



## BETTER THAN DEAD, A Detective Story

by Pat Nolan writing as  
**Colin Deerwood**

*Colin Deerwood's anti-hero PI, Lackland Ask, was named "Dick Of The Day" by the prestigious Thrilling Detective blog last year. The pulp fiction serial came about from dashed off word sketches no more than a page or so in length of the action depicted on the covers of pulp magazines from the 30s. Soon the fragments took on a life of their own, growing from the accumulated potential of the occasional improvisations to a crime story set in 1940. The author credits his style to evenings spent listening to The Damon Runyan Theater on the radio as a child and, when he was mature enough, the hyperbolic wit of Dorothy Parker. The inspiration for his private detective can be found on the cover of a March 1930 issue of **Black Mask** that featured Hammett's The Glass Key. Better Than Dead has been **Dime Pulp**'s longest running serial, appearing in 30 issues since January of 2020. Better Than Dead is truly better than dead.*



I felt like a house had fallen on me. A dead house by the stink. And by the taste, like I had a mouth full of rotten eggs. It took a few tries to crack open an eye. I slammed it shut immediately. The light was too bright and heavy, and the weight of it hurt my head which seemed larger than I remembered it. I didn't remember being a pretzel either but my arms and legs told me otherwise. My groan sounded faraway but maybe that was because of the ringing in my ears. I put my hands over my face and tried the eyes again, and encountered the same blast of white light and the space it occupied. I managed to get myself upright and sitting once I untangled my legs from under me and slowly pieced together what I was seeing.

I was in the cabin on Little Lake. Uncle Ned's Indian was parked in the middle of the floor, the bright light streaming in through the one window casting unflattering rays on the rest of the tumbledown cobwebbed furnishings. I felt like I had broken my back on what could have been a bed of nails but was actually a crude cot that was much harder. The reason I hadn't felt anything until I opened my eyes was on the floor next to the bed, a half pint of Uncle Ned's high-octane joy juice.

The stink got my attention again and made me gag. I bolted to my feet and yanked open the door only to be blinded by the intense brightness of an otherwise welcoming morning. I stumbled up to the pump platform, shading my eyes while little birds made annoying high pitched squeaks like they were either happy to see me or happy to torture me, and tried my luck.

I almost broke my arm trying to bring the pump handle down. It was frozen. I tried again as if the first time hadn't hurt enough. This time I wrenched my back. I sat down on the pump platform and looked out over the dark blue scintillating waters of Little Lake. It was like an apparition, a story book picture, and of the times I'd visited as a kid, I don't think I ever saw it that way.

The sun had been up for a while judging from the slant of rays through the trees, but there was an after the rain freshness to the air. In the distance swimmers frolicked on a float set out from the shore near a collection of green and white summer cabins. A green canoe creased the waves paddled by two women with a third in a large sunhat lounging in the middle, dragging a hand in the water. Maybe I wasn't the only one with a hangover. And the sounds of joyful shrieks and laughter of bathers on the docks of the resort

around the bow of the lake reached me like a long ago memory of my own delight at being here.

I grabbed a tin pot from the clutter among the washtubs and picked my way carefully down the overgrown path to the dilapidated dock at water's edge. I'd watched granny do it before. Sometimes the pump needed priming.

I bent over the lapping waters and reached down, got a handful of water and threw it on my face. The shock of the cold wet helped a little. I cleared more of the tadpole scum from the surface and dipped in the pot, filling it to the top and straightened up to get my bearings. That's when I saw her.

I'd caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. About fifty yards down the shore a sleek silhouette emerged and pulled itself effortlessly up to the top of the large boulder. She shook her hair out of a bathing cap, water dripping off of her in sheets and extended both arms out from her body, arching her back, resembling a little T.

And T always stands for trouble as far as I'm concerned. Just what I'd come up to the country to avoid. What made it worse was that she was a beaut, blond hair cascading down her to her shoulders and a figure like a young sapling, a shapely young sapling.

I may have been hungover and groggy but my better instincts kicked in. I held my breath until she turned and walked up the cut in the bank and disappeared behind a stand of birch trees. My luck with women hadn't been all that great of late. Now not only did I have the thought of Becky gnawing at me and pointing an accusing finger of guilt, but I had a water nymph tormenting me with the prospect of moonlight swims. My goose was cook. I could almost taste the sauce.



I didn't have a man named Friday, but I went about fixing up the place like a man on a desert island anyway.

The pump wasn't broke, just dry from lack of use. It took a couple pots of water poured down the gullet but I got it to squeak, working the handle slowly down and up and down until I heard the slurp of the uptake and a spurt of rusty water sloshed out into the trough. A couple more hearty pumps and it gushed out clear and cold onto my upturned face and mouth and splashing across my chest. It

was a tasty quenching drink with a mineral tang that I remembered fondly, and it revived me.

If I was going to live in the cabin I was going to have to get rid of the rotting stench of the dead. My nose told me that the stink was strongest near the stove and the chimney pipe up through the roof. And as I suspected whatever it was, possum or coon, had crawled up in there, got stuck and died. I shucked my soggy clothes and borrowed the greasy coveralls hanging on a hook on the wall near the toolbox. They fit loosely. Ned was a bigger man. Dismantling the stovepipe was nasty work but I got it done and dumped the remains in the heap behind the cabin. By then I realized that I was famished and set about devouring much of the grub the cook had packed for me.

I watched the sunlight play over the expanse of Little Lake from the front porch of the cabin and knew that I had to put Becky's death aside and concentrating on my plan. It had been a good idea to drop out of sight as quickly as I did. It might look like I'd been knocked off and was feeding the eels at the bottom of the East River. But I couldn't count on it for certain. I had to get as far away as possible from the cops and the mob as I could and stay there. The threat to my life from the Thieves of Bombay were not something I was too concerned about yet. The news of an upcoming draft, on the other hand, made me nervous.

The fly in my ointment was my lack of the do-re-mi. My broken C note would eventually play out to its last nickel and I'd end up sawing a violin on a street corner. My best bet to get some traveling cash was the art piece that Ted had left me. If Alice could find a buyer then I'd have enough money to leave all my troubles behind. Now that the diamonds and Rebecca were out of the picture, my plans of expanding my confidential investigation business and going upscale were nothing more than coal dust.

For the time being I had to make like a hermit hiding in a cave, not get friendly with anyone, especially nubile young girls and their shotgun toting fathers, and stay out of sight. But it wasn't in my nature to skulk around in the shadows—except when I was on a case, of course. I had to keep busy.

I set about taking inventory of the old cabin and figuring out how I could make it livable. The cobwebs met the old broom as did the floor. Granny's room, the forbidding sanctum, smelled moldy and I figure that it was probably due to a leak in the roof. The water stains along the far wall confirmed my suspicion. Otherwise, it was just a jumble of old furniture and boxes full of musty old clothes. A bedframe held a lumpy feather mattress that the mice had chewed through. A set of drawers had a mottled discolored mirror propped above it. I opened the only other window in the cabin and let in some air and light. A shaded kerosine lamp sat in front of the mirror and

when I reached for it I gave a start. The face in the mirror was mine but I almost didn't recognize it, smudged with soot, hair uncombed and standing straight up. The bruises on my face were starting to fade but dark enough around the eyes to resemble a black mask like on some pulp magazine character.

I took my time rooting around, getting a feel for what was there and might come in handy, accompanied by the pleasant memories of the previous stays of my younger days. I visited the outhouse, the door hanging on one hinge and not offering much privacy. I knocked down an old hornet nest above the plank seat and swept away a thicket of spiderwebs and egg sacs. Mice had nibbled most of what was left of an old Sears Roebucks catalogue. The old red lime bucket was still there, the lime as solid as a rock with the large kitchen ladle lodged in it. The memory came to me of Ruthie showing the younger boys how girls pee and how it seemed pretty disgusting and shocking at the time and someone had gone to tattle to one of the adults and how Ruthie got in trouble for it but it was one of the most talked about events that summer.

And that reminded me that there was a root cellar set in the downslope of the cabin's foundation. The rough wooden double doors were still intact. When I yanked them open, I heard something scuttle away. Critters were living in there, maybe relatives of whatever it was that had died in the stove pipe. There were shelves set against the back and the gleam of glass, a wooden egg box with something growing out of it and a huddle of burlap bags with tiny pale sprouts poking through. The glass on closer inspection were mason jars. Some appeared to be empty and others were dark and mottled, green and white. I pulled a few out to get a better idea of what had been tucked away all this time. Much of it looked like it might have gone bad, some were preserves, loganberry jam I guessed as that was granny's specialty. And to my surprise, the empty jars were not empty but contained a clear liquid. A twist of the lid and a sniff told me I'd stumbled on Uncle Ned's emergency supply. As if I needed any more trouble.



A pair of old dungarees chopped off just above the knees made passable swim shorts if I was of a mind to engage in bathing frolic. Mainly I'd just jump in the lake to cool off

after I'd swung the axe and made myself a nice pile of fire wood to feed to the stove. The early summer heat was sweltering, thunderstorm booming regularly on the horizon. By the time evening arrived so had the mosquitoes, but it was also the best time for fishing. I braved a few evenings to be able to feast on lake trout. No one had fished off the end of the old dock in a while and they and the insects were biting. Good as it is, fish will only do you for so long and I had a craving for some variety. I knew to stay away from the berry patch after I'd stepped in what a bear had left there. I had to take in supplies and that meant the farm stand down Lake Road or firing up the Indian to go into Big Lake and the Big Lake Market.

I was sitting at the table with a stub of pencil making up a list when I heard a tapping on the door frame and got an eyeful of trouble.

She stood about five foot four, her blonde hair tied up in pigtails that dangled down to just below the collarbone, a pert little nose and pouty lips, and a playful sparkle to her predatory blue eyes. The rest of her looked like it belonged on a pin up calendar: a pair of overalls, patched at the knees, over a thin undershirt. Barefooted, all that was missing was a piece of straw to chew on and a come hither look. I had to blink. She was a stunner.

While I untied my tongue to find something to say, even "hello" or "come in," she stepped into the cabin and glanced around like she'd been there before. "You look just like him." It wasn't an unpleasant voice, young, in the upper register. Lips set serious, she said, "Except younger."

When I didn't respond, she offered, "Ned, old Ned. And a little worse for the wear." She meant the bruises on my face.

"Maybe, I'm his ghost." I thought I'd be cute.

She shook her pigtails and threw me a smile that hurt. "No, I saw you use the outhouse and I don't think ghosts do that."

"You've been spying on me?" I tried to sound grave although I was amused.

"This old cabin been almost abandoned after old Ned died. Maybe once in a while some of the cousins will come up and get drunk and even that don't seem to happen as much anymore. I used to come round when I was younger, when Ned was up fishing and trading pa fresh caught for shine."

I had figured right, she was the girl I'd seen swimming the morning after I got here, the moonshiner's daughter. It was like a bomb with a lit fuse had just stepped into my life. And for obvious reasons, I didn't want to stand up and shake her hand.

She smiled at my discomfort. "My name's Marie. I live on the property over yonder. My pa is Abner Wilson though most know him as Crazy Man Wilson on account he'll shoot at you if you come

round uninvited. But as long as I can recall, he ain't never shot nobody, scared them mostly." She went on like she'd missed talking to anyone who'd listen. "If you're one of the cousins, I ain't ever seen a one of them look as much like the old man as you do. And you got his old Indian setting on the porch. He never lent his cycle to nobody, let alone let them ride it." She cast a wistful gaze in the direction of the porch. "'Cept maybe for me. He would let me ride it on the old dam road out over by Middle Lake. Ride fast enough and the skeeters won't get ya, he'd say." She gave a nervous little laugh, worried that she might have said too much.

"Yeah, I'm one of the cousins." I remembered the alias I'd given Ruthie, "Stan Gardner. Ruthie's the one let me borrow the motorcycle. Me and her used to vacation up here when we were kids. Probably about your age. How old are you?"

I could tell by the way she shifted her eyes she was going to lie.

"Seventeen. I'll be eighteen in another month." And when I didn't respond. "Honest."

"So Marie, is this just a neighborly visit or did you come by to borrow a cup of sugar?"



She was all over me like butter on scotch. I knew my next move would decide if I was going to be staring down the double barrel of a shotgun or not. I was torn by pulling her in close or pushing her away. I looked at that young face and I saw Rebecca, innocence yet passion.

"Listen," I said "you. . . ."

She was passing her young lips all over my face and my neck, whispering in my ear, "Oh, Ned, Ned, I knew you'd come back to me!"

So that was it. "Ok, kid, you gotta calm down. You got me mixed up with someone else." I held her by the shoulders and pushed her away. "I'm not Ned. And if I do look like him, it's just the family resemblance."

"Oh no, Ned, you've come back just like you said you would!"

"Ok, let's get one thing straight. I ain't a ghost and I'm certainly not Uncle Ned back from the dead."

She tried to put her arms around my neck and I held her wrists.

“But you look so much like the picture of him when he was younger and I think it looks just like you do right now except you’re not wearing a uniform. And he told me that if he could be that young again he would come and get me and take me away with him! And that’s just what he, you did!”

Now I knew I was dealing with nutty and the only way to deal with nutty is to be nutty right back. “Sorry to disappoint you, Marie. I’m not Ned and I can’t be Ned for you either.”

She gave me a fierce pout and was about to answer me back.

“Let me explain why.” I put on my most serious and somber air. “You see I just lost a loved one, a girl, in fact, just a little older than you.”

“Was she your girlfriend?!” she demanded.

“Well, I was hoping to make her my girlfriend but then she died.”

Her mouth went sad but her eyes were smiling. “Oh,” she muttered, “I’m sorry.” And then, “What did she look like?”

“She looked like a movie star.”

Her eyes brightened. “Oh, which one, which one?”

Now she had me. I’d been to a lot of movies but I could never remember any of the names of the dames. “What’s her name, the blonde with the grapefruit?”

“Oh I know, Jean Harlow!”

“Yeah, but more of a brunette and kinda classy.”

“Mina Loy?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Carole Lombard?” She narrowed her eyes in frustration. “Katherine Hepburn!”

“Yeah, that’s it, but younger.”

I watched her picture the face of the actress. “What was her name?”

I was surprised that it was difficult to speak it. “Becky, Rebecca.” And the ledge four stories up where she took her fall was still very clear.

I got a look of sympathy. “How did she die?”

It took me a bit to form the words. “She fell. From a building.”

“Oh, a suicide.”

“No, she and I were running away from a gang of crooks when the radio bomb blew up and she lost her footing trying to reach the fire escape.”

By the look in her eyes she was stunned by disbelief.

“You see, I’m a newspaper reporter and I was investigating a mob boss who turned out to belong to the Black Hand. Becky was



a cub reporter following me around cause I was supposed to be showing her the ropes, but we got too close to the bad guys. And she died. It happened just a few days ago, not more than a week. And that's why I'm up here. The cops are after me because they want to know what I uncovered. The mob is after me to keep me from revealing what I uncovered. And then there's the Thieves of Bombay out for revenge."

I might have overdone it. Her eyes were shining.

"I don't care if you're Ned or not, I'm in love with you!" she said advancing with a youthful ardor.

I heard it, and she heard it too, a shuffling and heavy breathing. I thought maybe it was the bear and turned in that direction and when I turned back she was gone. Then I saw him, lumbering up the path, red faced beneath the ragged straw hat. He was carrying a shotgun. He nodded to me as I stepped out onto the porch.

"Ifn I believed in ghosts I'd say you was one. Marie said you was. I knowed him after he come back from the war n he looked a lot like you do now. You're family I take it." When I nodded, wary of the shotgun resting across his forearm, "Abner Wilson. I got the big cabin over yonder." He cocked his head in the direction I made a note to avoid in the future. "Ned and me was fishing and drinking partners. He supplied the fish and I supplied the drink. It was a good trade. You fish?"

"I've been known to."

"You don't look like no country boy except for the dings on your face. You ain't showing any laboring muscle. City boy?" He sent a squirt of tobacco juice into the berry bramble.

"I'm Stan Gardner," I said, "I was a reporter working on a story about the mob and I got too close. That's why the knuckle prints." That got his interest.

"So this is your hideaway? That mean the govmint gonna come snooping around?"

"They won't if nobody tells them I'm here."

"You sure you ain't a revenuer?"

"Do I look like one?"

"No, can't say as you do." Old Wilson glared with a squint eye. "You look like trouble. Stay offn my property." He shifted the shotgun to the ready. "And stay away from my daughter."



I found his daughter after the moonshiner had slouched away through the thicket separating the properties. She was propped up quite comfortably on granny's bed reading movie magazines.

"Where'd you find those?" I asked flipping through the dusty stack at her side. There were copies of *Screen Star*, *Film Fun*, and *Star Brite* along with some more risqué covers and content from *Gay Parisienne*, *Spicy*, and *Smart Set*.

She looked up from her magazine, smiling mischievously. "Under the bed. Ned used to get them for me. Well, not all of them." She flicked the cover of a *Spicy* with a particularly racy cover. "He would read me stories of Hollywood and all the movie stars. And after a while I caught on how to read and could read them by myself and he said he was real proud of me. Even the teacher over at the school was surprised I could figure out how to read and knew so much about Hollywood which she said was the den of devils but I didn't believe her because if these are pictures of devils I wanted one and I wanted to be one." She held up a full page spread of Hollywood dollies.

"Wait a minute. You and Ned were. . . ?"

"Intimate? Not once. He wouldn't allow it. I read all about it in one of his magazines, all the different kinds of kisses, like the soul kiss and the vacuum kiss, the eyelash kiss, the nip, the taxi kiss, and there's this book called the *camera suiter* with pictures of how to hold someone when you're in love with them and. . . ."

"Ok, ok, I think I heard enough. So Ned never tried anything, you know, with his. . . ?"

"Once when I was swimming naked like I do on a full moon night because I read about a movie star who did that, he saw me. And when he stood up to walk away I saw that he had a stiffy. I thought it was funny because I thought only the boys at school got them. And they're always after me to touch them, but I won't ever. Ned told me not to touch their toads, he called them that, cause I'd get warts on my hands and I want my hands to be perfect and white as a Hollywood starlet."

The sirens were sounding in my head and I don't mean the ones sitting on rocks calling out to sailors that my old man told me about. These were police sirens, tornado warning sirens, air raid sirens, draw bridge sirens, man overboard ship sirens all telling me one thing. I was looking at trouble. That was the last thing I needed. And the way she was looking at me spelled my doom.

“You’re going to get me killed. You heard your old man. He’d shoot me if he knew you were here.”

She pouted and I got a sorrowful look. “But Ned. . . .”

“I’m not Ned and you know it!” It came out harsh and she drew back alarmed. I’d scared her. And I realized then that she could be a better ally than an adversary. “Listen, Marie, maybe you can help me.” That brightened her up. “There are some real bad men who would like nothing better than to get their hands on me. I need someone who knows their way around Little Lake, someone who knows hiding places in case they come looking for me, someone to keep their eyes and ears open so someone don’t come sneaking up on me.”

Her eyes opened almost as wide as her pert little mouth and she nodded her head vigorously. “Oh, yes, yes, I can do that, Ned, er, I mean. . . ?”

“You can call me Stan for now. When I get to know you better I’ll tell you my real name.” I held out my hand because I could tell she wanted to throw her arms around me to seal our compact. “Shake?”

I could have passed a hand over my brow to signify that I dodged a close one. Now she was all smiles as she paused at the door to the cabin. “You can count on me, Stan. And don’t worry about pa, by the time the sun goes down he’s usually drunker than a skunk on sour mash. And that shotgun ain’t loaded. It’s mostly for show when summer folk takes a wrong turn and wander onto his property..”



**H**e had a smile like a mouthful of soda crackers, They turned to crumbs and he had to swallow them dry when he saw me. I saw him first, coming up behind him snooping around the cabin.

Earlier that day I’d set out with my list of items I’d need if I wanted to eat more than fish and drink moonshine, not that I objected to either of them. I fired up the Scout and rode down to the farm stand and picked up a sack of potatoes and a sack of onions, the foundation of any hearty meal. The farmer wanted two bits for a half dozen eggs. I might have paid that if he made me an omelet and served it to me on a silver platter. He was a thin rail topped by a bushy beard under a floppy felt hat. Under the overalls the sleeves

of his long undershirt didn't reach his wrists and he was missing two fingers on his left hand, pinky and ring. He'd given me the hard eye when I rode up. Maybe it was the sunglasses. I'd taken to wearing them as my eyes were sensitive to the bright country sunshine and the dark lenses helped ease the watery squint. I probably looked like a mobster or a Hollywood movie star to him. His scarecrow of a wife could only gape a toothless stare. The early corn was cheap and I picked up half a dozen ears.

I had to go into Big Lake and the mercantile store to pick up some canned goods including a couple bricks of spam and a two pound can of Hillsborough coffee. I ducked into the pharmacy and soda shop next door with a handful of nickels and found the bank of phonebooths at the back. I pulled the door shut, deposited a nickel and gave the operator the number to the shared phone by Alice's studio. The operator instructed me to deposit two more nickels because it was a long distance call.

The phone rang about five times before a gruff voice answered. "Ya!"

"Hey Linkov!" I shouted into the handset, "Get Alice on the horn! It's me, Lackland Ask!"

I heard him grumble something and then a loud knock and him shouting, "Alice! You have telephone!"

The operator had me deposit another slug before Alice answered. She was happy and happy to hear from me. I didn't want to waste another dime and got straight to the point. Had she found anyone interested in buying Ted's art piece?

But she was bubbling with her own news. First of all she was moving up to the loft that her friend Lee had occupied, and where Rebecca and I had spent the night, and who was going to move in with her boyfriend in a larger loft on Ninth Street. And the attack on her had come with a silver lining. An art dealer had read the story in the paper about her being a victim of a violent crime. Now he was working with an uptown art gallery to get her a show of her own. He'd even sold a few of her watercolors to some rich swells so all of a sudden she had money and prospects for more.

Right about then the operator said I needed to deposit another nickel if I wanted to continue the call. "What about the art piece!" I shouted casting a glance through the glass of the booth door to see if anyone had heard me.

Alice said knew a retired doctor from New Jersey who might be interested and that she was in touch with him to make arrangements. I had just enough time give her the address in Ridley, Stan Gardner, care of Ruth Walker, before my supply of nickels ran out.

I was about to clamber back on the old Indian when I caught a whiff of what was coming out of the exhaust fan of the Sleepy

Waters Café across the street. It made my stomach rumble and I thought, what the heck, I'd just splurged six bits on a long distance call, I might as well treat myself to something that wasn't fish or moldy preserves.

The sign on the window said *Breakfast All Day Every Day*. I caught a look at myself in the glass door going in. I was past needing a shave, hair mussed from the ride, and dark glasses I probably looked like a fugitive in some B movie.

But the waitress greeted me friendly enough and showed me to a booth and handed me a menu. "Are you with the movie people staying over at the Big Lake Lodge?" She took my hesitance as confirmation. She beamed a big smile, "Don't worry I won't tell anyone. One of the actresses was in here the other day and said their being here was all hush-hush."

She set a cup of steaming java in front of me while I examined the menu. I had a choice of stewed prunes, apple sauce, or figs with toast and coffee for two bits which seemed a mite high for such a light repast, Or I could get one egg and two strips of bacon or a slice of ham, toast and coffee included, for the same price. Two eggs any style with a compliment of toast and coffee the same. If I really wanted to splurge I could get a full portion of ham and eggs or bacon, potatoes fried any style, marmalade on my toast, and coffee for just shy of four bits. I let my eyes wander down to the bottom of the menu and knew right away that the next item of half a dozen eggs, ham steak, potatoes, half a loaf of bread, toasted, and all the coffee I could drink bumping two whole dollars was beyond my budget.

When the waitress came by again I ordered the number 4. She refilled my cup and handed me a copy of the daily blat. "Coming right up," she said, "You can read the funny papers while you're waiting."

To get to the latest in the lives of Maggie and Jiggs, Dagwood and Blondie, and Popeye and Olive Oyl, I had to cross a minefield of depressing headlines. Herr Moustache's army was advancing on Paris, Mister Loony was raising a fuss in North Africa, and Union Jack was in tatters. I didn't even bother to read what Uncle Joe was up to because it all added up to war, and the battle field is no place for a coward like me. To top it off, the local Army Corps had to recruit a hundred thousand men by the end of August otherwise the government was going to institute the draft. My appetite was spoiled even before I got to Joe Palooka and Kobby Walsh.

Beside the prospect of being drafted, the death of Becky, the cops and the mob being after me, not to mention the Thieves of Bombay, a trigger happy moonshining neighbor and his star struck oversexed teenage daughter were occupying my mind on my return

to Little Lake so I didn't think too much of the battered '31 Ford ragtop parked off to the side where Little Road goes from two ruts to one rut. And when I pushed the bike down the grade toward the cabin, I spotted him, a pear shaped man with a peaked cap sporting some official insignia, a loose fitting green shirt with a badge clinging to the front pocket, and a wide belt and holster holding up a pair of oversized herringbone trousers. I was almost up on him when he must have heard me, whirling around and clutching at the pistol in the holster before pointing it at me. If I'd been given a guess, I'd say I had just met Thorny.



**D**on't shoot!" I called out. I didn't raise my hands lest the Scout toppled over. Besides I was getting tired of having people poke guns at me,

The man in the peaked hat with the insignia above the bill grinned at first like he'd just won something. Then he looked at the gun in his hand like he didn't know how it got there. Feeling foolish, he got angry at having been caught out.

"You should know better than to sneak up on a man from behind like that!" He thumbed the badge pinned to his shirt pocket that looked like it might have come as a prize in a box of Cracker Jacks, "I'm an officer of the law! And I got every right to shoot you where you stand!" He holstered his revolver like it was a bother and gave me a squint from under a hedge of eyebrow. He had a nose that sat on his face like a large pickled strawberry. What passed for a moustache hovered crookedly over a mouth of bad teeth.

"What seems to be the problem, Sheriff? Have I broken the law?" I asked, pretending not to notice the patch of wet that had bloomed at the front of his trousers.

He raised what little chin he had for a try at a haughty glare. "Well, tresspassin' for one. And who's to say you are the owner of that there motor-sickle. It might not belong to you." He rested his hand on the butt of his revolver.

"I'm not trespassing, Sheriff, I got permission to be here seeing as how I'm related to the old gal who used to own this cabin."

"That so. What'd her name be then?"

He had me there. All I ever called her was granny. But then I remembered a little game she played with us when we were kids

and we wanted a sweet from her. "You ask nice," she'd say, "cause that's my name."

"We only called her granny because it would have been disrespectful to call her by her given name, and of course she wasn't my real granny, more of a great aunt a couple times removed. But if I recall, seems someone referred to her as Eunice."

He nodded like I'd passed a test. "I ain't the Sherrif. The name's Thorndyke, Alvin Thorndyke. I'm the Constable from over in Ridley."

"A little out of your jurisdiction, ain't you, Chief?" I offered and watched the slow coloring of his wan cheeks.

"This here is my jurisdiction." He touched the butt of the gun with a finger. "I'm looking out for a friend. Don't want no hobo settin' up camp out here."

"I'm not hobo, Marshal, you can ask my cousin, Ruthie Walker. She knows I'm staying here at the Ask family cabin, doing some cleaning up and repairs since nobody's been out here since Uncle Ned passed." I lowered my eyes, solemn like. "And Ruthie knows I borrowed old Ned's Indian to get around."

I could almost hear the gears turning under his hat. "What d'you say your name was?"

I figured him for a blowhard with an exaggerated sense of self-importance. I ignored him while I parked the motorcycle and undid the saddlebags to take them inside the cabin. When I turned to face him, he was giving me that suspicious look again.

"I didn't say, but you just reminded me of something. Maybe you can help me."

The constable wasn't too certain how to take the request and cocked his head to one side. "How so?"

"Well, I've been meaning to pay my respects to granny and Uncle Ned but I realized that I don't know where the cemetery is that they're buried in. Now I suppose I could ask Cousin Ruthie but I don't want to bother her more than I have to, she seems to have a lot on her hands with them youngsters. Can you direct me?"

It was like I pulled his earlobe and a light came on. He gave me a grin that I was sure I didn't want to see too often. "That's right Christian of you, son. Not only can I show you, but I can take you there!"

And that's how I ended up in Thorny's jalopy heading back toward Ridley.



**Y**ou didn't have to be a detective to figure Thorny out, he gave the store away whether he realized it or not. First he warned me about my neighbor, a trigger happy moonshiner, said to have killed a man or two in the wild wooly days before repeal. And his daughter was a man crazy headed for perdition if she didn't change her ways. Nothing a good husband couldn't fix.

He gave me the lowdown on the farmer who had the stand down on Lake Road. The raggedy scarecrow of a man was known as Three-Fingers McKay. He'd lost them in a fight at a roadhouse near Grover City. "He was a lowdown drunk until he found Jesus and the Widow Larson who lost her man over there where we ain't got no business being." He shook his head. "Sad story," and then glared at me with a sidelong glance.

"I would have joined up myself but as I was sole support of my dear widowed mother, rest her soul, I was given a deferment. In thanks to the Lord for saving me from almost certain death in the mud of a foreign land, I served him as a chaplain over at the county jail, the youngest man to hold that post in the history of the State.

"I also worked as a youth counselor at one of the all-girl summer camps they have around here. That was the toughest work I've ever done. You get that many young gals together at one time and you end up with packs of she-wolves, circling each other, looking to dig their claws into each other. It was enough to make your hair stand on end. It was my saving grace and blessing when my cousin, Sylvester Boone, became president of the town council after being the constable for many years and passed the post on to me. I was probably around your age, and I have to say, I have served proudly upholding law and order for the citizens of Ridley.

"And let me tell you, it hasn't been an easy job, especially the way things are in this country right now. I've had to deal with my share of hobos and drifters. My words to them when I catch them, don't let the sun go down before you're gone. I got enough to do with the ruffians and layabouts who belong here." He frowned at me and nodded. "Your cousins, I'm sorry to say, among them. That bunch went wild after the old gal died. . . 'scuse, I meant to say, the Widow Ask, and her son Ned, well, the heart went out of him about then, too. He'd had a tough lot what with the war. All he cared about was fishing and drinking, and that consarned motor sickle. Didn't matter no how to him that his nieces and nephews was raising holy hell with their drunken carrying on, almost burned the house down



around them. Those boys, they were always in fights, especially with any boys who came around to see their girl cousins. Even when they'd been invited.

"And they let that wonderful apple orchard the widow had go to seed. I can't count the times I pinched apples from those trees. And of course the cider she sold around town was loved by all. I just felt it was my duty to do something about it. After a while those boys got tired of spending their nights in the pokey with the town drunks. They got the message. They were better off being some place not in my jurisdiction. Some of them try to squirrel back, but I catch 'em." He smiled at the thought of that.

"And the girls, most 'er gone or married. The big city attracts them like moths, they think they can do better. But I seen some come back, too, worse for the wear, and by then what man is gonna to want 'em? Except for Missus Walker. She was the one who cared for the Widow toward the end. There was a will. She was very generous. Maybe too generous. And Missus Walker inherited the house. I look in on her now and then. She's had some hard luck. One husband left, part because of the goings on at the Ask house and part because there was no work for a man in these parts unless you want to be a busboy or dishwasher. And you have to know that Paul and Polly are a handful without a strong man to put his foot down. Except for the father of little Angel, but he's a waiter at one of the resorts in Big Lake. Man can't raise a family on what they pay, and from what I've heard, he likes to play the odds." He lifted his hand off the steering wheel and shook his fist like he was holding dice. "Can't say she didn't pick a good looking one, but something about him bothers me." And put a finger to the side of his nose.

A large powerhouse hove into view. I could tell by the headlight arrangement and the twin spots that it was official. Only the government could afford that much chrome. It was speeding headlong toward us, crowding the centerline of the narrow country road.

It caught Thorny by surprise. He grunted in alarm and steered for the shoulder of the road. "County Sheriff, wonder what he's up to?" he asked himself as the large dark Dodge sped past, the man in uniform at the wheel glancing briefly at them.

"Yep, he's in a hurry to get somewhere. Wonder if he's late." I offered.

Thorny looked at me like I was an idiot which I figured was to my advantage.

"No, something is going on." He looked over his shoulder and was about to pull out onto the road when another patrol car hove into view and passed at high speed. "Now I'm positive. Probably something to do with that missing gal."

"A girl is missing?" I thought of Rebecca. It was still eating me alive.

"Oh, probably just some youngster has run away with big ideas in her head. Or," he considered the possibility, "got knocked up by some summer vacationer. Happens all the time. And they come back, dragging their bastards with them in the walk of shame."

I could see that Thorny could be a self-righteous ass but I kept that to myself.

A mile or so down the road he pointed at a hillock topped with a few large oaks and a wrought iron arch over a gravel track.

"Coming up on it here," he pointed and steered onto a driveway where a sign announced *Morton Heights Cemetery, All Denominations, 1832*.

The road led up to beneath the oaks. Thorny knew the way up through the rows of burial plots, some more elaborate than others. Granny's larger stone held court over all of the dead relatives of which there were more than I realized. Ned's stone was the freshest, least weathered. The dates said he was only eighteen years older than me.

My old man said he hated his youngest brother. Not in so many words but through his arrogance toward him, resentful because he was his mother's favorite. I'd overheard him telling my mother that his brother was illegitimate. I didn't understand at the time, only that granny had done something with someone other than grandpa who might as well have been a faded picture behind glass on the wall for all that I remembered of him. I remember my mother defending Ned and the beginning of an argument, one of many, where my old man would win by a knock out.

Otherwise I could have cared less for the dirt encased bones beneath my feet. I was at the cemetery for an entirely different reason. I'd given it some serious thought. If I was going to vanish, I was going to need a different identity. Lackland Ask was going to have to disappear and in his place would have to be a verifiable person, someone with a birth certificate and a death certificate. Someone my age who had died young enough so that no one could tell the difference. That had been my plan all along. Thorny had just provided the opportunity and was familiar enough with the populace to provide some background if need be. Still being there did have its effect and I removed my dark glasses and rubbed my eyes.

Thorny cleared his throat. "Mighty fine woman," he said huskily, and I knew he meant it. "I get choked up myself at the thought of these fine people. I can tell by your eyes going red. No need to be ashamed."

I didn't want to tell him that my eyes had been watering and red for nearly two weeks and the dark glasses were the only thing that kept them from brimming with tears in bright daylight. I walked

away from the family site and lit up a cigarette, glancing at the headstones, many dating from the last century, none in an age range to be of any use to me. I'd figured my idea to be a bust as Thorny joined me at his ragtop and started to get in the driver's seat. On the downside of the hill were a couple dozen dingy headstones in overgrown plots.

"Who is buried down there?" I asked as I stepped down the hill and into the first row of plots.

He followed to the edge of the gravel patch. "Them's paupers graves, some of them from the influenza."

I stood in front of a row of five headstones. The large one inscribed with the name Jedediah Paulson had lived forty years, and his loving wife, Sara, five years less, and their three children, all had died within the same year. The youngest was my age. He was nine when he died.

Thorny stepped down next to me. "Paulson. I remember about them. Cousin Sylvester said they was found in their little shack out by the rail line, all dead. Said it was the Spanish flu though I can't tell you why they called that, maybe that's where it come from. They were pretty far gone when someone come up on them." He shook his head and walked away. "Sad story."

I took the note of the name, Jerome Paulson, born nineteen and eleven.

At one point in the sober drive back to Little Lake, Thorny turned to me and said, "I know your name ain't Dick Sales." He laughed like he knew a secret when he said it.

"I don't think I ever said it was."

"I know your real name. Sam Carter." There was a hint of triumph in his revelation. And he revealed his source. "Paul told me. He heard you tell his mother. A fine lad, that boy. He has my ear."

I was about to set him straight when I saw the dark car parked partially blocking the road ahead. I didn't have to say it. Thorny said it for me. "Roadblock."

I needed a roadblock like a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.



The phone was ringing in the hall. Ringing. I could hear it. Ringing. I could see it. Ringing. In my mind's eye. Ringing. In a smoky pool hall. Ringing. Why wasn't anyone answering the ringing? I would have answered but the room I was

in had no doors, just four walls of cheap wallpaper and scratched up wainscotting. The ringing wouldn't let up. The smoke was making my eyes weep blood. I had to force them open to the faintest slits. That's when it hit me like a bucket of cold water. The bucket of cold water.

Standing over me with an empty bucket and an impish grin was the moonshiner's daughter. "You set yourself on fire!" She said it like it was a joke.

I felt like a joke. The slant rays of light through the window of the cabin sparked the dust motes and the smoke and filled the empty jar on the table like the ghost of what it once contained. I looked down at myself covered in wet, the blanket as well, and the ragged smoking black hole the now soggy cigarette had burned through it.

The light was hurting my eyes worse than before and now I had a brutal headache to go along with it. I glanced up at Marie out of the side of my eye. She seemed to be gloating.

"Where were you yesterday when I needed you?"

She desperately wanted to be needed. "No! What are you talking about?"

"You were supposed to keep a lookout so nobody'd sneak up on me."

"What?"

"Yesterday I got a visit from Constable Thorndyke. You coulda warned me."

She shook her shoulders with a shiver. "Oh, Thorny. He's a snake." And she made a face like she'd tasted something unpleasant. "'He likes to make like he's your uncle or some other relative and tell you what to do, especially with girls. The boys he just puts them in jail if he catches them, but the girls, he takes out for long drives on deserted back roads in his jalopy and talks about the Lord and how we're supposed to all act like young ladies."

I pulled myself upright and wiped some water off my scraggly beard. "You've gone on a ride with Thorny?" I didn't want to sound too paternal.

She shook her head. "No, Thorny wouldn't dare cause he knows what pa would do to him. But some girls I know, older girls, they told me. Said they'd rather go to jail than go on 'the ride' with Thorny. He made their skin crawl."

I grunted in acknowledgement that I understood. "Where were you, anyway?"

"I was at the Odeon in Grover City with my friend, Irma. We spent the day there. First for lunch at the Downtown Diner, and then a double feature. Two Clark Gable movies. I'd seen one of them before, but that Gable, he's so dashing, Though I don't think he's that good of a singer. And Claudette Colbert is just too brassy. I

don't know what he sees in her," she said wistfully. "There's a change of feature tomorrow with a new William Powell movie. I like him too, especially when he's acting with Myrna Loy. He seems very charming. Even as a private eye."

I nodded and groaned as any movement of my head made it throb. I could have said that's what I am, a private eye, but then she might have got the wrong idea from the movies. Hollywood never gets it right. They always give the shamus a conscience, noble principle. You can't have any of that if you're going to be a private investigator and expect to survive. When you're a bottom feeder, high falutin ideals just get in the way of doing the job. I knew that. I had gone soft on Rebecca and that got me nothing but grief.

I staggered to my feet and she reached out to help me. I pushed her away. I was a little unsteady but I managed. I knew what I had to do and soon. I lurched for the door and mumbled "gotta see a troll about a hole" and stumbled off the porch and in the direction of the lopsided closet off to the side of the cabin.

"Don't fall in!" she called after me brightly.



I hadn't really wanted to think about it. What Thorny had said on the way back from the graveyard. We'd been stopped by the roadblock. Thorny knew the deputy, a young lug with a square head and eyes that wouldn't stay still. A girl had gone missing, the daughter of Judge Chandler. She'd gone missing after a shopping trip to Grover City. It had been two days now. They had the dogs out searching the lower shore of Middle Lake near the dump.

The deputy had eyed me suspiciously. Maybe it was the dark glasses, or the beard that was growing unevenly along the ridge of my jaw. Thorny had laughed when he caught the drift of the deputy's gaze. "This here's one of the Ask cousins from out in the Midwest. If you know the Asks you'd say they all had that same family resemblance. This one here is the near spitting image of old Ned Ask who didn't look any of them either. You might remember him from when you was a young hellion."

The young deputy had nodded his head, grinning. "The fisherman! With the old Indian motor bike!"

Right about then a rickety Model T sputtered up behind Thorny's Ford and the deputy waved us through after saying he was pleased to meet me.

I didn't think too much about being mistaken for old Ned but Thorny's remark struck a nerve. And it bothered me all the way back to Little Lake.

The grease monkey who pumped my gas at the livery in Ridley had thought I looked like my old man's younger brother. Marie and her father had remarked on the closeness. And now Thorny. Only Ruthie hadn't said anything, maybe because she'd known all along and wasn't surprised that I looked like Ned.

It got me to thinking and when I'm thinking I like to do it with a drink for company as it helps provide a different point of view on what I might be thinking about. I dipped into old Ned's cache of everclear and settled in to a bit of hard thinking and hard drinking which maybe I shouldn't have been doing especially when I was thinking about things that maybe I shouldn't have been thinking about. But those thoughts just kept crawling back into my head and I had to drink more to blot them out. The more I drank, the tighter the circles my thinking made until I got so dizzy I passed out.

All of that thinking drink gushed out of me like a fire hydrant into the hole at my feet.



If I was any good at math I might have put two and two together. I'd soaked my head in the lake trying to wash out the ache. I'd changed into an old pair of trousers I'd cut off at the knees as a swimsuit from the pile of musty old clothes in Granny's bedroom. I ran my shirt under the pump and wrung it out. I spot cleaned my jacket and trousers and set them and the shirt out to dry on a big boulder by the lake.

Then I crept over to the chicken coop on Crazy Wilson's property and swiped a couple of fresh eggs Marie had left out with the idea that I could collect them. She'd offered them when she heard me complain about how I was getting tired of canned beans, burnt rice, and lake trout. She also showed me how to avoid the booby traps her pa had set up around the property. If any one of them were triggered, he was sure to shoot, she'd warned.

I lit a fire in the outdoor stone fireplace and greased up a flat skillet and fried up the eggs. They hit the spot and satisfied my empty belly but my throbbing head was making me wobbly and I knew that there was but one solution. Hair of the dog. Unfortunately, using hair of the dog to cure the hangover has a lot in common with being in debt to a loan shark, you'll never pay it off.

The first sip went down hard and I felt my gut riding the elevator up to the top floor. The second taste wet my whistle with only a slight shudder. By the third lip smacking swallow, my headache and I were on more friendly terms.

My eyes still burned but I could see clearly what my next step was going to be. I had to get over to the courthouse in Grover City where the birth records were kept at the Country Recorder's Office. Once I got the certificate I was going to use it to apply for a passport under the name of Jerome Paulsen and take myself some place south of the border where Kovic, the cops, the feds, the diamond dealers, the draft board, or the Thieves Of Bombay would never find me. I figured that if I went in asking for the document looking like a mug, the clerk might be a little suspicious. I had to look legit, like that was my job, that I did it all the time. I worked for a law firm in the city if they thought to ask. But if they're like most government clerks, they almost never do. Unless they stepped on the cat's tail that morning and spilled their entire cup of hot coffee over themselves.

I had just stretched out in the shade of the porch, counting my chickens before they hatched, mainly about how much money I could get for Ted's art piece if Alice found a buyer, when I heard a high whistle pretending to be a bird. That was Marie's warning signal. I looked up to see her at the edge of the thicket between the properties pointing to the path leading up to Little Road. And then I heard the voices. I spun around just in time to see a slim young boy in a pair of swimming trunks, towel draped around his neck, and lugging a large wicker picnic basket. Right behind, a little girl in a summer dress and bare feet came running after him. And behind her, the other twin with their mother, Ruthie. I should have known. She'd probably sent Thorny out to reconnoiter the lay of the land as it were. Bringing up the rear, a large gunny sack over one shoulder and murder in her eyes, was the cook.



Ruthie was wearing a long sleeved robe, a large woven purse slung over one arm, open toe sandals, a large straw hat, and white frame sunglasses. She stopped in her tracks and placed a hand on her hip when she saw me. I felt like a bug under a magnifying glass or maybe a mouse who had just wandered into the cat's path. Either way, the only word I could think of was "uh-oh."

She smiled to show me she was pleased with what she saw or was it just to show me her teeth, a row of tiny uniform bone grinders.

“Surprise! We thought we’d come and use the lake. Hope you don’t mind.”

They’d all gathered around the front porch looking at me expectantly. Ruthie cocked an appraising eyebrow. “Who do you think you are, Tarzan?”

“Yeah, that’s me, Tarzan. I got tired of the jungle and thought I’d try out the pines and the lake.”

“Tarzan doesn’t have a beard,” Ruthie’s boy chimed in.

“Have you ever seen Tarzan shave? Maybe he has a barber. Runs down to the local village and has the witch doctor scrape a machete across his chin.”

“I don’t think he wears dark glasses.” This was the older girl, well on her way to being just like her mother.”

I had to shrug. “I don’t understand why. As lord of the jungle he’s certainly entitled to.”

“That’s quite a swim suit. Make it yourself?” Ruthie said with a mocking grin.

I laughed because I probably did look a sight, a ragged fringe of threads dangling around my knees. “I found an old pair of trousers in Granny’s room. I had to use the axe to chop them off at the knees.”

“Granny’s room,” Ruthie looked past me at the doorway. “That was the forbidden inner sanctum. If you got caught in there you’d get the switch.”

“Telling us we weren’t allowed to go in there was like telling us we had no choice but to try.”

“I snuck in there one time with Cole Turner, my older cousin. He said he wanted to show me something. Everybody talked on how Granny must have had jewels or gold hidden in there that she kept so secret.”

I’d heard that rumor and once asked my mother about it. She assured me that there was no truth to it. Granny was just guarding her privacy. “Are you sure it was him going to show you something?”

Ruthie caught what I was hinting and narrowed her eyes at me, and then glanced over at her kids. “What are you standing around for? Go jump in the lake!” And as an afterthought, asked me, “How’s the water?”

“Wet.” The kids hadn’t waited for my answer and were already running down to the boat dock.

“Very funny. You should be on the radio. Like Jack Benny.”

“Maybe I should have my own show. A quiz show. I’d call it Ask Me Anything. With your host, Lackland ‘Lucky’ Ask!” I gave a dim smile.



“People still call you Lucky? That was Granny’s nickname for you.”

“No one in recent memory. And for obvious reasons. Granny hated the name Lackland which is a family name on my mother’s side. She couldn’t understand why anyone would be name ‘no land.’”

“Well, she was right, it is an odd name.” And peering into the dimness beyond the door. “You sleeping in her room?” she asked with a wicked smile.

I don’t know why I blushed but I did. And I almost never stutter. “No, no. I sleep on the, the cot by the door.”

“Why, Lack, are you still afraid to get caught in Granny’s room? By her ghost?”

Of course I wasn’t, but that was Ruthie, always looking for a way to make fun of someone. “I go in there all the time!” I insisted a little too vehemently. “That’s where I got these trousers. Not much in there but an old musty rat eaten mattress and boxes and drawers full of old clothes.”

Ruthie brushed past me and stepped into the cabin. “You know, Tarzan doesn’t wear pants, just some little old leather mud flap.”

The cook dropped one of the pans she had hauled in the gunny sack and the clatter distracted me. Much about Ruthie the few summers I’d spent at Little Lake was coming back to me. Besides being a bully to the younger kids, she liked to dare you to do something stupid and then fink on you when you did. “Ruthie made me do it” was the common excuse although it didn’t save you from getting the switch or the belt.

“Well, if you don’t mind I’ll just go into Granny’s room and change into my bathing suit.” And she stalked back into the cabin.

The cook was struggling with the pump handle and I walked over to help her. “The handle’s stiff at first. It just needs a few good pumps.”

“I’ve heard that said.” She gave me a leery side glance.

“Let me help you with that.”

She shook her head. “I don’t need you interfering with my business.” And with the tilt of her round chin. “You gonna be busy yourself here before too long.”

I was wondering what she meant by that when I heard my name called.

“Like I said, I can do that myself. You got other things to tend to.”

Ruthie called out my name again, this time adding, “I want to show you something!”

I glanced at the jar of clear liquid sitting on the edge of the porch and decided that if I was going to respond to Ruthie's summons, I was going to need another pull.

"I found something you want to see!" was the siren's call beckoning me to my doom.



I stood in the doorway to Granny's room. Ruthie was sitting on the edge of the bed, a bare gam poking out from under her robe.

"Look what I found!" She held open the large square black pages of a photo album. "There's pictures of all of us up here for the summer. Cousin Dell used to take pictures of us kids with his Brownie, remember?"

I was surprised I hadn't come across the photo album in my rummaging through the clutter of junk and cast off clothing. But her mention of Cousin Dell brought back a vivid memory of him wandering around with his little black box and pointing it at anything and everyone. We were all intent with swimming and wrestling and just generally acting like wild Indians, and Dell, who was older than the rest of us, wanted us to stand still. My old man said he was a pervert which at the time I didn't know what that meant and then some years later I heard the story of how Uncle Ned had beat him up and banished him from Little Lake.

"Where'd you find that?" The pictures weren't any bigger than a pack of smokes and I had to lean over Ruthie to take a good look.

"Under the bed, behind some old shoes."

I remembered the ratty old shoes from my rummaging. Maybe Ruthie had a better idea of where to find it.

"Here's a picture of Granny and the family in front of the cabin. Ned had just finished building the porch. Cousin Dell took the same picture every summer. And she has them arranged by year."

I peered over her shoulder. "My first summer up here was 1920."

She leafed a few pages over and pointed. "There you are! And that's me on the other side with my mom and stepdad."

I heard her catch her breath. The picture brought back a rush of memories. My mother, Mel, and my old man, Nate. And me standing in front of them, a skinny bean pole making what I thought was a funny face. Standing behind Granny was Ned, probably about

my age now. Ned didn't look anything like the rest of Granny's children. They all looked like a combination of Gramps, who died before I was born, and Granny, but mostly knobby heads and big boned. Ned was slim and tall and looked mostly like. And if the picture had been any bigger I might have been looking in the mirror.

There was something else. Maybe the lotion Ruthie had slathered on or some seductive scent or the combination of both. The way she was holding the photo album up I could see down the front of her loosely closed robe. I came alive in a manner of speaking. And I might have had one sip too many because it struck me as funny. I had the rigid grin of a man whose fate is sealed.

Ruthie couldn't help but notice either. She reached out. "I think I've found the missing tent pole." Now she was sitting up, picture album tossed aside, intent on the buttons with her nimble fingers. The robe had fallen open and a hirsute abyss stared back at me. I didn't resist knowing what was coming, and knowing that I knew it was coming the second she showed up with her kids wasn't any consolation. I had to enjoy the inevitable even as I calculated that the cost in the long run would far exceed a reckless momentary pleasure. She pulled me toward her, a particular smolder to her gaze.

I heard a voice. It wasn't hers.

"Knock, knock!" was accompanied by a rapping on the front door frame to the cabin. "Hello? Stan? Hello?" That such innocence could bring a momentary world crashing down or offer up other possibilities.

Ruthie stood up so fast she almost knocked me over cinching her robe closed. Her eyes narrowed. "Who's that?"

For a moment I drew a blank. Then it came to me like a long lost memory. "Marie." And at her confused look, "The moonshiner's daughter."

Her mouth dropped open as she stepped from Granny's bedroom and caught sight of the young girl filling out the bathing suit. I imagine mine dropped open too because standing in the cabin doorway was a pinup of the kind you'd find on any grease monkey's wall.

"Well, Marie! How you've grown!" Ruthie exclaimed as she fixed me with a stare that should have turned me into a block of stone. I was just as dumb.

Marie was all smiles even though the glint in her eyes could have chiseled me to dust. Damned if I did, damned if I didn't.

The kids had followed Marie into the cabin. They had come up to ask permission to take a ride around the lake in her rowboat. That had the effect of defusing the tension and I was for once thankful for children. Ruthie suggested that they all go for a row but making a point of excluding me as being one too many. I breathed a sigh of relief. The look that she threw me as they trudged down to

the dock and the bobbing dinky was that of a woman scorned and I knew what that meant. The cook had got a fire going and was hacking at a dead chicken, water boiling in a big pot. She just shook her head in mock dismay.

I dressed in a hurry.



I was desperate. I was running low on cash. I couldn't hesitate any longer. The haircut and shave was going to cost me. What I would normally pay two bits for was going to be twice that much. The only barber was over in Big Lake and he catered to the vacation crowd which is why his price was so steep. I'd become considerably more sober at the realization of my predicament.

I sat in the chair anyway. The shop was next to Big Lake Hotel Resort and Cabins, the ritziest of all the motor courts and hideaways ringing a good part of the shore. A wide display window looked out over the street outside and the entrance to the resort. The motor traffic was noticeable and raised hazy dust in the heat of a midday. A truck carting inner tubes rattled by headed for the beach.

The barber was a talker. He must have thought he was on radio. He knew all the latest news as well as the word about town, who was who, and where who was staying. He had a sidekick, a toothless old geezer missing his left arm, who ran the tobacco newsstand inside the shop, and who snorted and chortled, and amen-ed the big man with the scissors in his hand.

The headlines displayed in the newspaper rack screamed *Britan Attacks France!*

"Now ain't that something. I knew something like this was gonna happen. Once you get to warring, everybody else has to join in. And I see what they're up to. Using the war as a distraction."

"Who you talking about?" the old vet gummed.

"Why John Bull, that's who! They've always had a grudge against France. You've been to France, aincha, Bill?"

The old man smiled. "Hinky-dinky parlay vous."

"Now here is the way I see it. The British attack the French and draws everybody's attention away from what the Germans are doing. Meanwhile they've got armies massed along the border with the good old USA!"

"Mexico?"

“No, not Mexico. That’s what’s so insidious! The threat is to the north!”

“Eskimos?”

The barber nudged me with an elbow and a wink. “No, Bill, not Eskimos, but something almost as bad. Canadians. And I hear that some of them can’t even speak a word of English. You know what they speak? French, same as they talk in France. Now you can see that if they’re attacking the French in one place they’re going to attack them wherever else they’re speaking it. That’s their plan. And then they’ll be coming after us, try to reclaim their lost colonies. That’s been passed on from king to king ever since we whopped ‘em. Twice!”

“But don’t we speak English?”

“No, you’re wrong there, Bill, what we talk is one hundred percent American.”

The barber heehawed and went on to something else. My mind was elsewhere. The picture that Ruthie had shown me. Anyone who didn’t know who was who in that picture might have mistaken me for Ned’s son. Maybe that explained a lot about what went on between mother and the old man. But he was a sailor, a girl in every port and a port in every girl. And she drank and swore like a sailor.

“Well, there you are!” the barber greeted accusingly as I noticed a shadow cross in front of the window and enter the shop. A black man in a light beige shirt and pressed brown slacks sauntered in. He gave the barber the stink eye and then nodded in my direction. “Shine today, sir?”

I looked down at my dogs and they looked beat. “Yeah, maybe spruce them up a bit.”

“Give ‘em the old Big Lake special, Rodney!”

Once the man had caught a better look at the condition of what I had on my feet, he shook his head in consternation. “Gonna take some work. Ten sense worth.”

“Why that’s highway robbery, Rodney! You’re gonna drive my customers away with prices like that!”

They both looked at me waiting for my reaction. I shrugged, “In for a nickel, in for a dime.” And to be honest, bringing those shoes back to some semblance of footwear would be worth a dime.

“What was the hubbub I heard earlier?” the barber asked the man as he retrieved brushes, rags, and cans from behind a cabinet and was lathering up the leather. “I heard sirens.”

“Found another one.”

“Another one? In the lake? Drowned?”

“They ain’t saying.”

“How many’s that so far this year?”

“This one makes three. All girls.”

The barber shook his head solemnly. "The Lake averages about half a dozen a year. Not only girls, but as you know, boys are stronger swimmers."

"Weren't no swimmer." The rag snapped across my toe effecting a transformation. "Heard it was Judge Chandler's daughter."

Even old Bill gasped. "Oh, she was a wild one," the barber opined. "I remember once. . . ." he went on but I had stopped listen. A sleek coup had pulled up to the front of Big Lake Hotel and I recognized the man getting out on the driver's side. A woman, and not just any dame, but one that had been buffed up to a shine, was waving at him with a big smile on her bright red smoocher. Her I wouldn't know from Eve, but him I knew. Paul E. Bello, aka Pretty Paulie, a well-known pimp smut peddler blackmailer from the big city, and if memory served me right, someone regularly seen in the company of Mr. K. I didn't get what he was doing in Big Lake but then I remembered the waitress at the café had mistaken me for one of the actors in the hush hush movie production at the Lodge. And if Pretty Paulie was involved, there was a good reason why it was hush hush.

I wasn't the only one who had noticed Paulie the Pimp. The black man had followed my gaze. He too apparently knew who Paulie was and seeing my reaction he took a closer look at me. And the fact that he was taking a closer look at me made me take a closer look at him. I knew him. He knew me. He was the shoe shiner in the building where my lawyer's office was located, the lawyer I had found covered in a layer of flies and whose killers had been lying in wait for me on Kovic's orders. This was the guy who was supposed to stop me if they missed me. Maybe he'd been sent to the minors league for his screw up. More than likely he was part of the Kovic mob fringe. And if that was the case then the mobster was too close for comfort.

There was a glint of recognition in his eyes but also an uncertainty. Maybe it was the dark glasses and the beard that threw him off. But I had no doubt that it would come to him and I wanted to be as far away from Big Lake as possible by then.

The barber held up the hand mirror for approval of his handy work. Beard nicely shaped, my dirty blonde locks clipped and held in place with pomade, I looked almost respectable.



The trolley line ran down the center of Main Street from one end of Grover City to the other. As a sign of the times, a filling station had set up a pump almost directly across the street from the roundhouse. The attendant, an eager young guy in a collared shirt, let me stow the Indian inside the fenced yard behind the garage for a consideration when I got back from the County Courthouse.

I hopped an inbound trolley just as it was pulling out of the station. The conductor was big guy with a square head. He eyed me like he'd seen my sort before and flicked the lever of the chrome coin change maker on his belt. I remembered when the trolleys were horse drawn in this burg. And they were cheaper. It was the price of doing business and I paid it. And I'd picked up a copy of the daily blat when I left the barbershop that I could also charge to my nonexistent business account.

I was looking for nothing in particular until I found it. Behind the war scare headlines, Grover City's only newspaper covered local news and politics of the Tri-Lake area. And with the occasional notable passing or scandal, the real news was left to the big city rags. A public safety announcement in bold print urging swimming and boating safety during the summer months took up half a page. A sidebar noted that there had been three tragic drownings in Big Lake so far. The edition had hit the stands before the discovery from earlier in the morning if the shoeshine man was to be believed. Another column reported that the search for Judge Chandler's daughter was ongoing and that the State Troopers were now helping in the effort. I had news for them.

But what caught my eye was the item on the investigation behind the attempt to dynamite the Federal grand jury looking into the activities of fugitive mobster Yan Kovic as well as the foiled heist at the US Customs warehouse. Witnesses were being sought, it said, and I knew they were talking about me. I didn't think I'd see anything about Becky's body being found. The obits were all local, anyway.

Two of the names in the obituaries caught my attention, not because I recognized them but because of their ages. One was sixteen and one was thirteen. That one claimed the young girl "loved to swim" was the kind of unintentional irony that often showed up when talking of the departed, and I wondered if the other girl had drowned, too. But by then a few more riders had crowded onto the

sidesaddle bench and I was running out of elbow room. Not that it mattered. The stone colonnades of the Courthouse hove into view and I stepped off as the trolley rolled to a stop.

Once I'd trudged up the wide granite steps and passed through the multi doored portal to the halls of justice, I followed the arrow and the sign that read Records to a stairway leading down to the basement. A corridor branched off in two directions at the bottom and another helpful sign pointed the direction. I came to a solid mahogany door framing a pebble glass panel upon which was written in bold black letters VITAL STATISTICS and turned the brass knob and went in.

At a desk beyond the counter stacked with an assortment of ledgers was a rail thin clerk in an eye shade and sleeve garters. I rang the desk bell to catch his attention otherwise I would have remained invisible. He slid the chair back, rose slowly and just as slowly made his way to the counter as if I had interrupted him from his important duty and he was doing me a favor.

He looked me over and was not particularly impressed. "Marriage, Birth, or Property?"

"Birth.

"County or Municipal District?"

"County, I think."

"I don't take orders on speculation. You either know or you don't." He had that sour attitude of a minor bureaucrat.

"County."

"Can't help you here." He jerk a thumb, "Next door."

I thanked him with a nod of my head, did an about face, exited the door I had entered, turned right and opened the door that had County Records in bold black letters on a similar pebble glass pane. I could have stepped into the very same office because the very same clerk greeted me with the hint of a superior smile.

"Marriage, Birth, or Property?"

"Birth."

He handed me a form. "Fill this out and put it in the basket." He pointed at the stub of pencil wound with a string and then at the empty wire basket off to one side of the counter. "That'll be three dollars."

I was about to protest but since what I was planning was illegal I thought better of it. "How soon can I expect the document?"

"Depends on how busy I am and if I'm on the county payroll or the municipal payroll."

I knew a gift when I heard one and decided to play along. "Of course, of course, I realize how busy you public servants are, especially at this time of year. I was hoping to expedite the acquisition by this afternoon as the document is germane to a



probate matter in the city.” I’d heard lawyers speak that way and thought I’d give it a try.

He licked his thin lips, shifted his eyes to the left as if making a calculation, and asked in a lowered tone, “You on an expense account?”

I made a grimace. “No, unfortunately, I’m paid by the job, a flat fee.” I waited a beat before I made the offer. “I’m heading over to the diner I saw on my way in, grab a bite to eat, cuppa java. Do you recommend the place?”

“Oh sure, I go there practically every day.”

“That’s good to know. Maybe I can have them send you over a sandwich. A piece of pie?”

He looked over his shoulder like maybe someone might be watching. “County Registrar frowns on bringing food into the office.” He paused, “But I sure do like their pies.”

I’d hooked him and slowly reeled him in. “I’m partial to berry pie. What kind do you like?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Coconut Cream.” Then he got confidential. “Tell them Orvil sent you. They’ll set a piece aside for me.”

I returned a conspiratorial smile and quickly filled out the simple form and peeled off three dollars from my money clip.

“Check back around three o’clock for that birth certificate.” And as a reminder “Coconut Cream.”



G rover City was easily forgettable, a wider spot in the road on the way to the widest spot. The red, white, and blue bunting was still up from the Fourth of July Parade. They probably still had a street sweeper on payroll judging by the number of horse drawn conveyances. One such specimen in blinders drew a large drayage wagon past me as I stepped to the curb. The Downtown Diner was catty corner to the park fronting the Courthouse in a square brick building with large windows flanking the step up double door entrance and overlooking Central Avenue. The airiness at the front tables were taken up with matrons and tea biscuits. I found a booth in the hazy amber light back by the swinging double door to the kitchen.

I looked over the menu the young girl made up to look older than she was had handed me. I didn't look at the items, I was looking at the prices. The java was a must but the sandwiches were more than I wanted to pay.

It must have been the pained look, but she asked, "You want me to read that for you?"

I laughed and shed the shades. "No, I can see just fine. My eyes are sensitive to the light."

She peered at me as I removed the fedora and set it on the bench next to me. "Oh, that's an excuse I haven't heard before. Tied one on, did ya?"

Her smile was bright but not hard on the eyes. "That bad, huh?"

"Any worse and I'd be calling a doctor. Are you ready to order?"

For twelve cents I could get four pieces of toast and jam, the coffee on the house with any food order. "I'll have the toast and coffee."

"Sorry, that's a breakfast order. We stopped serving breakfast half an hour ago."

Despite being a looker, she was beginning to be annoying. "You on a budget?"

I tried to look offended but she just shrugged and pointed at the menu in my hand with her pencil. "This lunch special here, the sandwich, at two bits, it's a pretty good deal. Comes with clam chowder, a side of grits, and generous slice of ham with pickled onions and the cook's own homemade mustard." When I hesitated, "Unlimited refills on the coffee."

I nodded, "Alright." And as she was about to walk away I remembered. "Hey, Orville, over at the courthouse, recommended this diner. I said I'd treat him to a slice of pie, coconut cream."

She turned and gave me a grim look. "Coconut Cream?" She flipped the menu over and pointed at the list of very pricey desserts. The Kountry Kokonut Kream was listed at one whole dollar. "A slice?" I almost squawked.

She shook her head. "Don't sell them by the slice. You're buying the whole pie."

It was still an expensive proposition and I hesitated. "Why don't we just forget it, then."

"Are you doing business with the county clerk?"

"I am. How did you know?"

"Would you like this business to get done soon?"

"Yes, this afternoon at the latest." And then I got the drift. "What if I didn't want any pie for me or anyone else?"

She shrugged. "The boss rents out rooms upstairs. At a weekly rate. They ain't cheap."

Not that I should have been surprised, grift greases the wheels of any bureaucracy.

I folded and the waitress quipped, “Be thankful he didn’t ask for Banana Cream pie, that’d set you back three clams.”



It was a day for coincidences. Just as I was coming out of the Courthouse with a birth certificate in the name of Jerome Paulsen, striding up the wide granite steps toward me was none other than John “Johnny Tomato” Damato, the king of the mob mouthpieces, accompanied by a couple of hard faced bruisers. I turned away as they passed briskly behind me, uninterested in anything except where they were going. That alone convinced me that Kovic was operating upstate while lying low from the feds. If I’d been more paranoid I would have thought they were following me.

The trolley had a stop conveniently in front of the Odeon. The marquee read “*Back By Popular Demand! Gone With The Wind!*” The afternoon matinee had just let out and there were clots of young movie goers adjusting to the heat and brightness of afternoon daylight, some queueing up for the tram. A gaggle of young girls practiced their Southern drawls on each other. “Did you hear what he said?” one asked affecting the accent, and she lowered her voice, “Damn.” Her friends giggled nervously, pleasantly scandalized.

I turned my attention to the queue as the rumble of tracks and a distant bell announced the trolley’s arrival. I don’t know how I missed it but there parked by the curb was Pretty Paulie’s snazzy coup with Paulie leaning against a fender smoking a cigarette and looking very suave in his expensive sporting togs and Panama hat. Something that was not lost on the young and impressionable female types whose urges had just been mix-mastered by the drama of larger than life images on the theater screen. The hook was Paulie’s alluring companion, a looker that could have just stepped out of the picture herself and attracting as much attention as Paulie.

I looked over my shoulder as the tram pulled away. If I was the suspicious type, I’d think that Paulie was trolling for local talent. But it wasn’t any of my beeswax. Then I thought about Marie and knew she was just the type to fall for a con like Paulie’s. And that

made me think of Rebecca. It was still difficult to admit that she was dead. It was my fault. I let her ride along on my mission of revenge.

But it all had started with the diamonds in exchange for the code book, and then the double cross, and the shootout. Only to get away with the sachet of diamonds she had stolen from Herr Doktor Soloman's safe and then to lose them dodging the G-Men. And ended on the terrace of the Serbian Social Club with the bomb built by her father exploding in an assassination attempt on Mr. K and the Black Hand, knocking her off the ledge she had been perched on, and sending her to her death four floors below.

I thought of the diamonds for a while and the lost opportunity they represented. They were a fluke when I was in need of just such a fluke. Too good to be true as they'll always tell you. And that's what it was, a pipe dream. After Grace left for the Hollywood, my I-don't-give-a-damn attitude put on weight. Mad at the world, I was ready for a fight. I'd knocked around as a private hood for a while when I was younger. That's why I knew a lot of the players. Then I help someone out of a jam, just because they looked like nice people, and it paid off. Best of all, I liked the way it made me feel. Like maybe I was worth something, a hero, in their eyes at least. Still it was a hustle and making ends meet wasn't something I knew much about. And I wasn't dealing with the best or the nicest of people. So when I did meet someone who wasn't like the others, it made me think. And I thought about someone who was innocent and trusted me, someone I'd failed. Rebecca.



I was still thinking about the diamonds after I'd tipped the kid two bits for keeping an eye on the Indian while I was conducting business. I'd rolled up to the highway getting ready to head back to Little Lake when I recognized the sporty coupe breezing by. That was my third sighting of the day. If I'd managed turn those diamonds around, I would have had my own roadster to visit all the resorts and spas. What bothered me wasn't that a crumb like Paulie had all the goods and the breaks, but the face that peered out the rear side window as it passed. It was a young face, a frightened face. I could have sworn it was Rebecca, but I didn't want to believe my eyes.

I throttled up and tore after the coup and soon was eating its dust. I gave the Scout more gas closing up behind and angling to pass. I let up as a farm wagon pattered into view from the opposite direction. At Paulie's speed the road opened up again in no time. I gunned it and slowly pulled up alongside. He had his head turned yakking at the dame and she facing him caught the movement of my shadow out of the corner of her eye. That made Paulie jerk his head around and look over his shoulder. I had just enough time to glance into the rear window where I'd seen the apparition of Rebecca's face. A suit case blocked part of the window and beyond that was what appeared to be a pile of overcoats.

I got the mean eyes as I pulled up even with the driver. If looks could kill. I don't think he recognized me. He wouldn't know me from Adam but I did recognize the bird sitting on the bench next to him now that I got a closer look, someone from way back, when I worked as muscle at a gin joint. And as if she'd seen a ghost, she recognized me. Paulie may have had more engine but I was pulling less weight. I gave him the secret Boy Scout salute as I roared ahead.

The road taking me back into Big Lake was lined motor courts and claptrap cabins. I'd left Paulie far behind when I turned off and stopped behind the large sign that said Lake Shore View Cabins & Spa and waited for the perfumed chump to buzz by. I was suddenly curious about what Pretty Paulie was doing in Big Lake and with whom. I didn't have to wait long. Summer light dripping a slow orange onto the skyline glanced off the windshield as a bright glare. He wasn't moving slow like maybe he thought he'd catch up with me.

I let him get ahead of me slowed down by the crowds of vacationers, many in straw hats and light dresses wandering in and out of the shops along the main drag. The latest model roadsters and coupes shared the curb with farm wagons and Model-Ts. I'd expected him to turn into the entrance to Big Lake Resort as it was the classiest spa on the lake with a large hotel dining room and nightclub. I was wrong. He kept going on Main St to the outskirts where it becomes the road to Ridley and to Little Lake.

I kept sight of the coupe far enough off his rear horizon that he might not catch me tailing him in the mirror. The coupe broke a rise in the road and dropped out of sight down the other side. By the time I crested the hill I had a clear view of the road ahead into a valley of farmland and wooded tracts. The coupe was nowhere to be seen. Even at its top speed that machines could not have covered that much roadway.

I pulled to the shoulder and scanned the distance. They couldn't have disappeared into thin air. Then I glimpsed lifting behind a stand of trees, dust churned up by wheels on a dirt road. At the bottom of the hill the tumbled down remnants of an old stone

wall marked the wagon track. I had seen the outline of the large stone manor between the trees from the top of the rise and I figured that's where the coupe was heading. It was part of Big Lake Resort. I remembered hearing about it when I was a kid, an elite hunting lodge, although everyone referred to it as The Lodge along with the assumption that not just anyone could stay there. I figured this was the back road in.

I waited till the dust settled before I nosed the Scout onto the dirt track. I followed it slowly as ways up over a gulley and around a turn as it climbed the hill toward the lodge.

A large man in a sweat stained hat stepped out from where he'd been stationed and held up his hand, a shotgun cradled over his left arm. "Private property, pal. Turn around."

He was a lot bigger than I was and didn't seem the least bit concerned that I knew it. "This ain't the road to Little Lake?" I ventured innocently.

He shook his head unhurriedly and gave a gapped toothed smile. "Not by a long shot, mac. Now turn back around. At the pavement take a right. If you pass through Ridley, you've gone too far."

I thanked him and turned back the way I'd come. Both sides of the track were densely wooded with sycamore and oak, some maple, and a smattering of spindly pine. I bounced back to the pavement and let my eye follow the contours of the boulder strewn hillside and the brush cluttered ravine that creased the hill directly below the lodge. If I was going to take a look at what Pretty Paulie was up to, it was going to take a hike to find out.



I found myself up a tree, a leafy ancient chestnut, overlooking a courtyard at the rear of the swank hunting lodge. I also had a clear view of the two gleaming machines at the front entrance to the large stone manor. The one I recognized as Paulie's coupe and the other was a large Chrysler New Yorker with a white hood and a ruby red finish.

I'd made my way to my perch with less effort than I'd imagined. I'd found a deer track through the thicket that eventually widened to a faint over grown foot path that ran along the side of the ravine and continued up the hill and alongside a six foot stone wall, tall enough to booster me up into the lower branches of grandfather chestnut and provide me with a catbird seat of the entire layout.

And there I sat considering my next move. There were large windows set into the stone edifice and I thought that I could creep up to the shrubs that bordered the lodge. I heard a shriek. It was a laugh and it was followed by a long legged beauty in tennis togs with a drink in her hand. She was followed by Paulie Bello and the woman from my past, Jean or June, who was leading a young blonde girl that was not Rebecca and not more than sixteen toward the table and umbrella next to the elaborate nymph topped fountain at the center of the courtyard.

I didn't have to be a genius to know that something was wrong with that picture and I would have followed my hunch to the logical conclusion except for the fact that it was put completely from my mind by the figure who emerged from the shadow of the umbrella. I'd recognize that stubby pink bullet anywhere. It was none other than Mr. K!

It was obvious that Paulie had brought him something that pleased him by the wide leer on his mug and how he kissed the young girl's hand continental style.

I'd see enough. I realized that I really wasn't all that interested in Paulie's business after all. And Kovic was a powerful enough reason to relocate. I abandoned my leafy bower and started back down to the trunk which was considerably harder than going out on the limb. I was about to swing down to the rock wall when another motorcar drove up to the front of the lodge. I froze. I recognized that car and I knew the driver. It was Thorny!



I made like a bat and got the hell away from there. As I raced back to Little Lake I was still shaken by what I'd seen in the courtyard. I'd watch as Ridley's Constable Thorndyke strode into the hunting lodge like he'd been there before. And next thing I know he made an entrance into the courtyard and Paulie got up and shook his hand and introduced him to Kovic who got to his feet like Thorny just said something interesting, nodding his head, and the woman, June, joined them too and added a few words that astonished both Paulie and Mr. K and seemed to make a case for what he was saying.

I didn't waste any time getting off that hill. I had a bad feeling about what I'd seen. I wasn't going to take any chances. I had to go on the lam again, pack up a few things at the cabin and I

was gone. I had to count on Alice to find a buyer for Ted's art piece. The way I was feeling I'd let it go cheap. The birth certificate in my jacket pocket was my ticket if I was going to have an identity as a world traveler.

To my relief there was no sign of Ruthie and her kids at the cabin. The porch had been swept clean and a pan with pieces of chicken back and some grits had been left on the table. They were cold and greasy. My other choice was a can of baked beans at the bottom of a gunny sack. The jar of moonshine looked untouched and it called to me. One sip was enough to bring me back. I found my satchel and stuffed my other shirt in it and looked around for the few things I might have brought with me. And I was going to be long gone by the time anyone came looking.

I walked down to the lake shore and caught the last of a cloud streaked sky as the sun dipped below the trees for one last time because I didn't plan on coming back.

I heard her sobbing before I noticed her. Marie was sitting at the end of the dock. She looked up wiping away her tears as I stepped down the path, standing and sobbing.

"Are you alright?" I heard myself say instead of "I'm leaving, it's been nice to know you. Goodbye."

"Oh, Stan, I've just learned the most horrible news. My friend, Sissy, is dead. They found her in Big Lake this morning. They say she drowned."

I put my arm around her shaking shoulders and tried to think of something to say. I drew a blank until I remembered the barbershop. "Was she the girl that went missing, the judge's daughter?"

"Yes," she sobbed, "Sissy Chandler, that's her name. But I can't believe she drowned. She was a champion swimmer at summer camp! It doesn't seem possible!" And she sobbed some more.

I wanted to comfort her but was impatient to be on my way. "I read in the paper that there've been a number of drownings in Big Lake. It's more dangerous than it might seem."

"That's true. Hardly anyone ever drowns here at Little Lake. I wonder why that is?"

"I don't know. Maybe because Little Lake is deeper and considered dangerous so people are more careful out here. Big Lake's just a big flat meandering pond and it's not very deep or that very clean. Too many motorboats and cruisers and carelessness." And for a minute there I almost sounded like my father.

"You know what else is sad?" holding back tears, "I knew two of the girls who drowned this year. And now Sissy."

I wanted to tell her I was leaving because it was none of my business. My business was to disappear. "That's tough, kid," as I looked over my shoulder.



"They were a little older than me but I'd run into them at the movies in Grover City and we'd go to Woolworth's for sodas after the show. And I knew Sissy from girl's camp where she worked as a junior life guard after she graduated from high school. She was so much fun to be around!" And that made her cry.

"Listen, kid," I said trying break in to tell her I was leaving.

"Oh, that's eerie. I just realized something. Two of those girls, the one I knew and the one I didn't, had gone on the "ride" with Thorny. Do you remember I told you about that?"

"Thorny?" Again.

"And you know who told me that they had? Sissy. And she named others that I didn't know. She said he'd tried to get her to go with him, threatened to tell her pa that she'd been out with some boys."

"The judge?"

"Oh, he's just a regular old JP in Ridley, everyone calls him judge. And she told him go ahead and tell him and see what happens to his job."

"Thorny."

"Oh, his whole family is nothing but crooks and cheats. His cousin is in prison for embezzling from the town council. And Thorny, he's never around when you need him and always around when you don't. And always up into someone's business. Pa had to show him the bore of his shotgun to convince him that he didn't have any business out here."

I had to tell her the truth. "Thorny is the reason I have to get out of here. I'm leaving right now. Somehow he learned who I was so I have to go. Now!"

"About who you really are? Stan?" She'd grabbed my sleeve. "Ruthie told me all about who you are and all of a sudden it makes so much sense? She was really mad, by the way. She accused me. You know, you and me. And I swore that I hadn't, we hadn't, and maybe she believed me. And she told me you were running away from the police. And that your real name was, Lucky, and that you had made improper advances. But I didn't believe it."

Here it was sunset but something just dawned on me. "You say she was mad. You think she was mad enough to tell Thorny?" My wheels were spinning, I just had to let out the clutch.

"I don't know, why? She might have. The kids heard what she was telling me. They might have told him."

"I don't want to scare you, but you need to get away from here. Thorny is likely to come here real soon and you could be in danger. And I don't want you here when he does."

She clung to me. "Take me with you!"

"I can't, kid. Where I'm going, there's only room for one. You'll be safe with your old man." I bent my face down and tilted

her chin up and lightly kissed her lips. "I'm counting on you to be smart about this. Forget I was even here."



I made two mistakes. One was listening to Marie plead with me to take her along. She didn't care that bad people were intent on cutting my life short. She'd only be in harm's way I insisted. She didn't like that one bit, but she finally calmed down and accepted that I wasn't going to budge. I told her I didn't want another young woman's death on my conscience. I watched her as she ducked through the thicket and back to her chickens and bootlegger father.

Mistake number two was that I had acquired a taste for Uncle Ned's moonshine. I went back to the cabin with the idea of adding a jar of everclear to the burlap bag along with the can of beans. I was about to tuck the goods into the saddle bag when I looked up. Thorny was standing there with his gun on me.

"Hold up, you bastard, don't make a move."

I wasn't all that surprised that it would come to this. Things were moving faster than I'd anticipated. Thorny was shrewd but his weakness was his self-importance.

"Thorny, old fellow, what's the meaning of this?"

"Don't play dumb, buster. I know who you are. Miz Walker spilled the beans. You're an Ask! And that explains everything! You're old Ned's bastard!"

The cat had been let out of the bag and I considered what the constable had said. "Alright, I guess I should have figured as much seeing as how everybody remarked on the resemblance. That doesn't explain why you're pointing your six shooter at me."

"You're wanted for questioning by the police down in the city. When Miz Walker told me that, I made some telephone calls. The feds are looking for you, too." He gave a wicked grin. "It's my sworn civic duty to turn you over to the authorities. Thing is, there's someone else who is interested in your whereabouts and they're willing to pay cash for that information."

"Mr. K," I nodded, and sighed like I was resigned that I'd been caught. "You got me, Thorny. It must be your lucky day. It certainly is not mine. I hope you got a good price. Especially when you have to apprehend a dangerous desperado like me." I mirrored his grin.

“Shut your yammering. No business of yours what I got paid.” He patted his hip pocket for reassurance. “You’ll lose that sappy grin once the boys get done with you.” He fit two fingers to his lips and gave a shrill whistle.

“The boys?” I had figured I could overpower Thorny as long as I kept him talking and got him to let down his guard but the boys changed the odds.

He gave a sadistic chuckle. “Mr. Kovic’s associates are gone have a word, but if I was you, I wouldn’t expect a conversation.”

A voice from the top of the path down to the cabin called out, “Hey Thorndyke! You got him? Good job!”

I caught a glimpse of two square shouldered silhouettes appearing from the shadows as a puffed up Thorny turned to acknowledge the compliment. I swung the sack with the can of beans and the joy juice in a full roundhouse and hit him square in the mug just as he turned back. He didn’t know what hit him and dropped like a poleaxed steer.

I bolted, ducking low as Kovic’s thugs took up the cry. “Shoot him,” I heard one of them shout. I crawled through the gap in the bank of brambles separating Granny’s patch from the moonshiner’s property. Shots rang out and I heard them snap through the branches overhead. I had a general idea of the lay of the land. I’d taken the path to the chicken coop before and I knew enough not to take the boobytrapped one that led to the still. Then there was the path to the main house and the one in the opposite direction that would take me down to their landing and the lake.

I saw my best bet was to head for the lake and take my chances in the lengthening shadows along the shore. If I had to, I could swim for it. They were close behind. I could hear them grunting and swearing and shouting what they would do with me when they caught me.

I dove behind an old horse wagon that had been left to rot among the underbrush and saplings. They stumbled past me and took the path toward the still. There was a rattle of empty tin cans and what sounded like a cow bell. Then came the scream. One of them had stepped in the bear trap Marie had warned me to step wide of. Another yell at the sound of something heavy hitting the ground.

I thought I’d add to the chaos. “Federal agents! Throw down your guns and surrender!”

More shots erupted in the direction of the still. Louder, not just the pistols the mugs were packing. The muzzle flashes lit up the underbrush like giant fireflies. And then “Behind you!” It was Marie. And another shot. And then nothing except the stillness of encroaching twilight.

I waited holding, my breath. I heard a groan and Marie’s voice asking, “Where you hit?” I figure I should see if I could help.

She heard me coming and had the rifle pointed in my face when I broke into the clearing.

"It's me, Stan." I held up my empty hands.

She was standing over her father who was seated, back against the distilling shed, protecting him. He threw me a mean glare like it was all my fault. And he wasn't far from wrong.

"How bad's he hurt?" I moved in for a closer look and the old moonshiner scowled like a growl.

"It's just a scratch." He grimaced and produced a flask from his overall and took a snap.

I could see from the blot of blood seeping from the shoulder that it was more than a flesh wound, "He's losing a lot of blood. He needs to get to a doctor." I said to Marie.

A worried frown creased her forehead. "I can take him over to Doc Gallup in the flivver." And when her father protested, "He'll patch you up like he did last time when you shot yourself in the foot."

The old man grimaced from the pain as he tried to stand up. "I'll be all right. Better than these fellas at any rate. Who are they? Don't look like revenuers."

One of Kovic's men had caught the shotgun blast just below his collar bone and had fallen backwards, one leg at an odd angle held in place by a large claw trap,. The other one was laid out neatly, arms on either side, pistol on the ground just out of reach of his right hand, with a slap happy expression on his face except for the bullet hole between his eyebrows.

I was about to explain when I realized I still had a problem. Thorny.



**T**horny was a problem. He wasn't where I left him after I'd clobbered him with the can of beans. I froze in front of the cabin's porch. The Scout was still there. But the shadows were deeper and longer as the sun settled behind the trees at the other end of Little Lake. My ears piqued, I listened for any sound that he was nearby. I crouched lower, head cocked. I examined the dark shadowed undergrowth among the trees, ahead and behind me. If I was lucky, Thorny ran off when the shooting started. A snap of shrub or stick turned my attention to the path leading over into the berry bramble. If he still had his shooter, I was fish in a barrel. I

ducked around the fireplace where the cook's earlier fire smoldered and sent up puffs of smoke. I was looking for something to defend myself with. I picked up the skillet. It was heavy but too small and I didn't think I'd have much luck batting bullets away with it.. There was an assortment of forks but no knives. I knew where the knives were. In the kitchen. But I'd have to get into the cabin through the front door. A wide open target. I grabbed a length of firewood from the kindling pile. It was too short. Now I was sure something was coming from the direction of the brambles by the rustling and commotion. The loud grunts. Maybe I'd broke his skull when I walloped him with the gunny sack weighted with a can of beans and a jar of white lightning. And he was writhing in a death agony in the berry bushes. I grabbed a stout faggot from the smoldering coals in the fireplace and poked my head around the corner of the cabin. Even in the encroaching dark it was obvious something was shaking the bushes. It had to be Thorny.

I looked at the stick in my hand. It was smoking. The tip was a red hot coal. If I got close enough, I could poke him in the eye. I dashed across the yard to the shadows of a large lilac bush that Granny had planted there many years ago. I realize that the glowing end of the stick was a dead giveaway and was about to toss it when I heard a sound I was sure Thorny could never make. And I was right.

A large bear stepped into the clearing and poked its nose in the air. I knew enough to bury my leavings when I was done eating for the day. But I figure that Ruthie had left in a huff and didn't bother to clean up. The bear stretched its neck toward the outdoor kitchen and then stopped because it heard it too. Someone was coming up the trail from next door, and I knew it was Marie. And she wouldn't see the bear until she was right up on top of it. I had to do something quick, no matter how foolish.

I jumped out of the shadows and brandished my brand while giving as loud and terrible shouts as I could manage. The bear was not impressed. Standing on its hind legs reminded me why it is not wise to confront a bear with a stub of smoldering wood. Even in the dim light I was pretty certain that the red drool dripping from its muzzle was not berry juice.

I waved the stick in front of me anyway. In the process, like a magic wand, the tip of the stick flared up with an angry flame, all that smoldering energy suddenly released. I was surprised, but the bear even more so. It settled back on its haunches and then turned and trotted off like it had never been there. No one would believe it if I'd have told them. Nobody but Marie who had seen the whole thing.

"You sure scared off old Abe," she said, "He don't like fire."

"You know the bear?"

“Oh, sure. He’s been rooting around here for years. He won’t bother you if you don’t bother him.”

“He was dripping blood from his jaw.”

“You sure?” I could see that worried her. She shifted the rifle in her hand and stared in the direction the bear had fled. “What about Thorny?”

“Right over there by the Indian is where he came up on me. He had brought Kovic’s hoods along. Those are the two dead mugs over by your pa’s still. I figure Thorny came to and hearing the gunshots coming from your place made a run for it. Maybe I didn’t hit him as hard as I thought I had.”

“Well, it’s getting dark and we need to take care of other business.”

“The only business I can think of is me leaving here, and in a hurry.”

“No. I got to run my pa over to Doc Gallup to see after his wound. And there are two bodies that need taking care of.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You brought the mess. You have to help clean it up.”

“What, you want me to bury them?”

“No. We’ll take ‘em over to Middle Lake and dump them there.”

“Middle Lake?”

“Nobody’ll ever find them.”

It was like she’d done it before. She had it all worked out. I would cart the bodies down to their dock and load them in her pa’s skiff while she took him to see the local sawbones.

“That could take all night. What if Thorny comes back with reinforcements?”

She handed me the rifle. “You know how to use this, don’t you?”



I could have just as well taken off. Why should I care about the bodies? I planned to be long gone. I should have never listened to Ralphie Silver and agreed to take the job of looking for Kovic’s hophead daughter. I had to get my revenge after what he did to me. But that led me to Rebecca and the diamonds. And Al’s sister, the Empress’s Cucumber, the Thieves Of Bombay. My life was beginning to sound like one of Max’s crazy adventures. But Max,

why hadn't I thought of Max? All of a sudden it was all beginning to make sense.

Kovic's mugs were dead weight. There was no way I was going to carry the bodies over my shoulders. I rummaged around the moonshiner's shed by the light of a kerosene lamp, on the lookout for any booby traps, until I found a canvas tarp covering an old flatbed heap. I rolled the first body into the folds and dragged it down to the boat dock. The lake was calm and quiet and the sound of the body bouncing against the gunnels echoed across the expanse. I had a bit of a struggle getting the bear trap off the other one's leg, but he was a smaller guy and he dragged real easy.

Once I got both the corpses settled, I took time for a cigarette from the pack I liberated from one of the thugs. "I Smoked A Dead Man's Smokes" I thought sounded like a good story that might appear in one of those men's magazine, depending on what you thought "smoke" stood for. He wouldn't have any use for them anymore. As a couple of gunsels on Kovic's payroll, they were surprisingly light in the money clip. Maybe they were hoping to replenish the dosh by icing me. Whatever the reason, it was mine now. If they weren't going to be found, what difference did it make.

I'd finished two cigarettes and I might have closed my eyes a bit because Marie startled me when she called my name. "Stan?" I had been thinking about Thorny. He was a loose end, and still a danger if he got his wits about him. But first things first.

Marie fired up the outboard motor and steered out across the calm night lake waters, the bodies slumped at our feet. It had been a while since I thought of the size of Little Lake, a long narrow stretch of water that ended three quarters of a mile at the far end at a dam and spillway into Middle Lake. The last few rains had brought the lake levels up and the spillway roared even over the pattering of the outboard.

The moonshiner's daughter angled the boat out of the strong current and touched the deserted finger of beach above the dam. The swarm of mosquitos weren't as bad as during the late summer evenings she claimed, but it didn't mean they were absent. I could hear them divebombing, looking for any patch of exposed flesh which on Marie was plentiful. It didn't seem to faze her. And when I slapped the back of my neck where it felt like a squadron of them had landed, she laughed. "Penny Royal, that's what keeps 'em away." And she slapped at a bare arm, "Most of 'em, anyway."

She help me drag the bodies to the overlook and drop them down the chute. They were swallowed by the dark and the churning froth at the bottom. We didn't say much to each other as we looked out over the dark distance of the swamp that was Middle Lake. It wasn't until we were half way across the lake that she thought to say something. "When I said pa never did shoot nobody, I lied a little.

But the ones he did was before my time, mostly city bootleggers. His first wife. Her boyfriend. All swamp meat for the skeeters.”



I was exhausted so I didn’t resist when Marie invited me into her bed. I’d once teased her about the boys at her school. “They’re only after one thing.” But she did admit to kissing one or two. “Just a peck, never a bushel” she says mischievously. Then on second thought, “Well, almost never.” I was her first man, the others were just boys. Besides I was the spitting image of Uncle Ned who I had just learned was probably my father and with whom she had been madly in love. I was road tested and put through my paces. After all that, I had no problem dropping off to sleep. And she woke me at first light to say she was going to retrieve her pa who’d spent the night in Doc Gallup’s surgery.

I figure I’d be making tracks as well, and she walked with me to where I’d left Ned’s motorcycle in front of Granny’s cabin. I knew what she was thinking and I was going to have to say no. A wisp of mist rose over the lake’s waters and the cool air was little respite from what promised to be another scorcher. Morning light seeped through the branches of the trees and illuminated the wooded glade the cabin occupied. The Indian was still standing and the gunny sack I had walloped Thorny with, both the can of beans and the jar of shine, no worse for the wear. I didn’t detect any brains on it. The clout had just knocked him out. From the corner of my eye I caught the gleam of metal at the edge of the path to the berry patch. It was Thorny’s pistol.

“Did you lose a shoe?”

I could see what Marie was pointing to, a man’s scruffy half boot, and just up from it I made out a shape that didn’t belong to the bramble. Two and two were coming together to make sense. This was exactly the spot where the bear was fussing about when I’d come back looking for Thorny. I thought he’d run off when his pals hadn’t come back after all that gunfire. I was wrong.

I hunched down next to the body to get a closer look, Thorny was obviously better than dead, he was, in fact, the deadest of all.

Marie crouched beside me. She had come to a similar conclusion. “I can’t believe old Abe did this. He must be getting senile.”



“That’s what it looks like.” His jugular had been severed and he’d bled out. I stepped away from the body and back into the clearing near where Thorny and I had had our last encounter. Splotches of blood were visible in the dirt and weeds leading up to the bramble where the body lay.

I pointed to where the trail of blood began. “He must have run into the bear here. The question is, how long was the bear in the brambles? Was it before Thorny highjacked me? Not that much time passed between when I knocked him out and Kovic’s thugs started shooting and chased me, and then ran into you and your pa. If I had to guess, I’d have to say that the bear was there at the time of the first shots fired. It probably scared him and he attacked the first thing he came upon. Thorny.”

Marie gave a little squeal. “Oh, this is just like in one of those William Powell movies!”

“But here’s the problem. The amount of blood at the beginning of the trail is just a few smears and globs.” I didn’t want to get too technical with her. “So I’d say his throat was slashed after he started bleeding. Because where he fell the ground is soaked with blood.”

“What does that mean?”

I crouched down next to the body again. “We’re assuming that the bear did this. One swipe with his big claws slices the artery in his neck. But if you look closer at the wound, it’s not as big as you’d expect, not bear claw big anyway. And besides he’s been shot.”

“Shot. How can you tell?”

I pointed to his chest. “That is a bullet wound. And for all I know, so is the one in his neck, the one that made sure he was dead.” I reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and fished around. “Those fools were firing blind in the dark. They missed me and got him. That, or it was the bear.” I pulled out a folded bill. It was a C note. The C note Kovic owed me. It took the long way around and it finally got to me.

“What’s that?”

A thin gold chain with a charm depicting a candle holder, what Granny used to call a chamberstick, was wrapped up with the hundred dollar bill.

“A necklace. You want it?”

She jerked away, repulsed, and then just as quickly brought it closer for a better look.

“That’s her charm necklace, the candleholder!”

“Whose?”

“Judge Chandler’s daughter, my friend, Sissy!”



Finding Sissy's necklace opened a can of worms. First, Marie was dumbstruck and began tearing up.

"How could I have been so stupid!"

I tried to console. "It's not your fault."

"It's as plain as the nose on your face."

It had been a while since anyone thought my nose was plain. It has been bumped, tweaked, bent, target of not a few fists, and, as a result, broken. It probably stopped being plain around the time I turned thirteen.

"All those girls. The ones that went missing. Year after year. Some were thought drowned, some just were missing, runaways to the big city. I knew a lot of them. Or knew of them because they had, well, you know, a reputation. And I'll bet they'd all gone on a ride with Thorny!"

I could have said that the evidence was circumstantial, but she didn't want to hear that. I let her rage. She jumped to her feet, using words that I didn't think she knew, spit at the corpse, and then kicked it before running off sobbing. Her parting words were, "I've got to go get pa."

I was left with another body to dispose of. I didn't think it would be wise to ferry it over to the Middle Lake dam in broad daylight. And I was itching to be gone. I hiked up to the road and down to where Thorny's heap was parked. I figured the gray coupe behind it belonged to Kovic's men. I started up the constable's green ragtop and drove it on the overgrown track to Granny's and eased it down the hill till I was even with the berry bushes. Thorny was dead weight but I was inspired to get what I had in mind done. I tied him to the steering wheel with an old rope I found in the backseat and released the handbrake. The wheels rolled about half a turn before stopping. I put my shoulder to the rear bumper. That did the trick. The green Ford started slowly down the hill toward the lake. Then it picked up speed, hurtling toward the dilapidated dock. It was going to be a tight squeeze between the dock and the big boulder at the bottom and I worried it might get trapped before the jalopy hit the water. Gravity took its course and sent the motor carriage up the side of the boulder, somersaulting into the lake with an impressive splash. I didn't waste any time watching Thorny begin his descent to the bottom of Little Lake, a little lake but a deep one.

I buzzed into Ridley in no time and met no one on the road with the exception of a few farmers and their horse carts. I

recognized one as Three Fingers McGee headed over to open his farm stand who craned his head slowly in disbelief as I sped past. I was in a hurry to get away from the lakes. If the city was hell, this place was worse.

The grease monkey at the Livery Stables wasn't too sure what I meant when I said I was leaving the Indian Scout with him, and that he should talk to Ruthie about buying it. I didn't mention that by rights I was the rightful heir to old Ned's property. And I told him he didn't have to worry about getting any grief from Thorny. Ever. I bided my time by the soda machine and listened to him tell me the story of his life and what it was like growing up hereabouts, telling me how he'd always had a crush on Ruthie even though she was older and married with kids. I didn't say anything. Who am I to step on a man's dream?

Finally the bus from Big Lake made a stop and I got on. I might have looked a little rough but the bus was near empty and I dragged my satchel to the rear and stretched out across two seats. The can of beans weren't going to do me any good, but the jar of clearlight would ease my traveler's bones. I had a half pack of expensive foreign cigarettes and an unexpected hundred dollar bill. I thought of Marie. I thought of Rebecca. I thought of Grace. I didn't have much luck with women. Maybe I wasn't trying enough. But I didn't have time for any entanglements. I had to concentrate on my plan to flee the country and leave the cops, the feds, the mob, the diamond syndicate, the Thieves of Bombay far behind. Getting a passport and a new identity was next on the list.

The driver honked his horn a couple of times and then slowed down and pulled to a stop at the edge of the highway. I wouldn't have thought anything of it if he hadn't shouted, "You're going to get yourself killed standing in the middle of the road like that, young lady!"

I knew the sound of the voice that was going to answer.



I was hotter than a two dollar pistol when I stepped off the bus at the main terminal, and for a couple of reasons. The obvious one was I had gone from the fire back into the frying pan. The city was Kovic's territory. I figured that there was still a price on my head. And the law was looking to question me about Ralphie Silver's murder.. The Bombay mob and probably the diamond

syndicate were still after their revenge and the missing rocks. The other reason was Marie Wilson, the moonshiner's daughter.

She had flagged the bus down, endured the scolding from the driver, and lugged her suitcase back to where I was seated.

I explained to her again that she couldn't come with me.

She said that she was going with herself and that we were just going in the same direction.

I told her that I couldn't be responsible for her in the big city, and that I barely knew where I was staying myself which was kind of an exaggeration as I had a pretty good idea.

She replied that she had been planning this trip to the city since her last year in high school and that she would be staying with her friend, Irma, who lived in a woman's residence while she trained to be a court stenographer, and which she deemed perfect as she herself hoped to eventually find work as a newspaper reporter like Rosalind Russell in that movie with Cary Grant. And the first thing she was going to do as a reporter was investigate Constable Thorndyke and prove that he was responsible for the disappearance and drowning deaths of those girls. She had it all planned out. She would haunt the newspaper morgues and find all the articles and notices of girls missing up in the Lakes country and then stitch together an airtight case proving that Thorny was behind it all. And anyone else who might have turned a blind eye. She was going to get revenge for his victims.

I had to tell her that revenge didn't have a rudder or a steering wheel and there was no way of knowing where it would take you. I knew that from experience.

She was quiet after again insisting on her resolve to expose Thorny for the monster he was.

I was thankful for that and settled into looking at the countryside passing by from a corner curve of the window. I had my jar and expensive cigarettes. The bus stopped every so often along the route, picking up passengers heading into the city. An old gal in white gloves and shoes like leather bricks gave me a nasty look and asked me to put out my cigarette. Cracking the bus window open was as much as I was going to do. She wasn't pleased with my non-reply and found a seat up toward the front after complaining to the bus driver who reminded her that it was a free country.

The motion of the ride had made Marie drowsy and she leaned her head on my shoulder, giggling and speaking random words as she drifted off. I didn't think too much about it as I had other things on my mind like getting a new identity and finding a way to get out of the country before they reinstituted the draft. If Alice could find a buyer for Ted's art piece, it would be easy. If not, it would be hard and I had to be prepared for that.

The rumble of the bus crossing the bridge into the city shook Marie from her snooze. She'd smiled at me, drowsily and then hugged my arm to tell me that she was going to change her name if being a reporter didn't work out and she went to Los Angeles to become an actress. She would take my last name and call herself Eve Gardner as that Stan Gardner was the name I used when I'd introduced myself to her.

I gave her some free advice. Stay away from Los Angeles. And if she couldn't do that, she should dye her hair brunette and call herself Ava. There were too many blondes named Eve in the movies. She showed her appreciation by stroking the inside of my thigh and nibbling on my ear.

The bus made a quick wide turn that threw us up against each other and then face to face, almost lip to lip, and I could feel her heavy hot breath on my cheek. Or was that mine. I was breaking a mild sweat and I could tell it was destined to be another hot summer day, hotter than I'd expected. But destiny often has its own wicked sense of humor.

With a hiss of airbrakes, the bus had come to a full stop at its destination. Passengers were standing and stretching, some of them glancing our way.

Marie stood up, a little flustered and, grinning in embarrassment, straightened her blouse, grabbed her suitcase, planted a kiss on my cheek, and said "Bye, Stan, it's been nice knowing you. Don't be a stranger."



I banged on the door to Alice's studio keeping to the shadows. The wrought iron fence at street level blocked the view into the alcove under the stoop. A man had died on the sidewalk on the other side of that fence, a man wearing motoring goggles, sliced to the quick by Linkov's sword.

No one was answering the door and that had me worried. Alice was home most of the time working on her art. The last time I'd been on the other side of that door there had been a dead body, also wearing goggles, stretched out across the floor, also victim of Linkov's rapier. Both of the dead thugs had been looking for me and Rebecca, presumably after the diamonds because, not solely by coincidence, a crew of similarly goggled robbers had descended on Herr Doktor Soloman's apartment with guns blazing. I was pretty certain they weren't the Thieves of Bombay, it didn't fit with the

way they operated. And it definitely wasn't Yan Kovic's style. Who they were was still a mystery.

I felt a presence loom over my shoulder. It was Linkov, Alice's neighbor, the crazy Russian painter. He didn't have his sword, but his scowl was threatening enough.

It was the beard. "Linkov, it's me, Lackland Ask. I'm looking for Alice. You know where she is?"

He squinted closely at my mug. "Yes it is beard." He shrugged and walked away, a finger of his hand pointing up. "Top floor skylight studio." Linkov was never big on small talk.



Alice was happy to see me in her typically understated fashion. She had a cigarette in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. "You've grown a beard."

"Nice to see you, too, Al. Looks like you're moving up in the world."

That provoked a smile from behind a wreath of smoke. "You might say that. My friend Lee, the artist who used to work here moved to the island when her boyfriend came back from Wyoming and let it to me." She used the paintbrush to indicate the small space with a bed and a sink and not much else. "You and Becky stayed here one night. Remember? It wasn't that long ago."

I glanced around the studio. It did look familiar.

"There were more canvases stacked against the wall. My watercolors don't take up as much room."

I remembered the skylight. And I remembered Rebecca. It was a painful memory.

"And you guys left some things behind."

She handed me a little cigar box. Inside was Rebecca's pistol, a Remington 51, often referred to as a purse gun, the bank deposit envelope I had placed the post office package notice I had lifted from Della's mailbox for what I later learned was the jade, the Empress's Cucumber, now empty, and to my surprise, the little cloth sachet that had once held the diamonds and which Becky had claimed she lost in the coalbin, also empty. Suddenly my head was spinning. Something wasn't adding up and I had to sit down to figure out how come.

“Lack, are you ok?” Alice guided me to a chair by a table, the cigar box in my hand weighing a ton.

I had questions. For myself. Did the empty sachet mean that Rebecca had had the diamonds all along? Were they in her coat pocket when she took the plunge from the fourth floor of the Serbian Social Club? Even so, why was the bank envelope in the box and empty, the package slip gone. I knew she had it on her when we took the room at the Lattimer Hotel. So if she fell to her death how did it end up in the cigar box? She’s told me that she’s left the pea shooter behind so no surprise in finding it here. And it was loaded.

I stuck the pistol in my jacket pocket. I couldn’t decide what to do with the bank deposit envelope or the empty sachet. They were telling me something, something I didn’t want to believe.



Alice took me to see the doctor. His name was Patterson. He was a retired pediatrician and he collected art and wrote poetry. We met uptown at a gallery in a part of the city I hardly had the occasion to visit in my line of work. It was Swellsville, gilded windows and polished brass, Even the air smelled sweeter.

She’d already laid out the details of what had gone on the last couple of weeks I was hiding out in Little Lake. After the horrific attack on her by the goggle men, and the dead body bleeding out in her studio and the other one on the sidewalk out-front, and the police investigation and all the confusion of their questions, she was set upon by reporters with more questions. One of them got a look at her watercolors and liked them and he told his friend who was the art critic at the newspaper. The critic dropped by since he was visiting the loft of a big name artist who worked in the neighborhood. He loved what she was doing and introduced her to the uptown gallery owner who right away bought a sampling of her sketches and now was interested in some of her larger landscapes because he was certain he could find buyers for all her watercolors. He wanted to include her in an upcoming group show with well-

known painters, and even talked about mounting a solo exhibition of her “work” as she called it.

It was as if the dark cloud of the dead bodies of the men who had attacked her had a silver lining. Suddenly she had money, or more than she’d had before. I liked her new outfit and it fit right in with the gilt and shiny black lacquer of the gallery. With the exception of the beard, I looked pretty much the same, rough around the edges in my second hand tweeds, battered shoes, fedora, and dark glasses. Bright daylight still made my eyes water and ache. I looked like a blind man beggar Alice had abducted from a street corner. Under my arm was a box containing Ted’s art piece she said this Dr. Patterson might be interested in buying.

The doctor was all smiles when he saw Alice, and held out his hand. “Alice, so nice to see you! Roland has been showing me your sketches.”

Alice returned the smile, a little embarrassed. Her popularity was still new to her. She nudged me with an elbow.

“This is Jerry. . . .”

I saw her mind go blank. She’d forgotten the alias I was going to be using for this deal. I shifted the box to my other arm and held out my hand. “Jerome Paulsen, doc, nice to meet you.”

The doctor was a clean looking older man with wire frame specs, a white collar natty tweed suit, and a perfectly tied bowtie. He didn’t hide that I wasn’t what he’d expected. “You are an art collector?”

I shook my head. “Ixnay, doc. Only this piece Ted gave me. I thought I might get into the collection business but it turned out to be more than I can afford.” I smiled to myself at the little joke that I’d been in the collection business, but that one required a strong arm.

The doc gave me a thin lipped smile in return. “May I see the item?”

On the way to the gallery, Alice and I had gone over the way the deal could go down. I remembered what the art collector everyone hated had originally wanted to give me for it. Alice reminded me that his name was Huddington. He’d offered a grand, but Alice said that with so few pieces by Ted after the bonfire, I could probably ask more. Start at five but don’t go lower than three, she’d advised. Five grand was a lot of money but she said that for some people, it was peanuts. I wasn’t going to argue. I’d only been expecting a grand and even then I couldn’t understand why someone would pay those kind of peanuts for what was in the box.

Art, she’d said.

I was obviously in the wrong business.





The doc didn't blink. I blinked. I think Alice blinked. He reached into his suit coat pocket and took out a thin leather rectangle.

"To whom shall I make out the check?"

I looked at Alice. Alice looked at me.

Patterson smiled and nodded like he understood. He called Roland, the gallery owner, over and they left together speaking in low voices.

I could see that Alice was going to get teary. "This was one of his favorites," she had said when we boxed it up. I tried not to feel bad. The sale of Ted's art piece would pay for my ticket out. I figured he'd understand.

When Roland returned with Patterson, he had a manila portfolio in his hand which he opened to display five bundles of cash, each with a picture of Ben in the oval. He gave the envelope to Patterson who handed it to me.

In return the good doctor got the box of something someone had made from bits and scraps scattered around the furniture repair shop and placed in a handmade wooden box behind a pane of glass. I still didn't get why, but I did understand that a gallery could be a kind of bank. You could make a deposit with art and you could make a withdrawal in legal tender. This kind of collection business didn't sound half as dangerous.

I gave Alice one of the bundles when we got back to her place. "Finder's fee," I said.

I didn't expect the hug. She got tears on my lapel and wiped her eyes.

"Maybe Ted gave you this piece for just such an occasion," she sniffed. "He knew you were a trouble magnet and you were going to need to use it someday."

She had a point. Ted himself had even said, "Trouble finds you like gum finds a shoe."



Alice came with me when I picked up the passport forms at the Federal building. I had to copy the information from Jerome Paulsen's birth certificate into the appropriate boxes.

Alice peered over my shoulder. "What are you going to put down as your occupation? Peeper?" she teased.

I thought for a minute. "Optimist!"

Her laugh echoed in the small stuffy office. Heads turned. A clerk looked up with a scowl.

"Yeah, like an eye doctor, a private eye doctor." I smiled at my joke.

"You mean an optometrist. Like Doctor Patterson urged you to see. Optimist means someone who is an idealist,"

I shrugged, "Yeah, that could be me, the optimistic optometrist"

While we had been making nice with Patterson after taking his five grand, he asked me if I'd been in a fight recently. Maybe my mug suggested the possibility although the evidence that I led with my chin was covered by a beard. He asked me to take off my dark glasses. He looked in my eyes. He wanted to know how bright light affected them. I told him it was painful and that they watered. He wanted to know if I'd been hit in the head. When hadn't I? In my job you take a lot of lumps and it's never a fair fight. He said I probably had a concussion. If the eye problem continued I should see an optometrist to get fit with special glasses.

"Lack, didn't you see this?" She pointed at the bottom of the birth certificate. "Here, where it says Medical Condition."

The doctor had recorded Jerome Paulsen as "Blind." "So now I'm am a blind optimistic optometrist," I joked, "Maybe I should put doctor in front of my name."

Alice laughed but not as loudly this time. "Why not, you've got the beard for it. And put an O.D. after it."

"O.D.?"

"Doctor of Optometry."

"Doctor Jerome T. Paulsen, O.D. I think I like the way that sounds."

What does the T stand for?"

"Trouble."

She smirked, "Are you done filling it out?"

"Yeah."

She looked it over. "Pretty good for a blind man."

“You’ll have to guide me to the window.”  
“Just as long as I don’t have to bark.”



The cops finally caught up with me. Hogan, specifically. I had stopped at the newsstand around the corner from Hopper’s Diner, the daily blat’s headline blaring *Bombers Blast Britain*. It was another headline below the fold that caught my eye, *Missing Ridley Constable Sought For Questioning*. I was curious. Maybe Marie had stirred up a ruckus. I was on my way back to Alice’s old basement studio from the passport bureau with my new identity tucked in the breast pocket of my darker than tan suit coat. Almost two weeks had passed since I’d snuck back into the bad Apple. A lot had changed, and for me, for the better.

The five grand from the sale of the art piece had done wonders for my spirits, only the best mash, and my wardrobe, only the best haberdasher. It had also gone to the Uptown Downtown barber shop over on Seventh where I had had my mug given a going over. When I stepped out of the chair I was sporting a precise VanDyke. It went well with my sporty beige fedora with the fly fish feathers in the band and my new identity as Dr. Jerome Paulsen, O.D. Maybe the freedom of having a pile made me reckless. People were still looking for me. I’d let my guard down. But in my dark glasses and new duds, even the newsboy didn’t recognize me at first, and I’d been buying newspapers, girlies, pulps, and my Lucky Strikes from him for years.

I considered buying the latest issue of the crime fiction magazine, *Black Mask*. I’m not a big reader, especially of imaginary crime, but my old mug was on the cover of this one. I could see where Larry Jakes had got the color of the bruise under one eye just right.

I was about to take a closer look when I heard a familiar voice behind me. “You think you can fool me, wisenheimer? I’d know you anywhere, even in your dark glasses. You’re what every parent’s bad dreams are made of.”

I couldn’t help but grin. Jake Hogan and I went way back to the old neighborhood where I’d grown up, mostly on the street. He’d been the rookie beat cop back then. We were all wisenheimers to him, Ralphie Silver, Stevie Silverman, and me as well as a handful of other faces on the block. We thought we were the toughest guys on the East Side. He threatened to haul us down to the station just to

get our attention, and when that didn't work, and we got older, he did haul us in, and that meant that our parents had to come and get us, and sometimes that was worse than being taken in. "I guess I should say thanks for keeping an eye of me all these years."

"Where'd you get the money to suit up like that? Last time I saw you, you looked like you were sharing a wardrobe with a moth."

"Inheritance?" I coughed.

"Oh yeah, who from? I know it ain't from your old man. And I don't think it's from your mother, either."

"A rich uncle."

"He got a name?"

"Ned. Ned Ask."

"Ned? That the best you can come up with?"

"Honest. His full name is Nedan T. Ask."

"What's the T stand for?"

"I dunno, Ted, Tom?" All of a sudden I felt like I was ten years old again, caught doing something I wasn't supposed to do.

"That's a nice story, wisenheimer, but I still got to take you downtown."

"Come on, Hogan, you don't think I had anything to do with Ralphie's murder, do ya?"

He shook his head slowly, giving me the patented intense cop stare. "No, I don't think you did Ralphie, wisenheimer. You ain't got the guts or the brains."

"Then whadya want with me?"

"Oh, I got questions about that crew that ended up full of holes at Kovic's warehouse. But it ain't only me, the government boys wanna have a word."

"Listen, Hogan, this is all Ralphie's fault."

"There you go, blaming a dead man. I can't say I'm surprised." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Let's go."

"Wait, wait. Let's talk about this. There's something you should know." My chances at a clean getaway were fading fast. If Hogan took me in, I'd be a sitting duck for Kovic's stoolies and anyone else who would want to get their hands on me. And I wanted to avoid the feds at all costs. "How about I buy you a cup of coffee over at Hopper's diner?" I was gonna throw in the offer of a donut but I know how sensitive cops can be about that. "You know Ralphie," I pleaded, "it was always his schemes that got the rest of us in trouble. And this whole chain of events started because Ralphie said he had a job for me. Hear me out. Ok?"

Hogan cocked his head to one side, surprised. He'd never heard any of us beg, no matter how deep a mess we were in.



**I**t all started with Kovic's daughter."

"Don't tell me." Hogan smirked over his cup of steaming java.

"Naw, nothing like that." And I went on to tell him about how Ralphie Silver had set it up. I was going to be paid to find the mob boss's daughter. Ralphie thought he could maybe get some of his gambling debt forgotten if I could bring her back to daddy. She had a history of running away and the old man usually sent one of his goons to retrieve her. But this time, it was way out of State, and South. His dapper boys would have been made out to be city slickers and the local law would be onto them like white on rice. As I could pose as a traveling salesman on my way through town without any problem.

Hogan grunted and shook his head when I told him how Kovic had stiffed me and left me for dead in a ditch on the island. And how I was determined to get what was owed me, with interest. But in the meantime, my pal, Al, the pearl diver at Madame Cho's chop-suey joint, hooked me up with his sister, Della, who wanted me to find her boyfriend who had stolen something from her. "That's how I got pulled in on suspicion of murdering him."

"Yeah, I remember that. I knew that wasn't you. It was a professional hit. I can't figure why. He was a no account pimp. And his girlfriend wanted something he stole from her? I wonder what that was."

I shrugged. "I never got the chance to find out." I left out the fact that I had filched the postal slip from Della's mailbox. "Of course that was before I knew that she and her brother were part of a robbery gang who called themselves the Thieves of Bombay." And before I knew that waiting to be picked up at the post office was the exotic erotic jade, the Empress's Cucumber.

I thought about the empty bank deposit envelope in the cigar box back at the basement studio where I was lying low, and the postal package notice it had once held. Della with her dying breath had told me she had mailed the jewelry box containing the rare jade to herself. Why was the postal slip missing? I was certain Rebecca had it on her that day. But she was dead. No one survives a fall four stories up.

"So not long after that, I'm in a phone booth where I find an address book somebody forgot. I woulda returned it but I couldn't read it." I didn't want to say I lifted the wallet from a man drowning in the East River.

"I told ya, you shoulda stayed in school."

"Naw, nothing like that. I can read alright. This wasn't in regular writing. Something called Serial writing."

"Serial writing? You mean like in the pulps?"

"I don't think so. Whatever it was, it was Greek to me."

"Waitamminute. Do you mean Cyrillic?"

"Yeah, probably. That sounds right. No way I can return it if I can't read it so I stick it in my pocket. I go to buy a cheap suit from a tailor, see, and as he is taking my measurements, I'm trying on the suit coat, the address book drops out of my old one. He picks it up and gives it back to me and when he does, he sees the writing. He's kinda shocked, probably because I don't look the type to be reading that cockamamie scrawl. And he's right. I do ok with the ABC's and I don't see why I gotta know anything else. Anyway, he says he can't read it well but he knows someone who might, a rabbi, at some uptown address, and that I should see if he can't help me."

"Are you going somewhere with this, wisenheimer? If you keep droning on, I'm gonna need another cup of coffee."

"Well, as it turns out the tailor has a daughter. . . ."

"Ok, I shoulda seen that coming."



I had to watch my step with the story. Hogan didn't need to know about the diamonds. It was best that I stuck with the beef I had with Kovic. I had tipped him to the crates of machine guns at the Serbian Social Club where I had gone, foolishly, to enact some kind of revenge because my old man taught me, somebody hits you, hit them back twice as hard. He didn't say anything about a brick wall and hitting it twice as hard hurts twice as much. And I'd told Hogan about the heist at the Customs Warehouse and the threat to the grand jury investigating Kovic's control of the waterfront. But how to explain Rebecca.

"Is she the one that jumped off the roof of that social club?"

"She didn't jump. There was an explosion, remember? She was knocked off the terrace." I didn't have to tell him that it was Rebecca's father who had built the bomb and planted it there on orders from Herr Doktor Soloman and his clandestine diamond syndicate.

“We never found a body so unless she walked, you’re imagining things.”

I had to think on that for a bit. “So Kovic grabs me, he thinks I set the bomb. They scam before the keystones can get there, and take me with them to the warehouse. Which is where you found me in the aftermath of the shootout.”

Hogan shook his head. “I can’t figure that one out. Once we started making identification of the bodies at Kovic’s warehouse, we realized we were on to an international gang that target the wealthy for their jewelry and their art. We’d been after them for a while as the ones who had been taking down high society penthouses and their art collections. I don’t see how Kovic fits in there. And the feds are still looking for him.”

“I don’t either but I heard he wanted me dead. And which is why I took it on the lam and laid low up in the Lakes country waiting for it to blow over. That’s where I learned my uncle had died and he had left me a little something in his will. I’m just in town wrapping up some business. I like it up in the country and I’m thinking of going back there to live. Start a new life, stay out of trouble.”

Hogan snorted. “Not a chance. Besides there’s the little matter of the victim’s statement.”

“Victim?”

“Yeah, a certain Alice Neal. About a month ago she was attacked in her studio by two men who were looking for you and the dame. Only thing that stopped them from murdering her was a crazy Czarist and his rapier. You’re an acquaintance of Miss Neal? You were seen leaving her dwelling recently. ”

“I’ll bet Kovic was behind it.”

Hogan shook his head. “Kovic’s goons don’t wear goggles. That one’s still a mystery. The same crew shot up a diamond dealer a while back. So far all the leads point to Chinatown.”

“Forget it, Jake, it’s Chinatown.”

He laughed and it was a rare occasion when he did that. “I’m gonna thank you for the cup and I’m still gonna extend my hospitality and invite you downtown to sample some of the swill they call java.”

“Wait, what if I told you something that would get you in good with the G-men and get you a load of commendations and maybe even a handshake with the mayor.”

Hogan didn’t get where he was by ignoring situations that would put him in a good light. “I’m listening.”

“I know where Kovic is hiding out. You think that information could buy me a pass?”

“I could take you down to the precinct and beat it out of you.”

“Listen, Hogan, I just want to move to the country and get out of this rat race, make an honest living.”

“You should have quit while you were ahead, wisenheimer. Honest ain’t in your blood, and why would a rat leave the race when that’s the only thing he knows.” He sat back in the booth, a spiteful grin creasing his mug. “But ok, spill.”



Chinatown.” That’s when it all fell into place. Hogan saying that all the leads pointed to Chinatown was the piece I was missing. The goggle bandits, of course. They resembled owls. And that’s what Max Feathers was called by the Chinese denizens in the neighborhood of his pawn shop, *māo tóu yīng*, the cat headed eagle. The Owl.

I stood in a doorway across the street from the pawn shop. I’d left Hogan holding up his end of the bargain. “For once you done something right, wisenheimer,” he’d said, “Just don’t leave town.” I had every intention of leaving town. My bags were packed and I’d made arrangements with Annie Bassinger, the tugboat captain. There was a freighter due to sail in the wee hours of the next morning and I was going to be on it. But first I had to take care of some unfinished business.

The front of the shop was dark, but a light shone against the ceiling at the far back where Max sat in his cage. I’d gone back to the basement studio and looked in the cigar box again. The empty deposit envelope, the cloth sachet that had held the uncut rocks, and slipped Rebecca’s peashooter into my pocket. The street was the usual hustle and bustle for the time of day, wagons and trucks and a smattering of foot traffic but mostly further up the block where the street stalls were set up. I waited for an old woman, bent forward on a cane, a scarf close around her face, to wobble past the entrance to the shop before I made my move.

The bell over the door tinkled. I quickly made my way through the racks of clothing and stacks of boxes to the cage. Max, his back to me, seated in his chair didn’t turn around until I was right up to the counter. He blinked at first and then nodded in recognition. “Lackland Ask, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I got a bone to pick with you, Max.”



An evil smile creased his unshaven cheeks and he rolled his chair up to the teller caged counter. "Should I put you on a waiting list?"

"I'm taking cuts, Max. I brought that diamond here for you to appraise. And I told you I was gonna cut you in on the deal when the rabbi's people paid me off for the address book. But you had to get greedy, you wanted it all."

This time he laughed, exposing the ruins in his mouth. "Is that not the purpose of this madness? To want it all, to get it all?"

"You offered Rebecca the red brocade dress as an engagement present delivered to the address she gave you. You figured that's where the diamonds were and you sent your boys to get them."

"Do nothing in half measures, I learned long ago. Not only were the diamonds an opportunity but you, yourself, as well. With Mr. K's price on your head, it was one I could not pass up."

"Keep your hands where I can see them, Max. I know you've got a gat squirreled away on the shelf below." I pulled the pistol from my pocket and pointed it at him.

He grinned and shrugged. "If you must know, I would have the diamonds and the finder's fee from Mister K. My owls swooped in on their prey only to meet with fierce resistance and find the diamonds gone and you missing. I assumed that you and the diamonds had left together. I had your so-called office watched. The super was very cooperative. The sister act failed to fool him. He alerted my man who followed them to the woman's studio. My owls swooped in only to find you not there and themselves dead. Unfortunate, but often the fate of soldiers for the cause."

The bell over the door tinkled as someone entered the pawn shop. "Closed!" Max called out not taking his eyes off me or the gun. And then "Guānbì" in case it was one of the locals. The bell above the door sounded again. "The diamond have entered the market so I hear. Whomever had them has made a tidy profit, and judging by your accouterments, you have come into some money. Only one thing puzzles me. According to my sources, the person who sold the uncut gems was a woman. Do I have to ask? Someone you know?"

That confused me, someone, a woman, had sold the uncut diamonds, and it must have shown. I hesitated as he brought the automatic to bear on me. "But I have you, Ask, and Mr. K's offer is still standing. His current troubles with the authorities will be short lived and has not slackened his thirst for revenge."

I pulled the trigger and nothing happened. I pulled it again with the same results.

Max was enjoying my panic. "You will kill me with your comedy, Lackland Ask. You in your fancy clothes, ridiculous beard,

dark glasses, and toy pistol. I will die laughing. But before that happens, you will suffer a horrible death at the hands of Yan Kovic.”

Out of the corner of my eye I caught a movement followed by the shadow of a shape. Max didn’t realize until too late that we were not alone. It was the old woman in the head scarf I’d seen creeping along the sidewalk before I entered the pawn shop. Only it wasn’t an old woman after all. It was Rebecca. And she had a gun in her hand, a big gun. “Try this on for laughs, Max.” Her revolver barked. Max held his chest with a look on his face like something he ate didn’t agree with him, a lead pill, as he slowly spilled out of his chair and onto the floor behind the counter.

“Becky! I thought. . .the explosion. . .you fell. . . .”

“I didn’t fall, Lack. I jumped.” She pointed the gun at me. “I jumped from the ledge to the fire escape just as the bomb went off. I was certain that you were dead. In the commotion I was able to get out of the building unseen.”

“You’re alive!” I wanted to hold her in my arms but the gun wouldn’t let me.

“I don’t want to see you again, Lack. Don’t come looking for me, otherwise I will be forced to kill you. Forget me, you don’t even know my real name.”



**H**ow could I have been so blind? I kicked myself with the thought of how I had been fooled all the way back to the studio where I grabbed my satchel and left without leaving a note. I needed to make my exit before more bodies started piling up, one of which, to believe Rebecca, could very well be mine. All the same my mind was feverishly trying to make sense of how Rebecca was alive when I’d been certain she was dead, shocked and relieved because I’d been blaming myself all this time. What didn’t square was how she had the diamonds all along and had no intention of giving me my cut. How could I have missed that? I’m nothing if not skeptical, I can spot a con a long way coming. But not this, dazzled by a pretty face and womanly wiles.

She brushed off the double cross, saying that she needed the money to finance her goal of fighting fascism and the oppression of the working class wherever it arose. And the way she saw it, there was a lot of that in the States.

This was not the naïve kid I thought I was protecting from the mean cruel world. The tables were turned and I was the dupe being led around by a sharp cookie.

She didn't want to go into detail about what she'd been up to since the night of the explosion, the night we'd made love in the shabby hotel, but I assumed fencing the diamonds had been some of it. She had some unfinished business she said, and it had to do with the jade, the Empress's Cucumber, which explained the empty bank deposit envelope. But why be so careless to leave those things behind in the cigar box?

With a shrug of cruel indifference, she explained that she had redeemed the package with the postal call slip, and it contained the Empress's Cucumber that Della had mailed to herself. The only problem was that the jade was a fake, a soapstone replica. Someone had switched the authentic jade with an imitation jade cucumber.

I had to think about that for a bit. The only time that the swap could have been made was when it was in the possession of Della's pimp boyfriend, the one who was murdered. The Thieves had got it in a heist of a collector's penthouse. Then someone stole it from them and left the fake behind. It was a wily move and I knew exactly just who could have pulled it off. He was gargling blood and thrashing on the floor behind the counter, The Owl.

Rebecca had come to the same conclusion when she discovered that it was a replica. She had stumbled upon the authentic jade after Max had offered her an engagement present. It had been a ruse to get her address to where he would have the red brocade dress delivered, assuming, correctly, that the diamonds would be found where she lived. Max was hiding the Empress's Cucumber in plain sight. She'd never received the red dress either, it was still hanging on the rack, so she was taking it and the jade as well.

That's the way I'll always remember her, revolver pointed at me, dress over one arm, imperial green brocade box in the other, backing out the door to the hubbub of the street outside. Rebecca was not who I thought she was. That accent, the innocent act, had me fooled good. I figured I wasn't the first and I wouldn't be the last. She wanted the power to change the world because she was a formidable woman, the money from the sale of the rocks and the authority of the Empress's Cucumber would make her what the Chinese call qing guo qing cheng, a terrifyingly powerful woman. A flash of red and she was gone. I had to wonder, is she working for Uncle Joe or just a rebel with a just cause, the Joan of Arc in all women? That's why when I think of her I think of her as the Red Empress.

I stood atop the accommodation ladder looking out over the smear of lighted early morning skyline behind the scrim of a thick fog. In the churning waters below, the stern of the tug Narcissus was

pulling away from the freighter's towering hull. I'd said my goodbyes to Annie, telling her that she was one of the reasons I wished I could stay. "Then stay," she pleaded, "Get your seaman papers. Ship out to the West Coast, Hawaii, I hear it's pretty safe out there." But, nah, my old man was one, and that wasn't me. Robal, one of Annie's crew, had given me the name of someone to look up when I got to Havana who would connect me with someone else to get me the rest of the way. Valparaiso, no one would ever think of looking for you there, an old mobster told me once. I was travelling light, a change of clothes and my new name as a visually impaired optometrist, like it said on my passport. Some people might appreciate the irony and refer to me as "the blind man", a really private eye. Maybe I could get into the art collection con south of the Equator. Open an art gallery, call it The Blind Man.

The first mate interrupted my reverie and indicated the direction with an outstretched arm. "This way to your cabin, Dr. Paulsen. The Captain looks forward to meeting you at breakfast." I stepped through the hatch and into the passageway where fastened to the bulkhead was a life ring displaying the ship's name, the S.S. Van Dyne.