two doors down.

It was one of those tall, narrow, opaque window, dark interior, shotgun places that catered to bank tellers, bookkeepers, secretaries, and clerks with tables along one wall and an enormous mahogany bar along the other that allowed only constricted access to the darker reaches of the back where the facilities were located. And the phone booth. That's where I headed.

An older woman in a ratty fox and a dish mop for hair, and an even older purple beezered gent in a rumpled brown suit and shapeless hat pulled down over a ruff of shaggy white feathers looked up from toying with the ice in their tall glasses. The bartender, with whom they had been conversing in earnest hushed tones, was a broad browed palooka with calm guileless gray eyes. He ambled down, a wide door in a dress shirt and a black string tie, to where I had ensconced myself among the shadows and where I had a good view of the entire length of the bar and the entrance. He looked me over as he placed a cork coaster on the bar. I was still wearing the clothes Annie had loaned me, the rough checkered shirt and pair of dungarees, the cracked leather windbreaker. I needed a shave. Maybe he thought I was in the wrong kind of dive. But he understood me perfectly when I held up one finger and then two fingers horizontal to the bar. Double. Whisky. Neat.

I laid out a fin when he brought me the drink and he came back from the register with three fish and some bait. They must expect some well-heeled patrons at those prices. I didn't say it out

loud. Besides the first sip told me that it was the good stuff and why disturb a sleepwalking giant.

Someone had left the daily paper in the corner near my elbow. I unfolded it and angled it to catch the light off the bright mirrored back bar. The headlines screamed about the mess in Europe. Under the fold one headline caught my eye. It read, **Mob Boss All Wet** and then in sub heads, *Two Still Missing*.

Apparently while trying to avoid capture by Federal and local authorities several reputed crime figures crashed their speedboat into a garbage scow on the East River. All but two of the occupants of the speedboat were recovered from the frigid waters. One of the missing men was believed to be Milosh Yamatski, a man known to be second in command to reputed crime boss, Jan Kovic. The other man's identity was unknown.

I reassured myself that Yamatski's address book was still in my jacket pocket. I was going to give its contents the third degree once I got the chance. Right now I had more immediate things to attend to. The swelling on my face had gone down and only the hint of a bruise outlined my chin line and the cheek under one eye. If I was going to stay in business I was going to need some new duds. First, clean up, scrape the stubble off my cheeks. Look sharp, feel sharp. Then I was going to call my crooked lawyer. Not to ask for legal advice. He was the one who referred me to Kovic in the first place. I figured I should warn him as well as give him hell for setting me up like that. I drained the glass. It went down like cool molten gold. I had to have another.

The old couple looked down my way, annoyed that I was calling away. . .their son? I smiled at the thought and the jolly gentle giant eyed me quizzically.

"Yeah, one more of the high class joy juice, and whatever your mom and dad are having. On me." He laughed a big belly laugh but his eyes were as cold as ten-penny nails. I pushed the fish and bait toward him and laid out another fin. He gurgled the shot until it lapped at the rim.

I slurped at the excess. I continued to plan my course of action, the one I had begun to form on my way back up the coast. I still had to be careful but I was assuming that Mister K thought I was feeding the eels along with his number two boy. As far as I was concerned that had been a draw. Maybe I was expecting a little more cash for my troubles, but for now what I had was a down payment. The address book was probably worth something to the right people. Maybe a closer inspection of Yamatski's digs would turn up something else that was my due.

Then there was Al's sister. That was a prospect I could cut loose though I knew I didn't have the full picture as far as she was concerned. I went to my wallet and pulled out the pink postal

package notice. I had grabbed a cash deposit envelope while I was in the bank. I folded the pink slip and fit it into the envelope. I called down to Tiny for something to write with and he brought me a stubby pencil. I scrawled my name on the envelope and laid a sawbuck on top of it. I pushed it toward him.

“I was supposed to meet a friend here but it looks like he’s gonna be late and I gotta be somewhere. Can you hang on to it and give it to him when he comes in? He’ll know to ask for it. His name’s on it. The tenner’s for your trouble.”

I was talking his lingo. “Yeah, sure, can do.” He smiled like a kid who had just been given a new toy. I watched him stick the envelope in the space behind the ornate cash register on the back bar.

I dialed for a cab from the booth and then strolled to the front door and peered out the small square window. I couldn’t see much from that vantage, just the odd hat bobbing past, and the intermittent shadows of bodies hurrying by. When the cab pulled up, I took a deep breath, pushed the door open, strode across the squares of sidewalk to the curb and jumped in the back almost all in one motion. The cabbie cut back into the traffic flow with a screech of tires. I gave him an address on Second Avenue and glanced out the rear window. A big black town car driven by a tall hat had pulled out from the curb a few spaces back. I didn’t want to take any chances.

“The black town car back there, can you lose him?”

The cabbie glanced in the side mirror and then into the rear view at me. “That’ll be extra.”

I slid a sawbuck across the back of the seat to him. I was starting to hemorrhage money.

“Hang on,” he said, and took the next corner on two wheels.



I should have asked for my money back. The cabbie had turned onto a street that was being repaved. Not only that, he rammed right into the back of a dump truck carrying a load of hot asphalt. If that wasn't enough, the collision triggered the lift on the dump bed and the contents emptied onto the hood of the cab. The cabbie had just enough time to get out before the door was sealed by a mound of steaming black pavement. To top it off, he immediately got into a shouting match with a large man holding a large shovel. I bailed from my side and flattened myself against the bricks of the building. The town car had turned into the street a few cars back. There was nowhere to go. A crowd was gathering and I joined in the flow long enough to duck behind the dump truck and sprint another fifty yards to the narrow shadow of an alleyway.

It was blind. Overflowing garbage cans and a few packing crates at the far end up against the brick face of the building and a fire escape that lead up to the roof. I ran to the end and judged the distance from the top of the crate to the bottom rung of the ladder. I could make it. I walked around the crate closest to the building thinking to reposition it at a better angle. I didn't see the hole. My leg went straight down throwing my face forward against the bricks. It hurt but not as much as my knee wrenched as it was at such a stupid angle. I collected my senses and saw that I was standing in the entrance to a coal chute. The crate had partly covered the hole and now I was wedged between the wall and the crate. I unstuck myself by pushing on the box, and untwisted my knee. I could feel the side of my face begin to swell and throb. The pain from my knee ripped at my thigh like a claw. I kept my sob to a cough, eyes watering, and realized that I had found my avenue of escape.

I lowered myself into the hole and slid the crate to cover it completely. I was in the dark. I felt the wooden hatch cover behind me. It gave way with a slight moan of hinge. I had to assume there was a chute. I set my legs ahead of me and inched forward. There was a ledge and then my feet struck metal, the chute. I went over the edge and gravity took hold. There was a drop and my feet hit, scattering loose coal. Finally after all these years I'd made it to the top of the heap. I was in a coal stall.

A faint light leaked through the cracks in the boards. The rough board door was latched from the outside. I hoisted myself to the top of the box. There was barely enough room for me to fit be-

tween the ceiling and the top edge of the enclosure. My now bad knee wasn't cooperating and caught briefly on the side along with part of my pant leg. The pain was such that I let go thinking that the drop would not be close to as painful. I was only partly right. My elbow took the brunt of the impact. I lay there for a while, I don't know how long. I didn't hear anything that would indicate someone was looking for me. I was in a semi-fetal position, the hand on the arm with the bad elbow cupping the bad knee and the other hand cupping the bad elbow. The shadows of rats crossed the faint light coming from beyond the hulk of brick furnace and boiler. I got to my feet like a man who had just been beat on by six angry stepbrothers.

The steps the single bare light bulb thoughtfully illuminated led up. I followed them. There was a door at the top. The door led to a large closet arranged with mops, brooms, and buckets. There was another door on the far side. It led to a hallway and the ground floor business advertised on the glass as a purveyor of fine discount clothing. I'd thought about getting to a tailor, just not in such a roundabout fashion.



Through the window I could see the red, white, and blue sign, YMCA. I was neither young nor Christian, and I wasn't so sure about my associates. While the tailor worked on the alterations, I walked across the street and into the building. The kid at the desk was a bleeding heart, wan with self-abuse. I had a choice, a room for two bucks a night which included pool and shower privileges or I could pay fifty cents and just use the shower, towel, soap, lock and locker included. That's what the sign on the wall behind him said. I went for the bargain. There was a fifty-cent deposit on the lock. It was no bigger than a matchbook and you could probably open it with a hard stare. There was an elastic looped through the top of the key. "You can wear that around your wrist when you shower." He said shower as if were a dirty word. And I just wanted to get clean. The use of a razor with disposable blade was another thirty-five cents.

I followed the arrows that pointed to the shower bay. There were rows of wooden lockers with their doors standing open. I picked one closest to the tiled entrance to the showers and shucked off my clothes. I stood there with my towel in front of me feeling very naked. It bothered me that my wallet and Yamatski's address book would be vulnerable to anyone who bothered to sneeze on the lock and rifle through my belongings while I was in the shower. Most of the other lockers around mine were empty. I took a chance and removed the items and tucked them at the far back of the top shelf of the locker next to mine. I took out a fin and stuck it in my pants pocket. That done I stepped across the cold wet tiles, hung my towel on the rack at the entrance and up to the first shower head. I was alone. And naked. I stayed naked while the hot water gushed over me with pleasant stinging force. I wasn't alone for long.



If you took a wedge of pink skin, thick muscle and bones and stuck it on a pair of chopsticks you'd have what this guy looked like. I imagine that it wouldn't be that obvious if he had clothes on, or that he had a little spigot like those guys on those Greek statues have. His head sat on his broad muscular shoulders almost like an afterthought. He was either a jailbird or a friend of the prison barber. The bluebirds tattooed at the top of each pec were supposed to make you think he was a creampuff. Maybe he was. I got the feeling I was going to find out. I stepped out of the spray and headed for my towel.

"Hey, where you going so fast, I just got here!" He was going to stop me from reaching my towel.

"Come on, pally, I don't have the time or the inclination to play drop-the-soap." I pushed passed him but he grabbed my arm. His grip slipped and I gave a hard shove against his chest, tangling his pipe cleaners with my foot. He went down hard on a cushion of muscle with a grunt. Grimacing he got back to his feet while I planned my next move. I'd only succeeded in making him mad. He rushed at me and I fainted toward the door, lost traction on the wet floor, and he had me in a bear hug before I knew it. I had to use my head. And I did. I brought my forehead down on the bridge of his nose. It hurt, but it hurt him more. His grip loosed and I broke it bringing my knee up hard between his legs. From his howl I could tell I caused him big pain. I was about to plant my foot in his face but he started crying, begging that I not hurt him anymore. He was a cream puff after all.

The desk clerk stuck his head into the shower room and goggled at the fallen Charles Atlas. If there'd been sand I would have kicked it in his face. "What's going on?" he asked alarmed, his eyes darting from me to Samson and back. I got the impression he was more interested in checking out our packages.

I pushed past wrapping a towel around my waist. "Nothing to get worried about, kid, just a lover's quarrel."



Smooth as a baby's ass. Almost. I patted my fresh shaved jaw and eyed what was staring back at me in the mirror above the wash basin. I'd decided to lose the moustache and now my upper lip looked naked and unfamiliar. I imagined with time I'd get used to it. Maybe. It had been a fixture on my map since it was just a fuzzy little caterpillar. But it was the least I could do to change my appearance. Compared to the plum over my right brow where I'd head butted the moose in the shower, the rest of my bruises were fading to a dull bluish amber. Now I just looked rugged, my features chiseled by patent leather shoes and big ringed knuckles.

Surprisingly my nose had withstood the onslaught without being permanently bent out of shape. That was a good thing because a peeper needs a respectable looking nose. Someone sees you with a lopsided schnoz and they figure you zigged when you shoulda zagged. Appearance is 99 percent of the presentation I read in the back of a dime magazine once. It made sense. I slicked back my wet hair with a steel comb and gathered up my wallet and the address book from the adjacent locker. My trousers were light the fiver I'd stuck in the pocket. Now it made sense. The ape wasn't love loony, he was just running interference while his confederate, most likely the kid at the front desk, rifled through my clothes. I figured to collect it when I turned in the useless lock and key. I turned to go and there was Armstrong again.

"Ya shouldnta done that," he said and took a swing at me coming from such a long way off I couldn't have seen it without binoculars. I ducked under it easily and bumped his chest with mine pushing back against the bank of lockers with a loud clatter. I stuck out my tongue and retrieved the steel blue razor blade that had been resting there. I held the edge to the small space between his chin and his chest. He struggled and I slashed the side of his jaw. His yowl brought the desk clerk running. I threw a towel at the bleeder who was now looking at the red on his hands with disbelief.

The kid ran to him. "What did you do? What happened?"

"Looks to me like he cut himself shaving." I yanked the kid back by his shirt collar. "And the fiver you took from my trousers, give!" The kid squirmed and I gripped the back of his neck and squeezed hard. He crumpled to his knees and handed the five to me over his shoulder. I let go and shoved him towards his part-

ner in crime. "A little bit of advice. Next time don't stand so close to the razor."



I looked at myself in the tailor's cheval glass. I was passable as a human being, bruised but clean. I never thought I looked good in tweed, brown's not my color, but the suit was a nice fit. Maybe it was the new shirt but I almost looked respectable. The shoes comfy, whoever had worn them before had done a good job keeping them up, buffed and polished to perfection, they felt comfortable, like old money.

The tailor had a nose like a can opener, a little cloth beanie on the back of his head, a cuff of pins and needles on one sleeve, and a yellow tape slung around his neck. He was a little older than me by the white sprinkled in the fringe of red beard along the jaw line. He looked pleased with his work.

I reached into my newly acquired wallet, courtesy of Yamatski, and pushed the twenty at him. Not a bad price for a dead man's wardrobe that fit so nicely.

The establishment was a used clothing store, I'd seen that right away when I emerged from my sojourn in the coal cellar. It was just what I needed. A change of clothes would at the very least give me an edge on whoever it was following me. Business must have been slow and I was able to get a good price on the brown tweed suit and vest. He threw in a pair of new skivvies and undershirt. The tie was extra as was the new Arrow shirt, and shoes, though he was willing to take half off when I balked. The socks were extra as well. I figure he was probably making close to a hundred percent markup considering that he could get a whole closet of suits for that twenty from some widow's estate.

He handed me a hat. "The pièce de résistance." He said like he was serving me dessert.

It looked like a fedora to me. I set it snug on my head and flicked the brim. I was unrecognizable as me. At this point I felt I could splurge and fished for another five in the wallet. Maybe the hat distracted me. I fumbled the address book and it slipped from my hand.

He was quick to pick it up and hand it back, but not before catching a glimpse of an open page. The color drained from his face and he lowered his eyes, hand shaking.

He spoke something I didn't understand. When I didn't answer, he tried something else I didn't understand. He looked at me, blue eyes wide, and I watch it dawn on him that I wouldn't understand anything but a hundred percent Yank.

“You are not a Slav?” He cocked a large ear at me like my answer was going to give him an idea to run or stay.

I shook my head. “No, pal, I’m as American as a sawed-off shotgun. What of it?”

He pointed at the wallet. “The writing in your book is Cyrillic.”

I looked down at a page with Yamatski’s secret writing. “Is that what that is?” And, “What the hell is it?”

“Cyrillic is the alphabet used in Greece and many of the countries along the Black Sea. The Russians use it.”

“Ruskies? Think this is some kind of Communist code?”

The tailor gave a shrug. “Unfortunately I cannot read it. I only recognized it as written using the Cyrillic alphabet.”

He was lying. “Yeah, but you spoke to me in it, didn’t you?”

“Speaking and reading are two different things. Where I come from we learn to speak many pieces of different languages without necessarily reading them.”

Now it was my turn to lie. “Yeah, I found this in a phone booth in Central Station. Somebody musta forgot it. I’d return it. . .” I looked down at the page, “. . .if I knew what it said.”

The tailor brightened. “You are in luck. I know a rabbi who can help you. He is an old man well read in many languages including those written in Cyrillic. Allow me to give you his address.” He retrieved a slip of paper and pencil from his shirt pocket and dropped his cheaters onto his nose.

I looked over his stooped back to see a beautiful apparition peek through the curtains to a room at the rear of the shop from which emanated the unmistakable smell of boiled cabbage. I smiled at the vision.

“Hello,” she said.

The tailor jerked his head around at the sound of the voice and then straightened, handing me the slip of paper. “He can tell you what it means.” And then, officiously, “What would you like me to do with your old clothes. I can dispose of them for you or I can have them delivered to your address?”

I gave him my card. “Yeah, bundle it up and send it to my post office box.” It would be a shame to lose that leather jacket, and maybe the shirt and pants would be an excuse to see Annie again.

He glanced at the card and frowned. “You are a private police?”

“Yeah, but I ain’t no cop,” I said still distracted by the comely tomato.

The apparition stepped out from behind the curtain. She was beautiful and petite, red curls cut close to her perfectly shaped

head. Even in the ankle length full sleeved shift she was wearing, you didn't need x-ray vision to make out that the proportions were correct and that everything bulged or gave way in the right place.

"My daughter, Rebecca." The tailor introduced with a worried frown.

"Hello," she said. Her big blue eyes bored a hole right through my chest.

"Please excuse, her English is very limited, newly arrived from Salonika."

As far as I was concerned she spoke the universal language. My heart was deafening me, and I felt a familiar stirring below the beltline.

She dropped her head shyly at my hypnotized gaze and clutched her father's arm. "Gangsta, papa?"

"Nein," he answered, "Shimol."



The cab took me crosstown to my lawyer's office building. It wasn't the best address, but these days all you need is a telephone and a listing in the yellow pages to run your operation. It was six storey brick that had seen better days, but that might have been before I was born. It had an elevator. Unfortunately, it was usually out of service.

Nothing had changed, my footsteps echoing across the polished marble floor of the deserted lobby. An old guy in a shapeless hat and a shapeless smock sat on the shoeshine platform reading a racing form. I knew him as the elevator operator, too, from the times the elevator had been working. He looked up at me with a mournful expression, his brown cheeks as wrinkled and creased as some of the shoes he'd shined.

"Shine?"

I shook my head. "Elevator. How long's it been out of service?"

"Oh, couple of days, I'd say." That's what he'd said the last time. "Still waiting on Otis to come fix it." That too.

"Guess I'll have to get the top the old fashioned way." And as an afterthought, "Seen Mr. Silver around lately?"

We both glanced at the lobby tenant board in the metal frame by the elevator door with its list of business. They were mainly garment industry offices or pattern mills, talent agents, dime magazine fronts, and booking agents who only dealt in odds. The fourth and fifth floor had been given over to sweat shops making Fifth Avenue knockoffs. My lawyer, Ralphie Silver, had the whole sixth floor to himself even though he only occupied a tiny office on the far end of the hall with a window overlooking an air shaft and the back of a building almost identical to this one.

"Not in a couple of days." It was always a couple days with this guy.

I didn't think much of it. Going up six flights you take your time, run into people you'd ordinarily miss if you were on the elevator. A couple of dolls who looked like they jumped off the cover of a crime magazine stepped by, the vest and shirt sleeved office weasels scurrying up and down the stairwell, always in a rush, a swell or two without a care in the world, and clots of headscarf wearing women babbling in something that just did not make sense.

By contrast the fifth floor was eerily quiet. In the past it had always been a hive of activity. I looked around before pulling open the door to the next flight up. The air hung pale, gray, and heavy with the smell of cotton dust. I doubted that the workers were on holiday. And a light was on, a single bare bulb, behind the frosted glass partition at the far end of the hall. Bookkeeper working late on the second set, most likely.

I was not exactly winded but I was breathing a little harder than usual when I came through the door onto the sixth floor. My mistake. The air was close, packed with the stench of an open cesspool the size of Lake Erie. I tried not to gulp but that only made it worse. There was a window on the landing. It was wide and led out to a fire escape. It looked like it hadn't been opened in a long time, sill and casement seamlessly painted in one continuous coat of the same chipped and cracked brown. I gave the brass handles a tug and it rose surprisingly easy. The stink roared past me as I held my hand over my nose and mouth. If Ralphie wasn't noticing the gut churning reek, he must have had a really bad head cold. He had to have noticed the buzzing. It sounded angry, coming from behind the door to his office which I at that moment pushed open and came face to face with a thousand thousand flies and their thousand thousand eyes. They swarmed me and then gave way as I barged through the whirring cloud and stopped at the front of Ralph Silver's desk.

Ralphie was in the office alright, but he was going to miss that late commute train up state. There were a couple of big bloody holes in his face encrusted with scintillating blue green bodies. And he smelled like he'd gone bad, really bad.



My mouth filled with adrenaline laced saliva, my eyes grew to the size of truck tires and my hearing sharpened enough to pick out a gnat's fart. Flies were throwing themselves at me. Maybe they knew something I didn't. The thumping in my ears was definitely not a gnat. It could have been my racing heart. Or footsteps padding down the hall in my direction.

I ducked behind Ralphie's desk and wedged myself into the footwell. My hand planted in a puddle of sticky blood, my face up against the stalactites dripping from the seat of his swivel chair. I would have spewed but there was nothing in my roiling gut but the golden dew I had imbibed earlier. I tried to make myself smaller by holding my breath not that the overwhelming stench wasn't already an incentive.

I wasn't the only one affected. I figured there were two of them by the thudding clunk of their large shoes on the floorboards and the exchange of their words.

"Oh, that stinks!"

"I don't see him."

"He mustacominyere. Look behind the desk."

"Jeez, that's just disgusting."

"Whadaya allofasudden squeamish?"

"Fresh I don't mind. It's when they start going bad."

A shadow passed over the light from the one window in the office. "Naw, nothing here but the stiff. Let's gedouttayere."

"But the shine said he come up here. Unless. . ."

"The window at the end of the hall! It was wide open!"

"Ya think he went to the roof?"

"If he did, we got him trapped. Let's go!"

I waited till their footsteps receded and eased myself out from under the desk. The flies were happy to see me again. My palm was covered with blood and I smeared a print across the back of Ralphie's shirt and got most of it off. I looked at the wet blob on one knee and realized I must have knelt in some of it too. I sidled up to the open door and peeked around the corner. The coast was clear. I made a dash for the stairwell. I could hear the goons clomping around on the roof above me.

No time to waste I took the stairs two and three at a time practically leaping from landing to landing. When I finally rattled out into the lobby, my eyes were crazed like a rat with a cat on its tail. I glanced at the shoeshine stand and the surprised expression

of the dark man next to it. I was on him in a bound. He reached into a drawer under the step-up and I knew it wasn't for polish. I grabbed his wrist and head butted him adding another prune to my forehead. One more and I'd have a jackpot. The gat fell from his hand and clattered across the marble floor. It looked like something that might have survived the battle at Ypres. Now it was mine.

I bolted through the front door and kept my back to the bricks until I came to the corner. Two blocks over and one block down to a subway entrance. I waited for a gaggle of women from the garment factory to move across the intersection and joined them. I heard what sounded like a shout from the rooftop. I didn't turn or react until I got to the next corner and then sprinted like a mad man for the stairs leading down to the subway, my hat still firmly on my head. If the thugs were stuck up on the roof I had a good head start, but I didn't want to take the chance that they were the only ones on the lookout for me.



Larry Jakes lived up in the triple digits, a part of town where I stood out like a Chiclets in a box of chocolates. But it was a part of town where no one asked questions and no one gave answers, willingly at least. I could lie low.

I'd given the hoods the slip by grabbing a train heading uptown. At the next stop a downtown train was pulling in and I got off and doubled back. When the train came to a stop in the station where I had originally boarded, I scanned the platform for any sign of the mugs, and there they were as painfully obvious as a couple of sore thumbs casting mean looks around and scaring old ladies and kids. Why they thought that I might have been on a train that just pulled in was beyond me. I waited till they boarded the car behind mine and just as the doors were about to slide closed, squeezed through and back onto the platform. I took the next uptown train to Larry's neighborhood.

Larry was an artist making his living as a sign painter. He also knocked out some pretty lurid covers for the magazine trade under a variety of assumed names. Dime Detective, all the Spicy magazines, Black Mask, you name 'em, they all bought his cover art. He specialized in buxom half-dressed blondes and square jawed ham fisted brutes with blazing irons.

He took one look at me standing in the doorway and ushered me into his studio. "Sit, sit over here under this light." He pointed to the bruise under my eye. "That's exactly the color purple I've been looking for!" Excitedly he grabbed a palette and brush and began mixing up colors on the spot. "Not as dark as plum and not quite maroon. Ok, needs a little yellow. Man that is ripe!" He grinned at me. "Wait, this is too good, I'm going have to sketch you right now. Oh, and those welts on your forehead. That one looks like it's casting a shadow. Don't move now. I need to get that color just right."

Larry was West Indian, a tall cinnamon colored man with distinguished grey temples and a wide big lipped smile. His lively brown eyes flicked across my face translating what he saw onto the pad in his hands. He spoke like a limey which was a reminder that he was an educated guy. Why he moved to this country to be treated like mud I could never figure. But he'd proven himself a good friend in the past and I needed his help to stay out of sight.

"Good to see you, too, Larry."



Larry's studio was on the second floor of a six story walk up next door to a down home eatery known as The Bull Weevil. He let me flop on a cot in a room facing the street. At night I could look down from the window and see the flickering green neon outlining the image of a boll weevil with the rack of a Texas Longhorn. Larry had designed the sign for Mavis "Ma" Stubblefield, the proprietor and cook. On weekend nights the swinging sounds of Kansas City jazz drifted out to the lively street from the back of the place. I was tempted to join the revelers but I knew I had to stay invisible until I figured my next move. On the other hand, it was hard to resist Ma Stubblefield's inch thick fifty cent steak not to mention the mountain of mashed potatoes and greens that came with it.

I'd cleaned myself up a bit in the last couple of days. I was still trying to get used to my map without the 'stache. Even Larry had objected, and when he finished up the sketch of my mug, he penciled it in. I scanned the daily blat for any hint that my lawyer's corpse had been discovered, but if it had, it wasn't deemed newsworthy.

I looked up to see Ma standing by my booth with a tin pot of coffee. "More coffee, sugah?" and when I nodded to the affirmative, she said, "Your steak'll be along in a minute." I thanked her and waited for her to top off my cup with scalding java.

The Bull Weevil was also a hangout for students from the University across the parkway. For that reason I wasn't the only face in the joint though the way I was dressed in my natty new tweeds I might have been mistaken for a professor. I looked the part, a professor in the school of hard knocks.

They were a noisy lot, slinging their slang like it was their own private language. It was difficult not to eavesdrop though I wasn't always sure of what they were saying.

"I just got back from a clam bake on the island and it was a real ring-a-ding-ding. . . shine your lamps on this brownie she gave me. . . Murder, she's a pip! I wouldn't mind making whoopee with her. . . does she have a sister? I have to get this kitten on the blower. . . She's only like that when she's guzzling the giggle juice. . . save your breath, she's a gold digger. . . a walking clip joint, she only wants to see the color of your kale. . . yeah, well I'm so beat I can't even afford dog soup besides I've been burning the midnight oil I'm so far behind on the grind and any more minuses on my

grades and the old man'll drop me like a bad habit. . .she cost me a sawbuck and I only got to nuzzled her neck. . .and I thought she was a classy twist. . .that's got to be some expensive whiff, pally."



I dropped a couple of buffalos on the table next to my empty plate after I paid the bill.

“Prez in town,” Ma said from behind the counter. “He might drop by after hours for a session, him and some kids from Kansas City.”

She knew I was fond of the man in the pork pie hat. But the kids. I’d heard them before. They were a little wild for my tastes. “I’ll be there,” I lied setting my hat on my head and pushing out the door to the street. I lit up and dropped the match to the gutter. I’d been going over my options and a gut full of food got me thinking straight. I had a plan.

The street lights blinked on and cast different shadows on the backs of shopkeepers locking up. I stood under one such beacon and read the address on the scrap the tailor had given me. It was further uptown in a posh district I didn’t often have the occasion to visit. To avoid the gendarmes in that neck of the woods a cab would be necessary. And it wouldn’t be cheap. The postal notice I had squirreled away at the cocktail lounge would stay put until a time when the post office was open. The other option was Yamatski’s place. The way the tailor had reacted when he read the hocus-pocus in the address book gave me the idea that there was more to the scribble gobble than he let on. I had considered availing myself of an inventory of Yamatski’s possessions from the start. Maybe locate that volume of hundred dollar bills or something close in value. My rates as a private investigator are reasonable but double cross me and suddenly they’re sky high. And I had yet to feel fully compensated. Yamatski’s digs also had the advantage of being close to the subway line.

I stepped down into the tiled lighted pit and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. It wasn’t the beat cop leaning on the lip of the token kiosk yakking with the guy in the cage so much as the fellow in the fedora nearby, shoulders hunched to his ears, giving the fag end in his mouth the benefit of his breath that made me do an about-face. In my business someone like that might as well have been wearing a sandwich board with “I’m a mug” painted in bright red letters. Maybe I was being overly cautious. Could it be that Mister K’s apes had all the subway stations under surveillance? They’d been waiting for me to turn up at Ralphie’s office so they probably figured I wasn’t feeding the fishies at the bottom of the East River. Maybe Yamatski’s body had washed up some place

and they were figuring to even the score. I considered a list of other maybes including maybe I should go back to lying low or even skipping this burg and lighting out for someplace that wasn't so hot.

All that consideration had brought me to Broadway where I hailed a cab. It was dark by then and I kept my hat pulled down around my ears and the collar of my coat up around my chin. If the subways were being watched, the word was probably out to all the cab drivers. All I needed now was a red scarf to pull over my nose and I'd be nothing but a shadow.



The massive brick apartment building anchored the block at the corner of the intersection where the cabbie let me off. Further down the avenue, the entrance to the address I'd been given was shaded by a couple of elms not that there was need for shade at that time of evening. The whole block was treelined and kept smart befitting the swells out strolling with their pet terriers. A couple of places had awnings and guys in uniform paid to hold the door open for you. And the heaps parked at the curb looked like they spent most of their time in a garage waiting to be polished by the chauffer. I tripped up the marble steps and into the foyer through a fancy grilled double door with a big brass door handle. The place smelled of wood polish and floor wax. A little bald headed guy in a tie, vest and pinstriped pants stepped out of a door just inside the lobby with a newspaper in his hand, cheaters resting on the tip of his nose. He looked at me with a cant of his head and a fist on each hip. Obviously I wasn't a tenant and the paradiddle on my map made him frown. I showed him the scrap the tailor had given me and told him I was there to see the rabbi about Cyril. That made his frown deeper and his mouth purse like he'd just tasted something sour. He stepped back into his cubby hole and I heard the stutter of the dial as he made the call. The talk sounded like yid. Live in this city long enough and you can recognize yid from kraut or any other non-native yammer. When he came back out he uptilted his chin and spoke. "Third floor, apartment three" but the way he said it, it sounded like "turd florr, appartement tree."

A polished mahogany banister curved up to the mezzanine and then accessed the broad stairway up. It was a well-kept joint, no doubt about that. The carpets on the stairs and the well-lighted hallways were stain free, thick and cushioned. Apartment Three had a shiny little brass numeral on the door just above the peep hole. I rapped my knuckles on the oak and adjusted the knot on my tie.

She was a narrow dame in a black dress with a white doily around the neck line, not exactly Elsa Lancaster in the *Bride of Frankenstein*, but a cause for the shivers all the same. She had the kind of severe pale face and cavernous eyes that made you want to say sorry wrong number and hang up even though you weren't on the telephone. Her hand reached for my card like the claw of a predatory bird. She stood aside and let me pass into the apartment, closing the door behind. Once inside, the dim lighting and the

somber shades of brown and shadow, the lingering smells of an unfamiliar menu, I knew I was in a different world, and the little hairs at the back of my head were looking for a place to scam.



Maybe I'd come at a wrong time. I walked past the dining room and noticed it was set up for a meal. I followed Olive Oyl into the smoking parlor where there was a congregation of somber men in suits standing or sitting around an old guy with a pile of white whiskers and a black beanie on the back of his head. They all turned to give me the once over. No one said anything. And for once the cat had got my tongue. From a cluster of bent elbows on the other side of the parlor I recognized the tailor who came toward me smiling and nodding his head.

"Ah, you've come. I thought you might have forgotten." And again admiring his handy work, "That suit is a perfect fit for you, yes, yes." He worked his mouth as if he were chewing his words working up to say something else complimentary. An older guy with white streaked temples, a Herr Doktor goatee and a stub of a cigar in his hand cleared his throat. At least that's what it sounded like. Maybe he said something because the tailor suddenly stiffened and allowed a worried look to cross his face.

He spoke to the cigar man deferentially. They were words I didn't understand though I did get the drift that they were about me. It wasn't difficult to see that they were about me as every pair of eyes was glommed onto me like bubble gum under a theater seat.

Now the cigar guy gave me the real once over. He spoke to me through a veil of phlegm. "You have something for Rabbi Joseph to see?"

"Yeah, some kinda gobble de gook I ain't been able to figure out." I gave them the benefit of my dumb Yank pose. "Your rag cutter here said maybe the old guy might be able to read it." I reached into the inside pocket of my suit coat. It was contagious because every shmoe in the parlor did the same thing though I figured they weren't reaching for a slip of paper. I handed the page over to mister cigar who stared down at it, turned it over, and then looked back up at me and then over my shoulder at the tailor with a glare.

"This is all, one page? You're bothering the rabbi with one page?"

The old guy who was obviously Rabbi Joseph had a smile like an idiot, rheumy eyes in inflamed sockets, and a set of square spectacles on a healthy honker and seemed to be oblivious to our conversation.

I shrugged. “Yeah, one page, what’s the problem? You don’t think he can read it?” I wasn’t a complete fool. No need to tip my whole hand. Judging from the tailor’s initial reaction the doodles might be worth something and I needed to get a fix on their value.

Now it was the tailor’s turn to get agitated. “You had a whole book, an address book, yes?” He eyed me suspiciously and everyone else in the room, except the rabbi, did the same.

“Oh, yeah, but I didn’t bring it with me,” I lied. “I mean, what if the old gent can’t read it. You ain’t my only option, you know. I got a friend works at the Metropolitan knows a guy who can read off the wall writing like that.”

While we talked the old rabbi had taken the page and looked it over. He turned as white as his beard and moaned before his chin dropped to his chest.



Everyone was looking at me like I'd just ordered a ham and cheese in a kosher deli. A phalanx of roly-poly women in headscarves and aprons rushed into the den, their hands to their heads, wailing. Among them was the tailor's daughter. She wasn't roly or poly. I caught her eye and she looked away quickly. One of the older women gently slapped the rabbi's cheeks and spoke his name insistently. The rabbi came to as if he were struggling out of the clutches of something grabbing at him. His eyes snapped open with a fixed resolve and a sigh of relief, breeze-like, passed through the room.

Now that the little drama had simmered down the gent with the pointy chin beard bent stiffly to the rabbi's ear. The women had filtered out through the crowd of suits like cigarette smoke. The rabbi nodded a couple of times and pointed to the torn page in his hand.

I'd ripped that page out randomly as I'd approached the apartment door and stuck the address book down the back of my pants. Now that I looked around the room I realized I was going to have to have an ace in the hole, or close to it, and I was glad that I did. You could cut the hostility and fear with a razor and only nick it, that's how thick it was. I gave them the what-for back and that seemed to work for most of them. A couple still glowered and sidled over to box me in while adjusting their muscles.

Pointy beard called the tailor over and said something that caused the tailor to nod a few times in quick succession and then say something long and involved while referencing the address book page. Then they turned their attention to me, even the rabbi, one eye a large milky marble, and stared me down. At that the stuffed suit gave me a big phony smile and held out his hand apologetically. "Mr. Ask, of course, please excuse this unfortunate incident." As I shook his hand he added, "The rabbi is an old man. It is not unusual." He put his arm around my shoulder in a companionable way at the same time. "Why don't we adjourn to the study and discuss this piece of paper? The rabbi will be joining us shortly."



The study turned out to be a room with shelves to the ceiling and on just about every wall that didn't have a window or a door and stacked both vertically and horizontally with an assortment of books squeezed into every available space, and, along with those books, years of accumulated dust. I sneezed. Pointy beard threw a frown that growled in my direction and then placed a finger alongside his nose before turning his back to me to make what sounded like spitting. A large map was draped across some of the shelves. I looked at it and didn't recognize the location but then I was never big on geography. I figured it wasn't upstate or down in the tide-waters mainly because the names were written in the same cocka-mamie alphabet as Yamatski's address book. Little flags were stuck on various locations. It was probably 'over there,' as the doughboys used to say.

"Mr. Ask, I must beg your pardon. In all the confusion I neglected to introduce myself." He made a little bow, bringing his heels together. "Doctor Soloman, Abraham Soloman." He made his way behind the large cluttered desk and opened a fancy box and pulled out a fresh Havana. He didn't offer me one, but then I was partial to smaller amounts of tobacco wrapped in white paper. When he finished preparing the torpedo, he lit it with a flame that belonged on the Statue of Liberty. It was his move so I waited, taking in more of the library and figuring that this was a place where some kind of planning was done by the table off to one side cluttered with an assortment of more maps.

Soloman cleared his throat and started in with how bad things were across the Atlantic what with Herr Moustache and Mister Loony stirring up trouble. It wasn't anything I didn't know about from the newsreels at the movie theater. Of course newsreels were the perfect time to get popcorn before the main feature. He went on and on and I was starting to get a hankering for salt and butter. Maybe even a nickel soda and a pocket half pint. He must have seen that he was losing me because he aimed a question at me.

"Have you ever heard of the Black Hand, Mr. Ask?"

I shook my head. "I've heard of Black Mask, the detective magazine."

He made a face like he'd just tasted something awful and it made his pointy beard shift off to his left. "Mano Negra? That is

not familiar to you? Or” and he said a name that rhymed with ‘shirt,’ “as it is known to them.”

“You got me looking on all counts, doc. Nary a one rings a bell.”

Soloman smiled and indicated the map on the bookshelves with his cigar. He puffed himself up with the authority of what he was about to tell me and strode from behind the desk like a professor from behind a lectern. He tapped a place on the map with a fat finger. “Here, in these hills, live bandits, kidnappers, criminals, smugglers, extortionist. They have led this way of life for centuries, millennia even.”

I groaned inwardly. I was reminded of Miss Peabody’s history class and how she would whack me with her pointer whenever I dozed off. I could feel my eyelids getting heavy already.

“Here in this harbor city,” he said pointing to a small dot marked by a flag “is a peaceful community of merchants who have lived here in prosperity and peace just as long as the bandits have lived in the hills. In the past there have been the isolated kidnappings or robbery of unwary merchants. A wise man knew how to stay out of their clutches. Only the foolish and greedy would take the chances that would attract the attention of these bandit clans.”

I’d put my hand up to my mouth to stifle a yawn. If this kept up I was going to need a stiff shot of something to keep my mind from wandering.

“Recently,” Soloman droned on, “the bandits have become more brazen and are now robbing people in their sleep or even worse kidnapping children and demanding ransom with the threat that if the ransom is not paid they will sell them into slavery, or worse, to the Nazis.”

I was wondering when the main feature was going to begin when he held up the page from the address book. “This belongs to someone connected with the Black Hand and the bandits in these hills. They are smuggling the gold and jewels they have stolen into this country. I believe that the address book in your possession could be the key to uncovering this smuggling operation and recovering the property of those who have been robbed. It is written in Cyrillic and in code but I think we can determine the names and locations of their operations. Once we have that information, we can turn it over to the authorities.”

I was catching the drift. What I had was valuable. And Soloman and crew wanted it. I was not too overly convinced about the last part, about turning the information over to the cops. That seemed counterproductive. But then I was distracted. The tailor’s daughter and Rabbi Joe leaning on her arm had just entered the study.



Her eyes never left me as she steered the old gent to a chair alongside Soloman's desk. They were blue shiny pools and I was drowning in them. She stood behind him once he was seated. Gramps had perked up since the fainting episode, his cheeks had a little color and he was focused, attentive. He pointed a gnarled finger in my direction. "You have more of these documents?"

I drew myself up to my entire height, pulled in my gut, and put as much authority as I could in my stance. It was all an act. I was wondering what the hell I'd gotten myself into. "Yeah, I do. It's an address book."

Soloman threw old Joe a look and then said, "You can read the Cyrillic?"

"Ixnay, Doc, I'm just guessing from the way some of it was arranged. Plus there were street names in American I could figure out."

Now it was Rabbi Joe's turn. "You are in possession of this dress book?" There was a fierce gleam in his eye as he leaned forward.

"Yeah, yeah, I just brought that page to see what it might be worth. I coulda brought the whole works but you guys mighta said it was nertz and I woulda never known the diff." As it was the book was digging into my backbone just about the beltline.

Soloman and Joe looked puzzled. Finally the old rabbi asked, "What is this 'nertz'?"

Soloman shrugged. "It is not Yiddish to my knowledge. And this 'diff' I do not know also."

The tailor's daughter smiled and I about swooned. She spoke and I felt my knees turn to Jell-O. "I think I know, zayde. I have been studying my American. Nertz is a Brooklyn pronunciation of the expression 'nuts,' maybe meaning crazy or perhaps nonsense, also a negative term for bankrupt or no good."

Even I didn't know that and I used the word all the time. This frail would be a smash on *Information Please*.

Soloman looked surprised and the old guy beamed a prideful smile at his granddaughter.

"Also," she continued, "I believe that 'diff' is a shortened form of the word 'difference.' Americans speak like telegrams I have learned."

Just like that I was laid bare by some Jane who just got off the boat.

Soloman harrumphed to get the conversation back on track. "I would say that if the rest of the book is similar to what you have shown us, we could come to a lucrative arrangement." He smiled what wasn't really a smile.

I figured when he said 'we' he meant more than just those present in the room. I had to be extra cautious around these jokers. There was a whole dining room full of tough kikes on the other side of the door. And once the dolly had opened her yap instead of flapping her lashes some of her glow had dimmed for me. She was out of my league, besides. "Yeah, doc, what you got to offer? I'm all ears."

Rabbi Joe gave a knowing nod and Soloman went to the wall of books, moved a couple aside to reveal a tiny wall safe. He looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was peeking and then spun the dial. When he rejoined us he had a tiny cloth bag in his mitt like a miniature Bull Durham pouch. He loosened the ties and poured the contents into the palm of his hand and held it out for me to take a gander.

I looked at him and back at the hand and then at the rabbi and his granddaughter who all seemed very pleased by what was being offered.

"You're offering me pebbles? Little gray rocks?"

It took a while to register and then Soloman almost choked on his goatee laughing. Rabbi Joe's laugh was wheezy squeak. The girl held her hand over her mouth but her eyes were yukking it up. When Soloman finally caught his breath he intoned, with all his puffed up superiority, "But Mr. Ask, these are uncut diamonds."

You coulda fooled me. What do I know of uncut diamonds? They looked like rocks to me. And then as if a light had been shined in my eyes: rocks, diamonds, ok, I got it. But who could tell the diff. Maybe I sounded suspicious. "How am I supposed to know that these aren't fake?"

"I can assure you, Mr. Ask, these are diamonds of the highest quality. From Africa," he added.

Learn something new every day. Diamonds that look like driveway gravel from Africa when all I thought they had was bananas and coconuts.

"Maybe you are who you say you are, Doc, but I only met you and Rabbi Joe here less than thirty minutes ago. I need to get the say-so from someone I've known a bit longer."

Soloman looked astonished. "You have an appraiser?"

"Yeah, guy I know runs the pawn shop over on Fourth near Chinatown. He was in the diamond trade years ago. He knows his stuff."

Now Soloman was almost on his tippy toes with indignation. "Stuff? If he knows this stuff then I knows of his stuff. I am

familiar with everyone in the diamond trade. Name your stuff expert!”

I’d obviously hit a nerve. And again I was distracted by the comely granddaughter and feeling like the big bad wolf. “Yeah, sure, everyone knows him. Triple A Pawn, Max Feathers proprietor.”

Two bigger bug eyes you couldn’t find in the cartoon featurette at a Saturday matinee.

“Feathers?” he moaned the name as if was a curse. “Max Feathers was disbarred from the League of International Gem and Diamond Merchants. Feathers is a fraud! A cheat! A scoundrel! A confidence man!”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but he knows his diamonds.” From the shade of crimson creeping up toward his popping temple veins I figured my bird in the hand had flown the coop. But I was saved by an angel.



“Herr Doktor” she said, and why he wasn’t charmed is beyond me. He raised an eyebrow as if being spoken to by a woman was highly irregular. “Zayde,” she also invoked the protection of the old rabbi, “I have a suggestion if you will indulge me.” Of course I was enchanted and I’d have to say she’d been doing pretty good at learning her English. Old Joe gave a nod lifting his hands to Soloman as if asking what’s the harm?

“Just as Mister Ask has brought only one page, perhaps we can allow him one,” and she smiled at me, “pebble to verify with Mister Feathers. In exchange for the book he will receive more.” She beamed, proud of herself although gramps wasn’t so sure.

Soloman didn’t like the idea as soon as she started talking and when she was done he liked it even less. “Nein, nein. What if he did not return? He has gained an item of value and we have nothing but a scrap of paper! Does he take us for fools?”

The thought had crossed my mind. If the diamond *was* real I could be on a boat to Havana before anyone was the wiser.

“It was my suggestion, uncle, and I have a feeling that Mr. Ask is in a situation unlike any other he’s been in before.” She came at me with her eyes as if she were boring in and I began wondering when I’d last changed my underwear. “Here he is with the opportunity to make a considerable amount of money, enough to give him a vacation from his dangerous profession for a very long time. I don’t think that he would pass up that opportunity.” Now she was appealing to my mercenary side: with a load of dough I could maybe ditch this burg or better yet upgrade my operation.

“Furthermore, I think that Mr. Ask is a man of honor, a man of his word who would not consider betraying us.” By “us” I was sure she meant “her.” And the way she said it, the implications were tempting. I just wanted to see how committed she was to her scheme.

“Thanks, miss, I forget your name, but you are correct. I am a man of my word. Once I shake on a deal it is solid. And if what I have is that important to you,” and I meant to her, “then it is just makes good business sense for us to conduct this exchange, the book for the rocks.”

Soloman sniffed like something didn’t smell right. He squinted one eye at me as if trying to view me from a different angle.

“Like the girl said, I take one diamond to Feathers. He looks it over. If he gives the ok, I get the gravel and you get the book. No one breaks a sweat.”

Soloman was shaking his head. He didn’t like the logistics. “How will we make the exchange? The Rabbi nor I cannot go abroad.”

“What? I ain’t asking you to leave the country.”

“No, no, we have to be careful in this city. We have enemies. We cannot be seen in public.”

“How about a coupla your minions. They look like they can handle themselves.”

Soloman gave a sour look. He didn’t like that idea either.

“How about the dame?”



There was an expression I liked to see after I've made love to a woman—shock and pleasure. I recognized it immediately because it was so rare of an experience. That's what was missing in my life. I could tell by the demur smile that she liked the idea. Shock for being put into that position and pleasure because it felt good.

Soloman sputtered like he'd inhaled something down the wrong way and coughed till his eyes bulged holding on to the edge of his desk for fear he might fall down. Then it translated into, once he caught his breath, "absolutely not, impossible, I won't hear of it." And in a couple of other languages, I couldn't be sure. In a way it made the objection international, like we were hemmed in by little flags stuck in a map. The old rabbi looked uncomfortable, color coming to his ears, and lowered his eyes.

But she knew her mark. "Zadye," she began, "if you send Mr. Ask with your men to the Feather Diamond place he will become suspicious and might not want to verify the authenticity of . . ." and looked directly at me, "the pebble."

The rabbi had lifted his eyes. They asked what are you getting at?

"Now if I were to accompany Mr. Ask to the pawnbroker, he would not be suspicious because we could pose as betrothed," she smiled, pleased with herself, "and we are inquiring as to the authenticity of the stone."

It sounded so simple. And naive. I know, I'd been there.

Soloman wasn't buying it. "Nien! Nein!" He was pacing now. "It is not safe! Who knows who we're dealing with. This might all be a ploy. He could be working for them. To kidnap Rebecca!"

"Herr Doktor, they could not have known that I would be involved. I didn't know it more than a minute ago when I suggested it."

"Rebecca, my child, these are cruel and evil people we are dealing with. They are clever, insidious." His head wagged back and forth like a dog's tail. That meant *no*.

"Listen, Hair Doctor, do we have a deal or don't we? Otherwise I'm wasting my time here."

"What you suggest is impossible. How do I know you have what you're claiming to have in your possession? That it is authentic. What else is there beside this single page? What am I buying?"

“First of all, Doc, suddenly you’re worried about authenticity. You musta thought that this page was the hoot’s snoot otherwise you wouldn’ta asked me into the inner sanctum. You were gonna offer me a bag of gravel in exchange for the book. That’s how authentic you made that single page. I get it. You think you need to be extra careful because you don’t know me from Adam. But lemme put you straight. This book usta belong to one of Yan Kovic’s goons, a guy by the name of Yamatski who is now swimming with the fishes in the East River. How I got it is a story we won’t get into. Just let’s say I got wet and the pages only suffered a little water damage around the edges, but everything is still readable because it was mostly written in pencil. It’s an address book and doubles as a wallet, about the size a cigar case, leather like one, and it’s got a wraparound zipper that closes up the three sides.” I don’t know why I felt I had to claim the wallet was empty, but I did. “There are pages of what look like names and addresses like I said, and what looks like some kinda codes. I couldn’t figure out what they said because my Buck Rogers decoder ring got lost in the mail. Besides they mostly was all in that serialic writing.”

Now the Doc and old Joe were trying to say something to each other without opening their mouths.

I gave them a nudge. “I saw you flash the old stink eye when I mention’s Mister K’s name. He’s from that part of the world you were showing me on the map, am I right?” I pointed to the map on the wall. Miss Peabody would have been proud of me—maybe something did sink in after all.

“Yes, the name is known to us. America is truly the land of opportunity when a petty thief in his home country can become an American gangster and make more money than even the President of the United States. Is that what you call democracy, rule by the petty?”

“He’d be part of this secret society then, the Black Hand, I’m guessing.” Even the frill took a breath in fright at the mention of the name.

Soloman nodded glumly. “They are a network of thugs and murderers who prey on the vulnerable, the fringes of society and culture where the powers that be often look the other way. We are the mercy of their genocidal schemes. There is a chance, a slight chance, that the address book will provide information that will aid us in our resistance and thwart their aims. These fascists are drunk with power! The Black Hand must be stopped from terrorizing our people!”

“You don’t have much of a choice then, do ya, Doc. Me and the bird take a rock over to Feathers’ shop. He scopes it and it’s either deal and you get the book you wanted or no deal and I

get a free ride downtown in the company of a beautiful young woman.”

Soloman made a face that made him look like he had exclamations points all over his mug!!! “They are real, that you can count on, and I would expect delivery of the address book upon verification!” He glanced sideways at the rabbi whose head reluctantly nodded yes. “Simon and David will drive you there and make certain there is not a . . .double cross, as you American’s like to say.”

I shook my head. “The girl is right. Max sees a couple of mugs with us, he’s gonna smell something fishy. Just me and her. Nothing to worry about. Max won’t bite. You just watch.”

“Nonetheless, they will accompany you and stay discreetly hidden but nearby. Should the need arise, Rebecca, do you know what to do?”

“Surely my father must have told you of what I and my troop of Red Kerchiefs did in the hills above the city.” Before Soloman could interject, she said, “We guided the refugees through the hills above the city and hid them from the authorities.”

“Ja, ja, we are well aware of your exploits. And that is why you are here in the United States. To keep you safe, out of harm’s way. You are, after all, Rabbi Joseph’s great, great granddaughter and ark of his ancient family line. Your father was foolish to leave you behind.”

“I stayed with my mother, to help in the resistance.”

“And sadly she is no longer with us.” Soloman lowered his head. “And you are here in relative safety.”

“I would have stayed behind! I wanted to avenge her death! Instead you had me kidnapped and brought to this country!”

I had to step in. “I hate to break up this family tussle here, but missy, if you want to get your revenge, the quickest way is to get going with the plan.” I coulda asked her if she had a backup plan but this was looking like taking candy from a baby. “Only I need to use the can before we head out.” With the quizzical looks they gave me I had to add, “My bladder’s lapping at the overflow valve.” Still nothing. “The facilities, the toilet?”



They rolled a big Packard around to the front entrance. Rebecca didn't look a bit like the kid in Soloman's study. She was wearing a dark wool skirt and a beige blouse with a collar tied in big bow under her porcelain chin, a russet three quarter length wide lapeled tweed coat, and a tiny brown Robin Hood peaked cap with a little woven black and red band propped jauntily on the luster of her long auburn hair. Looking like she just stepped off the silver screen, she smiled at me as I held the door open for her, long lashes blinking a beguiling thank you.

Two mooks sat like bowling pins in the front seat of the Packard—they couldn't have been more than sixteen years old—the one who looked like he was working on a 'stache driving. The other one had a head of curly hair no hat, even the bucket he was wearing, was going to hide.

I sat in the back seat with Rebecca. I'd made a detour to the water closet before we left, pretended to make my business all the while wedging Yamatski's address book up behind the gravity flush water tank. Then I flushed.

I was still a little flush, being next to this specimen of female flesh had worked up my blood. It was her feisty nature as well as her good looks that kept my interest. She, however, was interested in something else. Learning how to talk American.

"What is this stink eye?"

"Uh well," I was at a loss, "it's just kind of one of those looks you give somebody who says something that spills the beans when they shouldn'ta."

"Beans? In the kitchen? I see, they have spilled a pot of beans and you are giving them this look that you are disappointed, no, angry! Angry eye, yes?"

"Yeah, angry, maybe the evil eye without all the hoodoo voodoo behind it."

"Hoo-doo voo-doo. This is your American tall tales you are telling me. I have heard that they are told and one must be cautious because they have flam. No, flim, that's it!"

She had such a little pink innocence to the scrunch of her nose, such a determined set to her lips, such an intense gaze I didn't know if I wanted to kiss her or laugh in her face. "Flim flam."

“Yes, that is what I said. And this stink to the eye. It smells, it emits an odor, and you are . . . threatening with it? No, you are giving them this, this. . . stentsch with the look of your eye! Yes?”

She had my mind taking corners I didn’t even know were there and it was making me dizzy. I was on the verge of asking her if she wanted to see Niagara Falls because I was about to change my name to Niagara and I was falling for her. But it would have just added to the confusion. I didn’t want to look like a dumbo so I said, “The look says you can see the reek rising up off them and lets them know that you can.”

She cocked her beautiful head to one side as if considering the explanation “And who is this Buck Rogers, an associate of this Feathers man?”

I don’t know why all this wasn’t covered at Ellis Island but all of a sudden I was feeling like a tour guide at the Statue of Liberty. “Naw, Buck Rogers, he’s this guy who flies around in a rocket to other planets in outer space. In the funny papers, the brats, you know, the Katzenjammer Kids? He’s on the radio, too, and in the movies, that Olympic champ, Buster Crabbe plays him.”

Her pretty little forehead gave a frown. “This is your flam flim, yes?”

She was a real doll, and I can’t say that I’d ever met one before, not one like this, not putting on a front, acting tough or sexy, but smart as a pistol, and from what I could see, some terrific gams. She caught my gaze and pulled the hem of her skirt to cover her knees. “I am curious also. A hoot’s snoot, this is more of your filmy flam?”

“Naw, just something I made up. ‘don’t give a hoot’ means ‘I don’t care,’ and ‘snoot’ means ‘nose’ kinda like I’m ‘thumbing my nose’ and I just threw them together because they sound the same. It’s jive talk, that’s all.”

“A whole other American language?”

“You might say that. It’s what you might hear on the street, you know from the hep cats or if you hang out in jazz clubs.”

This is something you can do in American? I am unaware.”

“Well, yeah, you can if you’re good at it”

“And you are good at this, what would you call, improvisational arabesques, verbal flourishes? Maybe you should be a writer.”

“Yeah, I thought about it once.”

“What happened?”

“I ran out of paper.”

She laughed, peals of amusement filled the entire car and even Mr. Hair had to look over his shoulder to make sure we weren’t being unruly.

“Ah yes, I understand,” her eyes opened widely innocent, “Jive talk, a kind of argot.”

She wasn’t going to get me with that fancy word because I knew exactly what she was talking about so I said, “No, it ain’t like them snails you eat at them fancy French restaurants.”

This time she chortled behind her gloved hand and her eyes gleamed merrily reflecting the neon night of the passing streets. “Mr. Ask, I find you extremely charming which belies your rough exterior and manner. This is a most wonderful and informative conversation.”

The beam of her smile blinded me and tangled up my tongue. I didn’t know what to say, besides my heart was in my mouth and I didn’t want to spit it out and hand it to her because that would definitely be uncouth and what little couth I had I wanted to wait and use at the right time so I said “Yeah, I was thinking the same about you and maybe some time you and me we could, ah, get to know each other a little better, you know, over a cup of coffee or a drink, I could take you to a club, go dancing, hear some jazz.” I put my arm across the seat behind her and moved in her direction. “We probably got a lot in common. I mean, you’re doll and I’m a guy.”

She shifted toward the door on her side and I felt something hard poke against my ribs. I looked down to see her hand in her coat pocket and up to see that determined look I had found adorable earlier now steely and uncompromising. “You are suggesting what it is called a date, but not from a palm, one agreed on ahead of time on a calendar. I don’t think my father would approve or allow it. Our supposed engagement is a ruse, Mr. Ask, nothing more. Please do not try to make more than it is. I am fully capable of taking care of myself.”

I shrugged and sagged back to my side of the bench. I felt the breeze of being blown off followed by the disappointment of being wrong about a dolly again, I always end up leading with my chin wearing my heart on my sleeve, and falling for a herring, the operator behind my eyes putting me through to a wrong number.



“Your English ain’t so bad.”

“Yes, but it is my American I must improve. I am curious again for a word. What is this ixnay?”

“Nix, no. What you just said to me, notta chance. It’s pig latin.”

“Pigs who speak latin, another one of your American tall tales, yes?”

“No, it’s for real, something we used to talk in the neighborhood among us kids. Only thing I still use is ixnay, everybody who’s ever spoken it still does, that and amscray.”

“Amscray, I have not heard.”

“It means scram, beat it. . .go away?”

“I must remember these, scram, beat me. . . ? I am still confused as to why you speak the latin of pigs as a child.”

“Well, it ain’t really latin, it’s a made up language, a kind of a code so you can say stuff that somebody who don’t know the igpay ain’t gonna understand, like if they ain’t part of your gang, see?”

“Now I am very confused. Are you being truthful or are you with me making a toy?”

“No, it’s all true. Now I wasn’t as good at it as little Stevie Silverman, he’s the guy who taught most the guys in our gang. We called him “Stubby” cause he was so short. He could hold whole conversations in pig latin. Once he recited the preamble to the Declaration of Independence in pig latin to history class. Miss Peabody didn’t know if she shoulda been shocked or amused, but it got Stubby beat up on the playground for being a showoff anyway.”

“This is fascinating. How is this pig latin spoken?”

“It’s pretty easy. You take any word, like say pig and you move the first letter of the word to the end and add ay, a-y, so pig becomes igpay. Or like scram, you take all the letters bunched up before the a and move them to after the m, add an ay, and you get amscray. Simple.”

“That is easy for you to say, but let me see if I grasp it. Pig is igpay. If I wanted to say pig latin I would say igpay. . .atinlay?”

“Yeah, I suppose if you wanted to say that. Usually we just said things like amscray or uckday.”

“You would say a duck? For whatever purpose?”

“That is a short question to a very long answer, but the short answer is keep your head down. Unray was always popular when we seen the cops coming.”

“Run, am I correct?”

“Yeah, I think you got the hang of it. Try this one on for size. Ouyay areyay ayay ishday.”

“I am at a loss. It sounds like an infant’s babble.”

“It means ‘you are a dish.’”

“A dish? What is a dish? Do you mean a place setting. .
.oh, porcelain.”

I laughed “No flies on you.”

She brushed her shoulders, suddenly alarmed, “I hope not!”

I laughed again. And we were there.



I instructed the boys to park mid-block in the shadow of the cone from the street light. Max's Triple A Loans was half a block down and locked up tighter than a spinster's legs on a full moon night. I squirmed the dame around the corner and into the alley that ran behind Max's pawn shop. She didn't hesitate as we entered the narrow unlit corridor of discarded crates and overflowing overturned garbage cans, a sliver of gutter water gleaming down the center, the scramble of rats scurrying away. Visible in between the gap of tall buildings the sky was filling with dark billowing clouds and in the distance a flash then a rumble sounding like someone was moving furniture in the apartment upstairs, really heavy furniture.

I'd been there before and even though the sign on the heavy metal door claimed to belong to entirely different business, Ho Gung Import Exports, I banged on the door a couple of times. I knew Max burned the midnight oil counting his filthy lucre and probably even slept there. All I got for my trouble was a reminder of how hard a metal door can be. I tried again, this time adding my voice. "Max! It's me, Lackland Ask, open up!" I thought I heard a movement on the other side of the door and put my ear up to it. "Max! Open up!"

"Go away" a faint tired voice answered.

"Come on Max, it's me, Lack Ask. I found your stupid niece for you when she ran away upstate with that travelling Bible salesman!"

Nothing. Except for the rain drops that were falling with increasing intensity.

"I don't know what was worse for Max, that she ran away or that it was with a Bible salesman," I confided to Rebecca. I slapped the palm of my sore hand on the door a few more times. "Come on, Max! It's important! And it's starting to rain!"

Just then Rebecca stepped up and rapped on the door delicately with her knuckles. "Mr. Federman," she called out, "my name is Rebecca Eisen. I request a special favor of you. I am here with my betrothed, Mr. Ask, and we have an item we wish for you to appraise if you would be so kind."

What she said was more of a mouthful than Open Sesame, but it worked. I could hear the bolt being slid back and the tumblers turning and finally the heavy door creaking on its hinges swinging outward to reveal Max with a Louisville slugger in one

hand and a very perplex look on his mug. He stared at Rebecca and then at me and back again. "Betrothed?" he croaked.



“Come in, come in” Max waved his hand impatiently, smiling at Rebecca and frowning at me. There was the stink of old in the little storage room in the back and it wasn’t just Max. And as I guessed, a cot pushed against the wall under some shelves crammed with pawned items. He led us into the cage that was his office just off the main showroom and pulled the chain on the overhead light. In among the clutter was a rolltop desk and a work bench.

Max sat in the only chair and looked up at us. He was a sight. A halo of wild white frizz surrounded his mottled dome, wrinkles on his forehead stepped down to a pair of cheaters like the bottoms of jam jars astride a carbuncled schnozzle below which sat a smear of liver lips on a bed of untrimmed whiskers. No wonder he was known as The Owl on the street, but an owl that had just smoked an exploding cigar. He smiled and showed that he was running out of teeth and the ones that he still had weren’t in that good a shape. The smile was aimed at the dame. Me, he fixed with a squint.

“So you are getting married? The temperature in Hell must have dropped below zero.” The liver lips shaped a smirk.

“Thank you for agreeing to see us, Mr. Fedderman.” Rebecca beamed her glow at him. “It is the matter of a stone and its authenticity. Mr. Ask. . . I mean, Lackland, doubts that it is real.”

“A stone,” Max breathed noncommittally.

“Yeah, Max, it’s supposed to be an uncut diamond, but how can you tell? I mean, it looks like a pebble you might find in your shoe.”

“Uncut diamond?” Now the old guy was interested because instead of slouching in his chair he sat straight up.

“Lackland says you are an expert in such matters and can appraise its value for us.”

From the look on Max’s face maybe he took the term “expert” to some kind of insult. He stood up and I realized how short he was. Still, puffing out his chest he said, “Young lady, I will have you know that I was the most respected and renowned purveyor of gemstones in the international community of Shanghai. I handled only the finest in jewels, from diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, and jade. . . .” He was about to go on but the tailor’s daughter jumped in.

“Oh, jade, I love jade. My mother had the most beautiful jade necklace. , , .”

Not to be outdone, Max dismissed what she had to say. “I carried only the finest of Burmese jade, the jade of emperors and empresses, to some more valuable than diamonds!”

Now it was my turn. “That’s what I told them, Max. . . .” And at the dame’s scowl corrected myself, “Uh, her, that’s what I told her. You know your gems, diamonds especially.”

“Of course, if I do say so myself.” Acting humble didn’t suit him. “If I may examine the specimen.” He held out his hand and the tailor’s daughter reach into her coat pocket and produced a small white box. Max took it from her and opened the box and muttered a hmmm. He set the box on his work bench and found a pair a tweezers which he used to hold the rock up to the light.

“Like I told you, Max, it looks like something you might find on the beach.”

Max grunted and placed the pebble in the palm of his hand and poked at it with a finger. “The first difference you will notice between a pebble and an authentic uncut diamond is that an uncut diamond has a faint oily feel it.” Then he parked his glasses on top of his dome and pulled a loupe from his vest pocket and fit it to his eye socket. “The next detail is the surface of the stone, its facets, what are their shapes.” He dropped the diamond back into the little white box and handed it to me. “Congratulations! You are in possession of a genuine diamond. Quite a valuable one, I have to tell you.”



Well, that sealed it. I was going to be a rich man. My eyes and my grin were competing over which was going to be bigger. I looked at the dame and her smile was trying to make up its mind if she was pleased or now what. But I didn't care. All I could think about was what I was going to do with all that money once I turned those diamonds into cash. A new roadster like a Torpedo or a Roadmaster, an apartment in a classy neighborhood with a door-man at the entrance, new suits, none of those second hand threads, dames, booze, travel, maybe catch a train to Frisco and look in on Grace who was now working for a slick lawyer on Mason Street and flash my roll and say who's the loser now. Luck was finally turning my way. I could open my own office instead of just passing out business cards in cocktail lounges and night club. I would certainly be looking at a more upscale clientele, I'd actually have customers I could call clientele. I would need a receptionist, someone to answer the phone and show the clients into my private office with Lackland Ask, Private Investigations in gold lettering on the frosted glass pane of the door, maybe a dame like this one, smart, sassy, and eager to learn. Happy days were here again where actually they hadn't been before or if they had, they didn't stay for very long. I was going to be rich!



No doubt I was taking advantage of the situation but I reached around and put my arm around the frill's shoulder and pulled her to me. "Hey baby, how about that? We got a real diamond. It'll make a beautiful wedding ring!"

I got a sharp elbow in the ribs for my trouble. "Yes, of course, darling," she said between gritted teeth and giving me a firm no smile avoiding the closeness of my face like I had three day bender breath. "Maybe we should be on our way and thank Mr. Fedderman for his kindness."

"Leaving?!" Max's whole body, head, arms, legs shook no. "I would not think of it! This happy occasion calls for a drink! I insist!" and he produced a short round bottle from the bottom drawer of a dusty wooden file cabinet, the kind of bottle Sinbad might have rubbed when he was calling out the genie. He had a glass but it was greasy and finger stained. He shook his head and scurried to a set of shelves along the wall crammed with odds and ends, mostly glass and porcelain figurines like you might find in a Chinese variety store. He reached into the clutter and with a grin that was startlingly sinister produced a pair of blue and white tea cups, setting them on the edge of the desk and proceeded to drip some of the liquor into each of them before pouring a generous helping into the smeared glass for himself.

I didn't see why not. A drink always went a long ways to settling my nerves. It was the best tonic I knew. Besides I was in a mood to celebrate. The frail wasn't so sure and stared at the cup Max handed her.

"Mazel tov! To the health and prosperity of your union. May you have many offspring to see to you in your old age!"

She went all red in the face and I almost felt sorry for her. She hesitated and Max leaned forward to say something like it was going to convince her. "Ming dynasty," he said indicating the cup, "Very rare."

She pass the cup under her nose, still uncertain.

"A plum brandy from the old country."

She took a tiny sip to wet her lips. She smiled at the sweetness of the taste and tried a little more. By the time it reached her throat her eyes were watering and she was trying to catch her breath. She began to cough.

"Where are my manners?" Max gently steered her to the only chair in the room. "Here, sit, sit."

She thanked him and asked, "Where is your old country?"
"Transylvania."

I looked at my cup. Maybe the joy juice had affected my hearing. "You mean Dracula country? Don't tell me you're a vampire, Max."

"Pah!" Max spit, "The fever dreams of an Irishman. In the Carpathian Mountains there are many strange legends, but not all of them are about vampires."

Rebecca took another sip now that she was sitting. She nodded. "I have heard many of the folk tales from that region. They are similar to the ones I grew up with."

Max was pleasantly surprised from the way his whiskers parted to form a smile. "And where is that, my dear?" So when she said the name of the place that sounded something like Salami-ka, he exclaimed, "We're practically neighbors!" He poured himself a little more of the liquor and then a dab into each of our cups. "To the crucibles of civilization!" he toasted and took another big gulp and just to be polite I followed suit. Rebecca, too, though maybe not so eagerly.

Then she asked the question that set it all in motion, and gave Max the opportunity to tell his story. "How did you end up in Shanghai?"



“When I was a young man I had to leave my tiny village in the shadow of the larger castle town of Sibiu because of a matter of honor. It was a matter of honor for the father of a young woman who vowed to kill me. I offered to marry her but because of who I was that was impossible. I came from a poor family, my father an itinerant tinker and she was the daughter of prominent man in the village. I was quite handsome in those days and was known about the village as “zilbertung.” My father went to the mayor of the town and begged him to intercede. Being a wise man, the mayor proposed a solution. The man’s honor needed to be appeased but he was not an unreasonable man except for the fact that he wanted to kill me. He would accept satisfaction on two conditions. One, that I was to be banished from the village, and two, that a compensatory payment be made. As I said, my parents were very poor. The first stipulation would break my mother’s heart but at least I would still be alive, but the other was beyond their means. The mayor had an idea that would resolve both of the demands. With my parents’ agreement, my father was ready to kill me himself, the mayor took me to Sibiu and sold me to a travelling merchant as an indentured servant.”

“Oh, how awful!” Rebecca breathed and accepted another drib from Max’s bottle while I leaned my rear on the edge of the desk. Max had the floor.

“It was the best decision I never made in my life!” Max held his glass up in acknowledgement and lapped up more of the juice. “From that moment on, I trusted only fate, *dame fortune*. Decisive action is for schnooks. And most of my life has proved me right. Opportunity is always underfoot, you only have to trip over it.

“As it turns out, the man I was sold to was a trinket merchant, a man who bought, I should say swindled, poor peasants out of their family heirlooms. And he beat me horribly at first, especially when he was drunk. But I learned that he had a weakness for folk tales and so with my silver tongue, I beguiled him with stories from my village, some that I had heard at my grandmother’s knee and others that I made up *ex nihilo*, especially the ones with fantastic beasts and enchanted maidens who would lure young men with their whiles. And so I always made certain that he had plenty to drink at whatever inn we stopped at and I would tell him stories until he fell asleep.

“By the time we arrived in St. Petersburg, he had me reciting my tales to the denizens of roadside taverns and passing the hat. Of course I never saw any of the money because I was essentially his slave, a slave to a Slav. But in St. Petersburg, the past caught up with the merchant who was known as Ursulov, by the way, a bear of a man. He owed many debts and to pay them off he had to sell me even though he had become very fond of me and my stories.

“And I had landed in St. Petersburg at the turn of the century, a simmering cauldron of political dissent and talk of revolution, but now as the servant of a man who was a jewel merchant or a jewel thief, depending on whom you spoke with, a tiny man with a very bad temper who was not quite Russian and not quite Chinese—he claimed to be from the region near Lake Baikal which later proved useful in extricating me and my companions from a very dangerous situation.

“But I digress. At first I merely swept the shop and washed the windows and kept the fires going in the winter, and because I was quite strong, I accompanied him when he thought he might need protection. He carried a pistol and allowed me a knife. A known jewel merchant was not safe on the streets of St. Petersburg and he had made many enemies over his gem transactions. He had a young apprentice as well, a boy of about my age, perhaps younger, named Freddy, from Switzerland, and we became fast friends.”

“Ah, Switzerland,” Rebecca murmured, leaning a little sideways and accepting more of the fruit juice from the bottle. I had a refill as well. After a while, that stuff made you feel kinda warm and cozy, like you didn’t have a care in the world, and added to the fistful of diamonds I had in mind, I didn’t.

“I attended boarding school in Zurich,” she said dreamily, “I learned French, Italian, German, and English while I was there, and I had a friend in each of those languages.” She looked up at me trying to focus her eyes, “And now I am learning American.”

“A woman of words in the ways of the world!” Max raised his glass again and we all downed a slug. “I too learned many new languages during my time working for Otobayar as the merchant was known. Chinese and Russian, German, and French. Because of my silver tongue languages came easy to me, and soon Mr. Otobayar came to trust me as someone who could always bargain a good price for the merchandise, either up or down, depending on the circumstances. I also learned much about the gem business, especially that stones were an international currency, and quite easy to transport across borders sewn in the lining of a sleeve or the cuff of trousers, and were accepted everywhere.”

“Kinda like diamonds,” I said and I sounded stupid saying it.

“Exactly,” Max said passing the bottle around.

“Diamonds,” Rebecca echoed and sounded just as stupid.

“Those were wild and dangerous times in St. Petersburg. There were strikes by workers and peasants alike. Factions of the military were trying to gain power by overthrowing the Tsar’s rule. There was fighting in the street, soldiers killing many of the citizens who were protesting, demanding food, better wages, or even wages. Much of this fomented by the disciples of a dead Anglander by the name of Marx. Less than half a dozen years into the new century, Russia had started a war with Japan. The discontent in the streets of St. Petersburg and Moscow came to a boil and the people revolted against the government. The revolt was quickly put down but it paved the way for the Bolsheviks a dozen years later.”

“The damned Reds,” I growled and emptied my cup

“Soon Mr. Otobayar, whose full name by the way had thirty letters to it and was unpronounceable to anyone not familiar with the Mongol tongue even when they were sober, realized that a man in a business such as his was in more danger than a mere bodyguard could protect him from. It was time to flee. He had Freddy and I pack up as much as we could carry, sewing strings of gems into our clothes, in the linings of our suitcases and the heels of our shoes and we boarded the trans-Siberian railway and headed east. The streets of the capitol were running with blood and the Russian Empire was losing the war to the Japanese.”

“The Japanese,” Rebecca spoke dumbly and I had to agree with her.

“When we arrived in Moscow to board the train,” Max said, steeling himself with a sip for the next part, “there were soldiers everywhere. They were heading to the battle front. We feared we would not be allowed to board. But there were also poor peasants conscripted to hard labor in the east and so we rode in the boxcars with them, with Mr. Otobayar disguised as our servant.”

Max stared at the wall of his office like he was looking out a window and shook his head like he didn’t like what he was seeing. “It was an incredibly long journey across the wilds of Russia complicated by the fact that the train heading east, the one Mr. Otobayar, Freddy and I were traveling on, was regularly sidetracked to let pass the trains heading west that were loaded with the dead and wounded from the war with Japan.

“Even in your most extravagant moment you could not imagine the horrors I witnessed. Peasants starving or killing each other over a crust of bread, soldiers committing suicide or deserting which was almost the same thing as they had no hope of surviving in the wilderness, and especially after a troop train of their wounded comrades passed the other way, there were always the wails of inconsolable desperation. We had to be continually on our guard

and Mr. Otobayer and I had to deal forcefully with the growing insolence of the peasants. We feared for our lives and the gems we carried which of course would mean nothing to them. They wanted our clothes and our shoes.”

Max talked in a way that put pictures in my head and I just stared at him looking at what his words said. The girl was looking up at him with her mouth hanging open.

“Fortunately for us, as the train rounded the southern tip of Lake Baikal, we took on a contingent of soldiers native to that region whose language Mr. Otobayat was quite familiar with and was able to convince them to allow us to continue to our destination in their company and under their protection.

“When we arrived in Harbin we waited for weeks in vermin infested lodgings along with other Russian refugees who had arrived before us and were still waiting for the Eastern Chinese Railway train to take us to Peking. We roomed alongside criminals and deserters, Japanese agents and Chinese soldiers. Our lives were more in danger than they had been on the train for these men, and women, knew the value of the gems they suspected us of carrying.

“Mr. Otobayat had engaged one of the servants at the inn to be our ears and eyes and keep us informed of the intentions of the other guests. The night of the train’s arrival he warned us that several of the toughs and army deserters planned to attack us in the morning of the train’s departure for Peking. Mr. Otobayat on hearing the news came up with a plan. He paid the servant to betray us and tell the bandits that we had got wind of their plan and were fleeing to a neighboring village. As there was only one road in that direction the gang of ruffians set out to follow us, assuming that we could not have gone very far. We waited for them outside the city limits hiding in ditches alongside the road. Once they came into view, we had Freddy run down the road in full view. As they ran past us, we jumped out of the ditches and beat them with our clubs. Mr. Otobayat had to shoot one of them and I cut another one’s throat.” Max held his hand like was holding a knife.

The dame’s eye opened wide and rigid like the slots on a pay phone. He kinda got my attention, too. And as if to fan all the smoke away, he said, “A week later were in the international settlement in Shanghai. Mr. Otobayat acquired quarters where we could continue our business in gems, and sent Freddy on a steamer across the Pacific to America to look for further opportunities. He always thought of the future. Unfortunately, he was murdered over a deal with a Burmese jade dealer.”

Max held the smoked glass of the bottle up to the light and squinted with one eye. There was a corner left, probably enough for one more round whether we needed it or not. “Fortunately I

knew enough of the gem business to continue in the trade, I had my silver tongue, and by then I was considered a *yu shu lin feng*, a handsome young man, and cut quite a dashing figure among the denizens and emigres of the international settlement as well as the citizens of the middle kingdom. I even became the president of League of International Gem and Diamond Merchants, Shanghai chapter.” He frowned. “Until they brought false charges against me and had me barred from membership.” He dismissed them with a wave of a hand and downed the last in his glass. He peered at Rebecca. “And that is how I ended up in Shanghai, my home for a quarter of the century. I won’t bother you with the details of my having to flee before the Japanese invaded, the fascist Blue Shirts I had to deal with, the tongs, the Green gang, and Shanghai gangsters like Crater Face Huang and Elephants Ears Wang!”

Now there were some names for a Dick Tracy funny book and maybe Rebecca thought so too because she started giggling and then broke into a loud guffaw. “Elephant Ears Wang!” she snorted, and then let out a very unladylike gut splitter, tears running down her cheeks.

They say laughter is contagious. I thought it was kinda funny myself and volunteered a couple of chuckles. They bounced around the small office and the next thing I know, we’re all practically rolling on the floor, pointing fingers, crying, and trying to catch our breaths with a bad case of the yuk-ups and ho-ho-hos.



Wheezing and holding a hand up in surrender, Max wiped the tears from his eyes. “Thank you for your gift of humor Miss Eisen soon to be Mrs. Lackland Ask.” That only caused her to laugh some more, but it was missing something. He gestured to the interior of his shop. “Let me offer you something for your trousseau. Pick any item of clothing, silk dresses imported from China, or silk pajamas for the wedding night. With my compliments.” He winked at me and I gave him a big wink back like we were part of some vaudeville routine.

“Oh I just love the feel of silk on my skin,” she said getting to her feet, a little wobbly but managing a cross ankle dance to the clothing racks Max was pointing to further in the shop.

Max gave me the raised eyebrow and called me over for a tête-à-tête which I knew was French for a mouth to ear. “These diamonds, they have relations?” He was trying to be subtle but it almost went over my head.

“Uh, yeah, about a half dozen, I’d say. And if this deal works out, they’ll be all mine.” I couldn’t help grinning but Max’s grim mug made me stow it.

“Deal, what deal?”

“Don’t worry Max, I’ll cut you a commission for moving the rocks for me.” I looked over my shoulder to see if the dame was still occupied with sorting through the rack of dresses and pajamas. “See, I had this address book that belonged to one of Mister K’s goons and unbeknownst to me it was full of information about this mob called the Black Hand.”

At the mention of the Black Hand he gave me the Felix the Cat bug eyes. And nodded impatiently.

“These guys, the girl, this rabbi and his group are fighting them or something like that. It’s got everything to do with what’s going on. . . .”

“Yes, yes, I’m getting the flavor of what you are saying. And it is you that Kovic is looking for?” He was giving me the once over like he didn’t think I had it in me. “There is a price. . . .”

That’s when we heard the dame scream and then start laughing again. I figured she spotted a rat but why was she laughing? It sounded hysterical.

She was holding a bright red Chinese dress to her neck with one hand and standing by one of the glass display cases, pointing

to a quilted cloth Chinese box on top. "What is that?" she said looking as she if she was pleasantly mortified.

I was kinda brought up short myself. I knew what it looked like and I could give a guess of what it could be used for, but I didn't want to say. I left that up to Max.

"Ah, yes, yes, the Empress's Cucumber." Even he looked a little embarrassed, clearing his throat.

Now that he said it, I had to agree, it did kinda look like a cucumber. It was green and longer than it was wide, rounded and curved at the tip, with some carved leaves around what looked like a stem or handle at the other end. It looked like something valuable or at least expensive tucked into the padded plush red lining. On the other hand, it also looked like something you might find in the bedside table drawer of some lonely old maid.

"This once belonged to an empress?" The disbelief wasn't hidden.

"Oh, no, no, this is merely a soapstone replica. They are also known as 'aunty cucumbers.' The original one belonged the Empress Dowager Tzu-zi and made of the finest most translucent Burmese jade."

"Her name was Suzy?" Now I was doubting what I was hearing.

"No Tzu-zi, although I know it does sound like Suzy. The original Empress's Cucumber mysteriously disappeared after her death shortly before I arrived in Shanghai. Being in the jade business at the time with Mr. Otobayar we had heard rumors that it was for sale to the highest bidder. Mr. Otobayar thought he could broker a deal with a rich Japanese industrialist but it was all quite secret and I was kept out of the negotiations. Although his death was attributed to a jade deal gone bad, I believe Mr. Otobayar was murdered by a sect of loyalist bent on restoring imperial rule. They believe that possession of the lost Empress's Cucumber will boost their claim to legitimacy among the people of the middle kingdom. Even though no knows what became of it, treasure hunters and royalist agents are still searching for it. There is even a rumor that it has been sighted recently. Whoever has possession of it is holding millions of dollars and the fate of a people in his hands."

Max turned his head and smiled at the frail. "So you've picked the red cheongsam dress with the gold embroidered dragons. Excellent choice. The size looks right but maybe the hem could be let out a bit otherwise you might show a little more ankle than is proper for a young lady. I can have it done by tomorrow and delivered to your address."

As Max was showing us to the back door, Rebecca asked. "I was wondering, whatever became of your friend Freddy after he left for America?"

Max shook his head. "Sad story that. He returned to France and joined the Foreign Legion to fight in the Great War, was wounded and lost his hand. Now I hear he seeks out the company of Bohemians and degenerate artists."



The rain had stopped but there were puddles among the piles of trash in the alleyway. I steered her away from a big one by stepping in it for her.

“You’re so gallant,” she said.

She had looped her arm through mine and leaned on me to support herself. I leaned on her because it felt good. She was smiling and humming to herself and I kinda knew what that felt like just then.

“Mind if I call you Becky?”

She looked shockingly pleased. “Becky, a name like in your American writer Shemuel Klemens’ book, who is the sweetheart of a Tom Sawyer, yes, Becky. We read his stories when I was in school in Zurich.” Her tone turned confidential and intimate. “He is quite famous with his American tall tales translated into many languages. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was my very favorite. How I longed to sail on the mighty Mississippi!” she added with a sigh.

Max’s hi-test fruit juice had really made her loopy and I didn’t want to pop her bubble to correct her because she was pretty happy thinking she knew what she was talking about, but everybody knows that Tom Sawyer was written by Mark Twain and even though I never read the book I did see Jackie Coogan in the movie version and that whole fence routine was pretty a pretty funny scam. I’ve known guys who operate just the same way though they weren’t all that nice or clever in getting you to do their work for them and then taking all the credit. As for that whole bit with Becky, it just proved that dames are dames even at a young age.

We were under the streetlight by then. I looked down into her glimmering eyes and said, “You can call me Tom.”

Her laughter echoed down the deserted rain wet street. It was a pleasant laugh, full of promise.

Then Herr Hat had to spoil it. He came running out from the shadows. “Rebecca, Rebecca! Where have you been? You took so long! We were going to come looking for you!”

“Oh, David!” she said as he approached, obviously ready for any and more attention, “Were you really worried about me?”

By then he’d got close enough to get a whiff of her breath as she smiled up at him. “Are you drunk?” I got the benefit of an angry glare.

“Don’t be silly!” She slapped him on the lapel. “I’m perfectly slobber, I mean, sober!” And then broke out in a fit of giggling.

The Hat was making moves like he might want to take a poke at me. I wasn’t too worried about him, he was just a kid. It was the other guy behind him, a guy I hadn’t seen before, with slick backed hair, a razor sharp nose, pencil thin moustache, and a mean sadistic gleam in his eye.

The dame saw him, too. “Isaac? Why is Isaac?” she addressed the kid in the hat, and then stared at me, instantly sober.

I was keeping my eye on the Isaac guy when I thought I saw the big pole in front of the barbershop step forward. I wasn’t feeling any pain but I wasn’t that far gone. Then I remembered that there wasn’t a barbershop on this block and that wasn’t a barber pole. The guy was seven foot if he was an inch and a head on him like a cornerstone.

“Golie? Golie is here, too?” Now she was frightened and that was exactly what she wanted me to be as Hairy the Hat had her by the arm and was hustling her toward the Packard.

“Hey!” I shouted, about to say, “you can’t do that!” when I got a set of knuckles in the kidney from razor face. I folded like a day old racing form.



If it had ever crossed my mind I might have considered what a ragdoll felt like being tossed into the back of the rattletrap pulled up at the curb. It was an old bazou, as they say up north of Maine, from the previous decade and if it ever had a cushioned bench seat it wasn't obvious. It didn't matter anyway as I was dumped on the floorboards and the big mug kept his foot on my back while hatchet face took the wheel. The jalopy was lacking in springs as well and every bump and pothole was telegraphed like a smack to the face, and it seemed like the driver was going out of his way to find something to bump over or bang against. And of course when he took a corner on two wheels my head slammed the door post. Good thing I was wearing my hat. By the time the ride was over I'd been pummeled and no one had laid a hand on me. Unless you count the bruiser's foot, and the brass knucks to the kidney that was the admission price to this carnival ride.

The gorilla pulled me to my feet and pushed me against the gray granite of a swank building. And it had started to rain again. I had a sense that I was back where I started from but in the alley by the servant's entrance. I was still feeling weak in the knees when Mutt woke me up by slamming my head against the bricks. Neither of them had said a word the whole time I was taken for the ride. Now the skinny guy said, "Less go" while the lummoX picked me up and threw me into the open doorway.

There were a couple of tough nuts waiting for me, each one there to greet me with a fist to the solar plexus or the side of the head. At least I was out of the rain. I tried to look at the bright side but now all I was seeing were stars. Then everything went black because they knocked my hat off and pulled a hood over my head. I was more in the dark than I wanted to be. One of their punches had affected my hearing and all that was coming through was the dull roar of voices as they dragged me up a couple flights of stairs. I wasn't resisting but they were moving faster than my legs would allow and they didn't care that my shins were banging against the risers. Then they half dragged me a long stretch through another door by the sound of it slamming open.

A gruff voice gave an order that sounded like "put him there" or "in the chair" and next thing I knew I was thrown roughly into the sitting position and the hood was yanked off my head. I blinked in the bright light. A couple of big body shapes came into focus. The Mutt and Jeff of the strong arm boys first, hovering,

waiting for me to make a wrong move, any move, in fact. Among them standing well back by his desk, Herr Doktor and his pointy goatee looking more than agitated, the bookshelves and the maps looming behind him and I knew I was back to where I'd started from, but obviously things had changed.



“Do you takes us for fools?!” It wasn’t a question Professor Soloman was expecting me to answer.

“We have made inquiries about you, Mr. Ask. We have friends in high places. According to them you have an unsavory criminal record, receiving stolen property, public nuisance, drunk and disorderly, impersonation of a police officer, soliciting prostitutes, nonpayment of alimony, vagrancy, assault and battery, unlicensed possession of a firearm, discharge of a weapon in a public place, attempted murder, trespassing, invasion of privacy, stalking and spying with lewd intent. To say nothing of the fact that you have a price on your head placed there by the notorious Balkan gangster, Jan Kovic, a mortal enemy to our cause and my people, a tentacle of the Black Hand in this country!”

By the time Soloman got all that out of his system I had a chance get a sense of the fix I was in. There were a couple of other palookas besides the viper named Isaac and the gorilla they called Golie standing around the den with broad shoulders and mean eye mostly pointed at me. Anymore and it woulda begun to feel cramped. They had me surrounded. The next thing I know I might be dead.

I pointed to the pocket of my suit coat. “Mind if I smoke?” I was playing for time and they probably knew it. The viper hissed and made like he was going to smack me one. He hadn’t hit me in the last five minutes and maybe he needed a fix.

Soloman waved him away. “No, no, let him have his cigarette.” He said it like he was letting me have my last smoke.

I shook out one of the few left in the pack of Lucky’s and fit the smiz to my lip, the one that was starting to swell when the snake had smashed my face against the wall. I searched out a lucifer from my vest pocket and snapped the flame to life with a thumbnail. After I caught a lungful I blew it out slow and easy like I didn’t have a care in the world. I felt a little tickle below my throbbing nose where my moustache used to be and put a finger up to it. It felt sticky and when I looked at the tip I saw it was blood. I leaned back and crossed one leg over the other.

“You might have missed a couple, Doc, but seeing as how they were minor offenses, I’ll let it pass.” I picked a fleck of tobacco off the tip of my tongue. “Sounds like someone let you take a gander at my rap sheet. Each one of those so-called charges are not at all what they seem. Take for instance the drunk and disorderly.

I'm no stranger to drink but when you find out your wife has been carrying on with your best pal, well, it does something to you so I got drunk and angry. You can't blame me. And besides the mug threw the first punch and I was in no mood for that and laid him out with a right to the jaw but he wouldn't stay down so I had to kick him the head a couple of times till he got the idea and then the bartender and some of his friends came after me so I had to pull my rod to let them know I meant business and put a round over their heads. When the cops arrived I told them I was one of them and showed them my private investigator tin. They said that it wasn't a real badge and that I was under arrest,

"But it was just that one time. The rest of that is part of the job or misunderstandings, personal and financial. Besides you don't need a pedigree to do what I do in a world of cheats, chisellers and double crossers. You gotta know the game, Doc, And that's something I know.

"So you think you can just toss me around and step on me. Something's up and it smells fishy." I blew out a mouthful of smoke like I meant it.

"Fishy? There is this!" He thrust a wet towel in my direction and I saw what looked like a soggy pile of paper the size of an address book resting on its soaked black leather covers. It looked very familiar.

"This mushy matzos is what was discovered in the water closet after he left." He positioned himself to give me the broadside. "But not before the contents had been irreparably damaged!"

I'd seen Oliver Hardy give a more convincing chin punctuation. "This item you had to sell to us is useless, worthless. We could not consider the remuneration we had agreed on and must withdraw our offer."

I got up to take a closer look but the big brute slammed me back in the chair with one hand on my shoulder like he was merely closing a window. I stared at the pile of paper pulp. How could four dozen pages get so soggy in that short of a time. I hadn't stuck Yamatski's address book in the toilet tank, but in the space behind it and the wall, and if it had survived a swim in the East River fairly intact, especially zippered closed, why was it now just a sopping stack of curled pages?

Then I remember that I'd seen such a mess before. In the kitchen of Pat Fitzpatrick's apartment, a freelance reporter I used to know who went off to cover the war in Spain and hasn't been heard from since. His wife at the time, Flossie the floosy, had washed a pair of his trousers but forgot to check the pockets and didn't find his notebook till she was putting it through the ringer. Pat was in a rage when I just happened to drop by and I might have saved Floss another knuckle dimple to her cheek. Floss wasn't one

easy to phase. She heated up her iron and one by one steam pressed each of the pages and laid them out to dry. Pat's pencil and the ink scribbles were still readable if not a little scorched. She'd even stitched it together when it was dry and handed it back telling him that it wouldn't have happened if he washed his own clothes.

I eyed what had been my ticket out of the dumps. If the information in that address book was that valuable, why weren't they trying to save it? I would have. I didn't doubt that it had occurred to them so why the con?

I drew on the fag and considered my options. I didn't have many. I never expected a jackpot from the contents of the address book just more opportunities to get my revenge on Kovic and his mob, and I'd already harvested the cash so I was back to Go and waiting for my turn on the dice. I let out a breath of smoke. "Well, easy come, easy go. Too bad about the soaking of the goods, Doc, and sorry we won't be doing business. I can't expect you to accept damaged goods."

"Garbage!" the old guy insisted, "You offer me garbage!" He pointed his cigar at me accusingly. "And to think I allowed young Rebecca to accompany you to negotiate with that human filth, Max Feathers, a traitor to his people!"

I could tell he was warming up to launch a tirade and I didn't want to hear it. "Listen, Doc. . . ."

"No, you will listen, Mr. Ask. I will not deal with criminals like you and Feathers. Again my suspicion is aroused. Perhaps you are an agent of the Black Hand after all, sent to reconnoiter the scope of our operation. I was right to be suspect you of trying to trick us with this worthless material! This garbage."

"I get the drift, Doc, it's garbage, but it's my garbage so I'll just take it back and be on my way."

"Don't bother yourself with it, we will dispose of it for you." He called over one of his goons, "Maurice, see that this thrown out with the kitchen refuse," and handed him the pile of wet paper.

I had to object. "Hey, wait, that's my mine, I don't care if it's wet!"

Soloman waved away my objection. "It is unusable rubbish. You have no use for it."

"It is still my property."

"It is something that belonged to someone else of which you were in possession, hardly your property. You are thief and consort of thieves. Young Rebecca tells me that you, not she, are in possession of the uncut diamond, something else that does not belong to you. You will surrender it." He held out his hand.

I admit that it stung my pride that she'd finked on me because I thought that there just for a moment maybe we had seen

eye to eye and she had felt about me the way I felt about her but it was probably just Max's big juice that was making me addlebrained. A dame is always going to be looking out for her own best interest and the kid was a dame, she couldn't help it.

"Ok. Ok, let me stand up. I have to reach in my trouser pocket."

I was hemmed in on all sides. Once I gave them what they wanted what's to say they wouldn't drop off a roof or in the drink with bricks tied to my ankles. I was getting the bum's rush that was plain to see, this skit with the useless notebook was doing serious damage to their high and mighty reputation.

I stuck my hand in my pocket and felt for the little white box the diamond was in. I could tell that it had popped open likely during my manhandling on the way over and that now the rock was somewhere in the corner of the seam congregating with the local lint. I pulled out the open box to give my finger more maneuvering room and tossed it on Solomon's desk.

He was alarmed to see it empty and Isaac stepped toward me impatiently like I was trying to pull a fast one.

"Keep your shirt on, big boy," I said as I fished the pebble out and held it between my thumb and forefinger. "This what you're looking for?"

I laughed at Solomon's anticipation as I tossed the rock in my mouth and did a quick swallow just before Isaac's fist caught me square in the jaw. He hit me right on the button and the lights went out.



I felt trapped like a rat, encased on all side by something that wouldn't give. I was blind as a mole but I could still picture what that was like. I couldn't feel my hands and my shoulders ached from being pulled behind my back. My knees ached for the same reason. I was struggling to breath. I believed I was falling and tried to catch my breath. That's what brought me back. I had a clanging headache as well. If it was a bad dream I was dying to wake up. The combination of the workover I got and the gut full of Max's plum potion treating me to the stamping feet of pink elephants convinced me that the pain was too real to be all in my head even though that's where the hurt was..

How long had I bet out? My jaw still throbbed so maybe not that much time had passed. I was thirsty and at the same time feeling the urge to relieve myself. I was lying on my left side, not my preferred position for unconsciousness. I didn't have much choice the way I was trussed up. The gag was constricting my breathing and I started to panic. I could still move my head and tried to rub my cheek against the floor. I didn't have much leeway. I felt as if I'd been stuffed in a crate that was too small for me.

Finally the edge of the gag pulled away enough to let in a little unobstructed air. It was a relief but my bladder may have got the wrong message. Next to being dead the last thing I wanted was a spill in my BVDs.

At the same time I managed to reposition the blindfold up over my cheekbone that allowed for an unimpaired view of more dark. There was a distinct smell of damp mustiness that reminded me of mothballs and dusty attics. It was a familiar smell. I spent a lot of time in my granny's attic above the old mercantile store upstate. It was a kingdom of dust and cobwebs and I would root around in the old crates and barrels and cedar chests and old wooden toys that belonged to my dad and my grandad before him. Old leather bound books piled on the floor and the shelves behind them, and bundles of piano sheet music for the piano no one played anymore, itself gathering its own dust in the parlor below. There were mice and spiders in the rafters, trails of gossamer trailing from the clay thimbles around which the wires for the "electric" as granny called it, were wound to power the light in the parlor and in the kitchen and one in the bathroom.

I lived at granny's off and on when I was growing up, mostly when the old man was at sea and the old lady was off doing

something that didn't have anything that to do with me. They fought a lot and drank a lot, and I kinda fell into that pattern too, and soon I was a candidate for reform school which had nothing to do with reform an everything to do with keeping me locked up. How I ended up being a private peeper is another story for another time.

I tried to unbend my knees but that only pulled on my arms and wrenched my shoulders but in doing so I managed to dislodge more of my gag. Big gulps of air almost made me forget the headache and my throbbing chin. I was still under pressure from my bladder. I did a little more squirming and all it did was make me feel helpless.

Angry, I jerked my whole body no matter how much it hurt. It had the effect of bunching up the top of the blindfold so that my left eye peeped over the edge to make out more darkness. I kicked the only way I could and my feet hit a wall behind me with a solid thud. I could feel with the top of my head that it was lodged in a corner of the crate. My knees with a little movement bumped another solid surface.

I was boxed in, no mystery there, and how to get out was the 64 dollar question as I had let my subscription to Houdini Magazine lapse and missed the issue where they had tips on how to escape from a fix like this one.

Beside the sounds of my struggle and grunts there wasn't much to hear. I felt like I was drowning in a big bowl of silence. Silence, with an occasional creak and groan of the architecture and maybe the occasional soft tread, titter and squeak of rats, the occasional slammed door, a distant car horn, the rumble of an elevator, those are the sounds of silence in the big city. And the irregular sound of feet walking discretely on toe tips, the sharp tapping of fingertips on the outside of the crate, and of a soft voice asking softly, "Lack, are you ok?"



“Becky? Becky!” but with the gag covering my mouth I could have just as well been saying “cookie.” I clattered around in my severe confinement and yelled, “Becky! Get me out of here!” I had managed to slip the gag off to one side of my chin. “Becky! Hurry!”

“I can’t ask, Lack. They would know it was me and I would be in much more trouble. I am confined to my room and was able to sneak out because as your native Americans say, they were having a big powwow.” She sounded sorry sad and I might have had sympathized except that I had a pressing need.

“Becky, listen to me!” I strained to make my voice heard, the gag now around my chin. “You don’t understand! This is very serious!”

“Lack, I know,” she spoke quietly, “I have overheard them talking. It is serious.”

“Then get me out of here!”

“I can’t, I’m sorry.”

I figured I’d let her in on the emergency. “How can I put this delicately, uh, I have to whiz so bad my back teeth are floating!”

“Whiz? What is this whiz? Oh, perhaps it is the new all color film from Hollywood? But teeth, I’m not certain. . . .”

“Becky!” I yelled, “Listen to me! If I don’t get out of here I’m going to wet my pants! Just let me out of this box so I can find a corner to do my business and I promise I’ll get back in and no one will ever know. I’ll even let you tie me up.” I was desperate. I would have crossed my legs if they hadn’t been tied at the ankles.

Silence. Then “The teeth that float. . . .”

“Becky! I’m begging you! Let me out of here!”

“Shush!” she hissed. “I think I hear them calling for me.” I heard moving away from the box. “I’ll return if I can.”

That decided that. It didn’t matter that I wet my pants because worse was yet to come and once I was ripe enough the mugs would sort through what’s left of me and get their diamond I had to come to terms with that, but incrementally.



Wet wool is itchy. Maybe that would make a good epitaph for my tombstone not that I could be guaranteed anything more than cement socks at the graveyard bottom of the East River. The happy thoughts just weren't coming as I tried to distract myself.

I'd managed to get the gag off my face and somehow loosened the rope binding my hands only to have them explode into a swarm of pins and needles. Problem was, I was breathing my own air and it was making me drowsy.

I could hear workmen nearby hammering. Someone raised a shout. And the sporadic hammering resumed. I was surprised by the sound of running and suddenly my confinement was given more light as well as a large displacement of air. I was crushed by a heavy weight consisting of knees, elbows, and a full torso with a voice shushing in my ear. The lid to the box snapped down and I was in the dark again. It was Becky. And it was the last straw that emptied my suffering bladder.

She was breathing hard in my ear, her chest heaving. I started to say something but she shushed me again. "Stay quiet they won't find us." She whispered in my ear and I realized I could get used to those whispers in my ear. I tried to relax but trussed up the way I was and with her knees on my kidney and her elbow in my neck I just couldn't get comfortable. She wasn't tied up so she could shift her weight and her hip pressed down on my ribs causing me to gasp for breath. I grunted. She said "sorry." We stayed quiet listening to each other's breathing and for any sounds outside our confinement. My stomach rumbled or maybe it was hers. The minutes seemed like hours.

I heard a hinge creak and a shaft of light pierced the dark interior. Now both her knees were gouging into my arm and my thigh. There was enough light for me to catch her profile as she peaked outside the box which I realized was a large trunk with a domed top. Then she sat back down on me and let the lid drop and we were in the dark again.

"It was awful, Lack, they burst in shooting everyone." She started to blubber.

"What? Who? Becky, untie me and get me out of this box so I can understand what you're babbling about."

The trunk lid was pushed open and I was bathed in a dim grey light.

"These knots are impossible! And they're wet!"

“I have a penknife in my vest pocket, use that!”

I felt her frisking me but maybe she was unfamiliar with men’s vests?

“Oops, sorry.”

“Yeah, not that pocket.”

Finally she found it after fumbling under my coat and began sawing at the rope tying my hands to my feet. The ropes came loose and I was able to free one hand and pull myself upright. She stood on the outside of the trunk helping me up. I took the knife from her and freed my feet. I pulled myself over the edge of the large trunk and fell to the floor. It hurt and felt good at the same time.

I didn’t waste a minute getting rid of the ropes, rubbing the circulation back into my wrists. I grabbed her by the elbow and brought my face close to hers. “What I heard wasn’t hammering, they were gunshots. Who was doing the shooting?”

“I don’t know,” her eyes wide with fright, “Their faces were covered by kerchiefs and they wore auto racing goggles. I heard one of them shouting ‘Where are the diamonds?!’ Isaac and Golie and the others were shooting too, and Herr Doktor I think was. . . .”

We were in some kind of storage loft. A dull light seep through the dusty windows along one wall, packing crates, more large trunks, odds and ends of large furnishing draped in tarps made indistinct shadows and shapes. The windows were closed but I could still hear the sirens getting closer. “We have to get out of here.!”

Rebecca pointed to the door set into the far wall and I followed, limping the cramps out of my legs. I was reminded once again that I’d been left to my own devices and that certain things can’t be put off forever.



The door led to a dimly lit hallway at the head of a stairway leading down. At the opposite end, a window allowed access to a fire escape. I could hear the shouts and clomping of the flatfeet spreading out over the crime scene a several floors below. From the vantage of the window onto the fire escape, the alley was swarming with the flashing lights of patrol cars.

“What floor are we on?”

“We are at the very top, six.”

“I shook my head. “Too much can go wrong on a fire escape six stories up. What’s on the roof?”

“A little garden where the women of the building grow edibles for their kitchen. Oh, and Golie’s pigeon coop. He is so gentle with them, you wouldn’t think that he was the same fearful enforcer.”

“How close are the nearby buildings?” I was thinking if worse comes to worse.

She shook her head. “No, they are either too distant or many stories shorter.”

“Well, that’s it. We’re cornered. The cops are after me in connection with my lawyer Ralphie Silver’s murder. I heard that through the grapevine. They found my prints at the scene. Kovic’s mob is after me for dumping him in the drink and icing his muscle. That I should have figured, but Max confirmed it. Somebody else is after me for something I don’t even know about. My ex is after me for alimony payments. The cops are gonna turn this place upside down looking for witnesses, victims, or gunsels. I’m a hot property.”

She looked at me perplexed. “I am not certain I understood everything you were saying except that maybe you are in a lot of trouble if the police find you. I too must avoid contact with the authorities because if they ask for my papers, they will learn that I am in this country illegally.”

“Rats, just as I get out of one pickle I end up in another!”

“Lack, this is no time to think about food. I have an idea. Come.”

She hurried back into the storage loft and I followed on her heels. She rushed over to some shelves and started pulling down bags and suitcases. She rooted through some large boxes, yanking out articles of clothing, handing me a dress. “Here, try this on.”

It was too tight around the shoulders and the neckline was too revealing. I saw what she was up to and I liked what she had in mind, but I didn't think it was going to work. Not many dames of the six foot square shouldered variety.

She must have realized that too. She pulled out a large man's overcoat that likely belonged to somebody who was wider than they were tall. The bottom hem came to my knees. She fit a big ugly green scarf over my head and tied it under my chin.

"Take off your pants."

I wasn't sure I heard right. "What?"

"And your suit jacket, Put them in this bag"

She had me step into a large skirt with lace around the hem and then fit an apron over that, cinching it at the waist. My hairy ankles and clodhoppers were still in plain view.

She frowned. "Stoop down. Yes, bend your knees. Good, that hides most of your ankles and your socks and garters. Here, keep this bag with your clothes in front so that they cannot see your big man's shoes."

She hurriedly slipped into a large overcoat and slung a large leather purse over one arm. She wrapped a large multi colored scarf over her head and tied it under her chin. Then she fussed with my scarf closing it around my face so that nothing but the tip of my nose and my eyes were showing. She stepped back to admire her handiwork and gave a big smile. "If we had a mirror we could see that we look like a couple of old babushkas on the way to market!"



The first cops, a couple of plainclothes mugs running up the stairs with their guns drawn like Saturday matinee cowboys didn't expect to see us. We were on the back stairs that existed for services not the front where the lobby, elevator, mezzanine, and carpeting were. The young one with the slicked back hair and the twenty five dollar suit stared at us and then spoke to Rebecca. "You ladies live around her?"

I looked him over. I could take him and his cheap suit and what about his partner, a downtown cop I'd seen in the company of Hogan before looking back wondering why the kid was bothering.

Rebecca, shoulders hunched timidly, pointed a finger up the stairwell and said "mop" miming the action and then mimed passing an iron over a board.

"Ok, yer the house cleaners for the apartment upstairs? You seen any guys with guns running around?"

I had a hard time keeping from bursting out laughing and covered with a sneeze. Rebecca's shock and disbelief looked real.

"C'mon," the older cop called continuing up, "they don't understand a word you're saying."

The second set of cops were mostly uniforms clustered around the exit door to the alley and looked mean the way street cops do having seen it all and were too worldly wise to be taken by some cheap disguise parted like the Red Sea as Rebecca held me under the arm and shuffled along as best I could to the exit door head down not one of them thinking what are these two old broads doing at the scene of a crime.

It was the two guarding the other side of the door on the steps leading to the alley.

"Hold up, ladies, and where do we thing we're going now?" He was a tall skinny redhead with his cap sitting on the back of his head. His partner was a beefy bloke with a cauliflower for a face. He said, "What you two's doin here?"

Rebecca put her fists to her hips and got close, frowning in to his grainy mug. "Ve are to verk how ve cannot eat not verk?"

"Now, m'am,, he just wants to know the reason why you're being at a crime scene it being off limits to all but the police."

"I vant complain!" she shouted, "but no is listen! Mrs. Krawitch old lady!" she said tugging me down the steps, "cannot sleep all that bang bang. I call police can't sleep! Tell them must verk Vest Side, mop, mop, mop, clean, clean, clean!"

“But lady, we are the cops!” pasty face offered.

She pointed a finger at his puffed out chest. “Then something do it about!” she said with all the authority of a shrew. “I have verk go now. Come, Mrs. Krawitch.” Hooking an arm around my stooped shoulders, she carefully steered my shuffling progress through the maze of idling squad cars, occasionally glaring accusingly back at the two perplexed coppers.

I had to admit that she had talent and I could just imagine what those dumb flatfoots were saying behind our backs.

“That’s the trouble with them foreign broads, they’s ugly as sin. Ya seen the mug on that old hag. I swear she was growing a moustache. Smelled like an outhouse.”

“Yeah, but the young one’s a looker.”

“Problem is they all end up looking like they got crippling arthritis, a five o’clock shadow and permanent shiners.”



I'm not a big believer of coincidence but Becky's description of the shooting in Soloman's flat was going to win me over. She kept it to herself as we made our way through the traffic and gathering crowds drawn by the police action and blocking the once deserted midnight upscale neighborhood, me still struggling to maintain my stooped over squat pose. I finally got to straighten up a couple of blocks later once I was stepping down the tiled stairs to the turnstile and through to the subway platform. Becky kept her grip under my arm, propping me up, even though at this point she didn't have to.

The platform was empty and silent, no air stirring tunnel roar signaling the approach, trains less frequent in the graveyard hours. From the vantage of the dim lit far end I could keep an eye on the entrance to the platform while staying in the shadows. Becky too kept a focused vigilance. Unless anyone looked close, our disguises held true.

Despite being manhandled by Soloman's thugs, the adrenaline was keeping me cocked, and my brain clocking a thousand miles an hour. I had to think that I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time or it had something to do with me. Kovic had picked up my trail and that led him to Rabbi Joseph and his kosher commandos. But if they were after me, why go to all the trouble of shooting the place up. Becky's description of the gunmen made me think that they might be a gang of professional robbers. There'd been a rash of penthouse robberies in the ritzy neighborhoods around the first of the year. The Anti-Claus Gang one rag dubbed them as they were after expensive holiday purchases of jewels, gold, and art. Their get up was in favor of that conclusion. They might have started up again. And in the report of the previous strong armed heists, there had never been any shootings, just very effective threats. But the one thing that Becky said had me leaning to not a coincidence at all.



Men in suits suddenly appeared on the platform with the frantic looks of having just missed the train. I watched them scamper to the brink of the tracks through the window as it accelerated out of the station. The car was empty except for a blind man at the other end of the last car, slumped forward, propped up by his white cane. I sat facing Becky on the seat across from me, keeping an eye on the door leading into the next car. It was the downtown train because further downtown toward my neighborhood was my apartment where I hadn't been back to for over a week so it seemed like the logical place to head. Except. What if Mister K's goons or the goons in blue had my place staked out? The Y happened to be downtown, too, and the thought crossed my mind that for two bits a night I could hole up there for a while. But then Becky's old man's used clothes store was practically across the street.

She must have read my mind. "Lack, we can hide in my father's shop, no one will think to look for us there. Today is the Sabbath and he will not. . . Oh!" She caught her breath.

"Was your father's at Soloman's when. . . ?

She nodded. "He was there but not with the others. He has a room behind the kitchen where he can stay when he does not stay at the shop. It is next to my room." She made a face. "Maybe I should call it a cell where I live and work with the women. But my father is not one of them, the top echelon, Professor Soloman's council. He has high intelligence but for our cause he is better used analyzing strategy to defeat the enemy he told me. But I have never seen him with a gun. And guns I saw and guns I heard." She put her hands to her cheeks in horror. "I could not keep from thinking, they're ruining the furniture!"

The train pulled into another stations. No one entered the car and the blind man bobbed with the jolt of the train lurching back up to speed.

"Ok," I said, "tell it to me from the beginning" and at the same time realizing that the pain in my head was like a spike being driven through my eye socket and that I had a thirst that would drain a lake.

"It is all so what you say swiftly passing by my eyes, flashing, so fast. One of the maids was looking for me and called my name. I should be in my room but she called up the stairwell because she know I have to getaway sometime to myself. When I

come down to their floor, she said I had a package, but who would deliver a package at that time in the night, and before she could say more, a loud noise had come from the front door near where we were standing and men with guns in long coats and hats pulled down over their eyes, red kerchiefs over their faces, some with racing goggles rushed in

“There were three, maybe five, into the dining room when the door opened from Herr Doktor’s library and Isaac stepped out with his gun. That is when they all started shooting. I saw Isaac fall in the doorway and I could see Golie and Herr Doktor and some of the other men with guns. Then guns were firing from everywhere. The maid, Anya, who had come to get me, was struck on the cheek by a splinter of a doorway exploding from a bullet. I ran to my room for my coat and left by the back entrance. I was in panic not to go down where there might be others to do me harm. Up was the only way.”

What she described had all the makings of a heist I was convinced. I had a question but a shadow filling the door glass at the far end of the car distracted me.

She was saying, “But Lack, there is something else I must tell you,” when the door opened and in walked trouble.



One of them was dressed like a typical college kid, in a tweed suit coat, vee neck sweater, bowtie and a crushed fedora on the back of his head. The other two looked like they were still waiting for the right haberdasher. The tall skinny loose limbed one wore a shirt whose sleeves only reached his elbows, a pair of baggy pants held up by a belt knotted at the waist, and a baseball cap with the bill tipped up. He looked as bright as a dead bulb. And a short guy in a beanie who looked like he might be the ring leader. They were loud and maybe a little drunk. The blind man drew their immediate attention as the object of their rambunctious baiting, laughing and pointing, waving their hands in front of his eyes.

The one with the bowtie must have caught sight of me, and of Rebecca who had turned to glance over her shoulder at the ruckus, and now he was poking beanie in the arm with his elbow and nodding in our direction and saying something under his breath that made beanie's eyes get that special sparkle.

With barely a hint of nonchalance they sauntered down the aisle to where we were sitting. Beanie, flanked by string bean and bowtie, took the toothpick out of his mouth and pointed it at me. "Well if it ain't grandma and little red riding hood. You'll never guess who we are."

"Yeah," the string bean said, "we're the big bad wolves." There was no mistaking the river rat twang of their accent. Bowtie gave a crocodile grin leering at Rebecca.

None of them were being subtle and there was no reason I should be. With as much soprano I could manage, I piped, "You look more like the three little pigs."

Beanie's eyes darted to me. "What a really big mouth you got, grandma." Bowtie was giving me a suspicious scowl as string bean leaned over beanie's shoulder to look down on me, and said "Yeah, what really big feet you got, grandma." Everyone stared at my Thom Macan's.

My forehead smacked beanie between the eyes after I'd grabbed him by the shirt front. His eyes rolled back like he couldn't believe it and he folded like a pair of trousers around his ankles. I had more headache to pass around and went for string bean but his hands were high above his head and gawking at Rebecca. She had a little pistol pointed at him. Bowtie scrambled stumbling back down the aisle toward the next car tripping as he ran past the blind man, sprawling head first into the edge of a seat.

I stood my full height and stepped on beanie's hand. The train was slowing on the approach to the next station. I could tell by the squeal of the brakes and that of beanie's pain.

"You messed with the wrong grandma." I grabbed bean stalk by the arm and twisted it. I pulled beanie to his feet by his collar and dragged both of them to the doors as the train entered the station. "You don't want to miss your stop."

Bowtie was holding his head sitting up. He immediately got what the motion of Becky's pistol meant and as soon as the doors parted he followed his pals out onto the platform.

I looked around. There was no one else in the place but me, Rebecca, and the blind man. He held up his hand. "I didn't see anything."



The tailor shop was a solid brick block from the subway exit. I had shed the scarf and stood at the curb looking up at the building. All the windows were dark. In the distance the silhouettes of the midtown skyscrapers were lightening around the edges. Soon people would be heading off to work or looking for work.

Rebecca didn't have a key. She was going to have to wake up the super. She had me wait in a dark doorway of a shop further down where had anyone seen me in my overcoat and bare legs would have called the cops to report a flasher. When I saw the light inside the shop blink once I would know to come to the door and she would let me in.

I was dying for a smoke but I knew better than to light up. The headache was a dull throb now and had moved to behind my right ear. My tongue felt like sandpaper. I could feel another prune forming above my left eyebrow. All of a sudden I was in the middle of something that was spinning out of control and sucking me in. Was I dragging the kid along, too, or was she part of the deal? She was cool, smart, and she had a gun. That was in her favor.

In the meantime I had to get the stink that was Kovic off me. He tried to have me iced after I rescued his hophead daughter from the sour mash South. He put a couple of slugs in Ralphie, my lawyer, an old pal from the neighborhood who had steered me to the blood hound job. Times were tough and any cabbie or street corner mug mighta made me. Dropping a dime was not gonna be any sweat off their noses.

Running into the tailor and his daughter was pure luck. Whether it was good luck or bad luck was another matter I still had to work out. Who had been chasing me when I chanced onto them? I didn't feature it was any of Mister K's mob. Someone was tailing me. The mess in my room had been tossed by someone who claimed to be my sister, according to Curtis, the pervert super. His description made Al's sister. I had something that belonged to her, the pink postal package slip I'd lifted from her mailbox. A fair exchange for setting me up. Was she just the tip of the iceberg and was I a titanic dope for not seeing it coming? She had to have some reach. As soon as I come up with her ex-boyfriend's whereabouts, he ends up dead. Now there were more bodies. The robbers used the package delivery ruse, but at that time of night what express service would be delivering? Unless someone was expecting a delivery. But Rebecca had said that the package was for her.

As if I didn't have enough worries, I had pricey rock floating around in my gut with no idea on how that was going to work out. I'd asked the kid to tell me again the part about when the gangsters busted in, what were they yelling? "Where are the diamonds?" she repeated and then something she couldn't make out. "It sound like name, Worsey. Wharzee? I don't know." I repeated the name to myself again in the darkened doorway. Worsey, Wharzee, Wharz-ee, Where-zee. Where is he?

A light blinked or that coulda just been me dropping off, asleep on my feet.



There was a cot behind the curtain separating the display room from the back workshop of sewing machines, ironing boards, and a narrow cutting table. I stumbled toward it as if I was being drawn by an irresistible urge to fall on it. I was beat, not to mention bounced around and hammered. Too long without anything to eat, too much to drink, or any time for sleep made me want to throw in the towel, wake me when it's over. I held my head in my hands sitting on the edge of the cot knowing I'd drift off as soon as I was horizontal. I drank water from the glass in a big gulp. My head was swimming.

Rebecca fussed unpacking the bags and taking my pants to the large tub sink against the back wall.

"Lack, there is something you should know." Now she was looking at me with those pale blue eyes and it seemed like that was all I needed to know. She sat on the cot next to me and looked down at her hands. "Those men, Doktor Soloman and the others, they cheat you out of the diamonds of your agreement. Your address book was not destroy. I hear them talking.

"When I was brought back, Herr Doktor tell me to go to my room and stay until he call. When I go through kitchen before my room, the cook is shaking her head because she is not understanding why she must boil a book of empty paper for Isaac who she does not like but because Zayde say so."

It was like I had come in to the middle of a movie and wasn't making heads or tails of the plot. It was a close up shot filling the entire screen of my vision. For a kid she was quite a dame.

"They discover your notebook in water closet. Drop in commode when one of the men went to use. He give it to Herr Doktor who has an idea to keep your valuable information and keep his diamonds, too. I hear them talking before they bring you up the back stairs. They are laugh. They think they are very clever about how they cheat you."

She was looking at me now and I felt her soft breath soothe my battered cheek. I leaned toward her blinking to keep my eyes open. My lips brushed hers. I didn't blame her for putting her hand on my chest and pushing me away. It didn't take much. I'm a pushover for dames like her. And I kept falling, onto the rumpled sheet of the cot that smelled of cabbage and old sweat, hearing her say, "There is something else you should know," and me replying, "You say the nicest things," before her lips pressed hard against

mine and I realized that some part of me was still very much awake.



I like my coffee hot and black. I was drinking a strong tea that had been poured over half a dozen sugar cubes. The daily blatt's morning edition headlines screamed MASSACRE IN THE HEIGHTS and took up almost all of the space above the fold to make up for the fact that they didn't have any information except that the cops had found what appeared to be a shoot-out in an attempt at robbery. Even though I had the inside track of what really happened, I paid attention to what the news hacks had come up with. That the police were baffled came as no surprise. G-men were being brought in to help with the investigation. That was funnier than Dagwood.

Soloman, I kinda figured, was a respected businessman with international connections. He had ties to refugee organizations who were helping displaced people who were fleeing the krauts and the nasties in the Balkans around where I was guessing Rebecca was from. Rabbi Joe, Joseph Frank, they called him, also well respected and a community leader, resided at that address but was unharmed. According to unofficial reports, two of the stiffes were also residents of that suite of apartments, a third, thought to be one of the robbers, was of Asiatic origins which was another way of saying Chinese or Japanese. Half a dozen people had been taken to the hospital with gunshot wounds. A few residents were also not accounted for. There was an ill lit photo of a large room with a long table I took to be the dining room. A trio of men in fedoras with their hands in the pockets of their overcoats looking very much out of place, Police were questioning neighbors and were asking witnesses with information to please step forward.

I looked up at one of the unaccounted for residents and witness and got a frown. I'd been getting them since I woke up. It's not that I didn't appreciate all she'd done for me. I didn't expect her to wash my trousers and iron them dry and thought I'd thanked her by saying "you didn't have to do that." And she'd grabbed a morning paper as soon as the bundles hit the bricks at the newsstand down the block. She'd obviously read the reported account of what she'd been in the middle of and that giving a cause for worry. But that wasn't it, exactly.

The confidence that had been a part of her upbeat personality seemed shaken and I suppose it coulda been my fault. I had the choice between being a good guy by being a bad guy or a bad guy by being a good guy. I never thought of myself as a good guy.

On the streets, do-gooding tends to get kicked to the gutter. I don't even know why I chose pain over pleasure or maybe the pain was the pleasure of being perverse. So I said, "No." And when I saw her look, I said, "Not now." I wise up at the worst times, and when it happens, I don't know why it doesn't happen more often. As a result, I got some much needed shut eye while she I suppose stewed over why I didn't give her a tumble. I had to work out my next step but she had her own ideas.

"I cannot go back to them, Lack, you must understand. They are bad men, dishonorable men. Even my Zayde is foolish and old fashioned and believes the lies they tell him. He was my last hope to make them let you go. You are not at fault. You are good man, Lack, I can see that now."

My ears heated up and I was hoping I wasn't running a fever. "You have to find your father and tell him you're all right. Find out if he's alright. Do you have a phone number you can call in case of an emergency, somewhere you can go to be safe."

"I am safe here, Lack. This is the only place I know other than the room behind the kitchen in the apartments."

"But what about your things? Your clothes?" I had a pain behind my eyes that wasn't going away and I wanted to blame Max's hooch. Besides I wasn't having any luck convincing her that the worst for her was probably over. "Once this gets calmed down, you can go to your father and tell him you're safe. Who knows, he might even show up here looking for you."

"No, if he is not here by now, he has either been detained or he is not coming back."

"You don't know that he's dead."

She shook her head as if to rid herself of a sad expression. "No, I don't think he is dead because now I understand what has happened." Now she gave a sardonic little twist to her mouth. "You came to the apartments at a fortunate time, Lackland Ask. Did you not notice the large gathering of men? You came at the end of a long day of discussion and planning by the men of I don't know what but I can assume it was to do about the refugees who are being detained in Albania. It is a very complicated situation my father has told me." She shook her head, "He treats me like a child." Her blue eyes blazed with hurt. "I know what he does for them. He is a proud man and a believer in the cause. It is why he does what he does and wants to keep the truth from me."

She must have noticed my surprised look. "What do you know about me, Lackland Ask?" She gave a fierce smile. "You know where I am from, I am a refugee from Salonika, I have no papers, and I cannot go to the authorities. When I was young I play the piano at five years old. I was reading the classics by ten. Then I was sent to special school in Zurich where I belong to a group of

comrades, we called ourselves the “red kerchief” because that was our uniform, a red kerchief around our necks. When the war came I return to Salonika. My mother was a school teacher and belong to a political party prohibited by the metaxfascist government. The secret police arrest everyone in connection and steal their property. The Black Hand gangsters firebomb our place of worship and kidnap those of our faith for ransom. My mother was torture until death. My father escape to Istanbul on a Black Sea freighter and with help of compatriots come to America. I stay behind to be with my mother and help hide refugees until she is arrested and I hear she is dead. I have to flee because the secret police wishes to arrest me, too. I catch fishing boat across to island of Lesbos, and then to Anatolya where I ride many bus, lorry, wagon for many days to reach Beirut where after a long wait I am able to catch ship to come to this city and find my father who has joined with Herr Doktor Soloman and his refugee organization and where I can get new papers to say who I am and why we must fight for the revolution and overthrow the oligarchy!”

That made my ears perk up. And the more she talked the more I was beginning to get the picture. She went to a fancy school where they filled her head with a lot of baloney about truth and justice and capitalism and oppressed masses and fired her up with a fever to change the world to be a better place for people and puppy dogs. What she didn’t realize that if it weren’t for dog food, the dogs would be eating each other and even bite the hand that might pet them. All this high toned coffeehouse jabber disappears as soon as you step out on to the street where you have to look three ways, right, left and right again if you didn’t want to get upended by some bat out of hell, I wanted to tell her. Someone was always on the grift and they didn’t really need to have a fine opinion or reason to take you to the cleaners. You’re just another pebble in the path leading to the top, trod on by an endless stream of crooks and cons with table manners and nice suits with their hand in your pocket and who would think nothing of snuffing you as if you were a bug, maybe even less because at least they have to admit the bug’s existence. I was trying to tell her all that and if the people at the top of the heap ain’t buying it, it ain’t getting sold, but she was all pink in the face, eye bugging with intensity, declaiming that the workers of the world had to unite and overthrow the ruling class. I knew they only way that got done was through strong arm robbery, what some might want to call revolution. I had to laugh. “Well slap me silly and call me Einstein. You’re a Red!”

It was probably the wrong thing to say. I got the frown again and the glare that went with it. “I am not a color! I am a human being who wishes for equal rights for all mankind!”

I didn't want to tell her she was in the minority so I concentrated on the matter at hand. I didn't doubt that her people even her father and maybe even the cops would show up at the shop. I needed to make myself scarce and even though the kid had got her hooks into me, I was going to have to slip free if I was going to get back what was mine, with interest.

I had a diamond in me and I had to get it out. A good strong cup of Java would have done the trick without thinking. The tea, strong and sugary as it was, was making me think about what I had to do and I was wondering if I was up to the intellectual effort.

One of the things I learned from my old man was to make sure you were in the proper circumstances and that was by sitting in the library as it was often called. And if I went to library I would need reading material. I noticed that she had been filling in the squares on the crossword puzzle so that ruled that section out. She'd explained when I noticed her scanning the columns of clues, "This is how I am learning vocabulary for to better my English." She'd said it with a beam of pride. The screaming front page headline seemed untouchable so I opted for the for the funny page.

I had to ask, "Where's the library?" I got a crossword puzzled look. "The terlit, the commode?" and I was hoping that it wasn't a bucket behind a curtain.

She gave me a look of pleasant surprise. "So it is called that also, the library! Of course!" She had a key and pointed me to the water closet down the hallway past the broom closet that led down to the furnace room. "Be careful the super does not see you."

It was a tiny spot crowded with a corroded gravity flush commode, a scummy washbasin, a battered plumber's helper, and a stinking soaked mop



Staring at the blue and red can of Drano on the shelf under the sink wasn't helping, but then neither had Maggie and Jiggs, Orphan Annie, Gasoline Alley, Mickey Finn, or Terry and the Pirates. My brain was sending commands down to the engine room but nothing was turning or churning. Popeye and Mutt & Jeff couldn't take my mind off what I had to do. I was about to give in and pull my pants up from around my ankles when I felt the tremor, faintly, but I knew my gut had finally made up its mind and was sending signals to set off a chain of events. I quickly freed a double page of newspaper and slid it under the seat and then sat back down to let nature take its course. I was hoping that what I was expecting was at the head of the line and that I wouldn't have to wait for the next instalment.

I stink, I've been told that many times, mainly by dames, and for entirely different reasons. This time I was looking at the evidence that I did and trying not to add to it with something coming up my throat. I set the package on the washbasin and slowly ran water over the sticky stinking muck. They were two well-formed specimens. I began separating them with a pencil tip. Most of it washed away as a disgusting brown slurry and I almost lost it down the drain and had to stop up the hole with my thumb while my fingers carefully separated the tiny chunk of gravel to one side of the basin and onto a dry section of the newspaper. I held the pebble under the faucet and let the slow stream wash the dirt away. It still looked like a bit of grit but now that I knew what it was it was more than that. Slipping it into my vest pocket, I ran water over my hands washing off the crap and scrubbing my fingers with the bar of lye soap on the shelf next to the can of Drano. No matter how many times I put my nose to them, the stink lingered around my sparkling cuticles. I dumped the newspaper and the remains into the commode and after slipping into my suspenders, strode out into the hallway and back into the tailor's shop.



““You seemed pleased with yourself.”

“I’m happy to report that everything came out ok.”

“It was then a good ending?”

“Yeah, very satisfactory.”

“Did you bring some of it with you. I detect. . .something.
In the air?”

“Maybe we should find some fresh air. Things are looking
up and there’s a chop suey joint down the street in need of my
business.”

“Do you think it is safe to be in the public? The police?”

“I plan get as far away as possible from the cops and this
little beauty is my ticket out of here. I just got a little bit of unfin-
ished business to take care of and I’m gone.”

“Oh, that is the diamond. Have you had it on you all this
time? I did not find it when I was washing your clothes.”

“I had it in me.”

“Oh. . .ooh, that explains the odor.”

Yeah, well I didn’t have much choice. I had to do what I
had to do.”

“That is joke, yes?”

“Yeah , you catch on fast.”

“And where is this place you will be gone now that you
have a diamond.”

“Any place but here. I’m too hot to hang around. But I hear
South America is nice. Rio, Buenos Aires, maybe even some place
in Chile. I hear the weather is like California, and it’s not as expen-
sive. A cheap place to lie low while I’m on the lam.”

“Now you are just making up words. I have never seen this
word in my cross puzzles.”

“What’s a three letter word meaning ’23 skidoo’?”

“You are making fun of me but you also make me laugh,
Lack.”

“Yeah I’m just a barrel of laughs once you get to know me.
I kill ya with my jokes cause ya die laughing.”

“Now you speak of murder? Why is this funny?”

“Forget it. It’s just an expression.”

“Lack, I have something else to tell you.”

“You’re full of surprises.”

“Herr Doktor cheat you from the diamonds like I told you.
They have the real book that you have sold them for the diamonds.

They trick you with a false book soaked to look like it has fallen in the commode. I hear them laughing about this and I think they are cruel and dishonorable men. And I think that they must be not succeeding in this cheating.”

“I appreciate the thought, but a diamond in the hand is worth six in the safe.”

“That is just it, Lack, there are none in the safe!”

“Whaddayamean?”

“When they have their meeting in Zayde’s apartment I go into Herr Doktor’s office and take the diamonds from the safe.”

“You did what? How did you know the combination?”

“It is my birthday.”

“So you have the diamonds?”