



Better Than Dead
A Detective Story
by Pat Nolan writing as
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The sachet of diamonds dangled from her index finger provocatively. But a sack of rocks couldn't beam as bright as the pride in what she had done. She loosened the draw strings and gave me an encouraging nod. I was to add my pebble to the pile.

Against my better judgement I dropped it in and looked her in the eye. "You got a plan on how we're gonna divvy them up?"

"This is not a word that I know. What is this 'divvy'?"

"How're we gonna divide the loot?"

"You explain with one word and confuse with another."

Now she was frowning, frustrated.

"Okay, how many rocks are in the bag?"

"There are six. With yours."

"Don't you think that the address book with the cockamamie writing is worth all six of them?"

“I have no way of knowing. It depends on how useful is the information.”

“Yeah, but Soloman got pretty excited about getting his hands on it so maybe it was worth a lot. I got the impression that had the deal gone through without a hitch, he would have forked over all six of those babies.”

She studied me with those big blue eyes of hers and I could tell the gears were turning beneath the auburn thatch of her perfectly disheveled hair. “You are very naive for a private police, Lack. Now that you have undergone this ordeal at the hands of these men, do you think that they would have agreed to a fair exchange?”

She shook her head and I watched the ringlets bounce on her shoulder. “There is something that perhaps you do not know about diamonds. One stone alone, even uncut, is same as many, many American dollars. Six is, as you say, a ransom for a king.”

“So you’re thinking I should only get one?”

“Two, I think, would be more than fair.”

“But not three.”

She shrugged. “We must be reasonable, not greedy.”

Here we were having our first disagreement, and wouldn’t you know it, it was about money.

“I have cut my ties with these bad people, Lack, I cannot go back to them and ask for help. These diamonds will allow me to start a new life here in America.” Her eyes pleaded. “Don’t you trust me? Besides. . . .”

She didn’t finish because someone was banging on the door to the tailor shop and it sounded angry.

“Quick,” she said as she steered me to the back and to a little workbench behind another curtain, “Hide in here.”



I listened with my ear to the curtain as she talked through the door. It was the super and he was mad, bawling her out, from what I could hear, about the mess in the bathroom. He was threatening to call the landlord to have her father pay for the plumber. I could hear the surprise in her voice, at first a stuttered half felt apology and then indignant insistence that she had nothing to do with the stopped-up toilet. The super yelled that he would call the cops and that cast a shadow on an otherwise rosy picture.

The alcove I was in was some sort of workshop, but it didn't look like something you would find in a tailor shop. Spools of wire instead of thread, pliers instead of scissors, screws and bolts instead of buttons. There was an odd odor, too, but I couldn't quite place it. A few sheafs of grimy paper were folded in among what looked like radio parts on the workbench. I spread one open. It was a diagram of some sort, measurements and notations, and in the same weird alphabet as in the address book. I stared at the drawing on the second page, turning it sideways and upside down. It didn't make sense, cylinders, squares, squiggly lines, kind of a blueprint, but of what exactly?

I felt the stirring behind the curtain as Becky pushed it aside. Her frown accompanied darting accusing eyes and she was about to launch a volley when she caught sight of what I had in my hands and it seemed to deflate her. "Oh," she said.

"So your old man repairs radios, too?" I could tell by her downcast eyes that I wasn't going to get a straight answer.

"It is just hobby for him. He was engineer once and design wireless. When he was to come here, he must be a tailor. His father was tailor and his father before him, and so it was not difficult for him be tailor in this country." She led me out from behind the curtain and changed the subject. "Lack, we cannot stay here. Mrazovich will call the police. We must leave."

I was hearing what she was saying but my mind was back at the workbench. That faint acrid smell lingered in my memory too. It bothered me.

"Lack, are you listening?"

I nodded, distracted by the feeling that not everything was as it seemed.

“Yeah, yeah, I heard him threaten to call the cops. For what, a stopped up terlit? They’re not going to come for that.” I fixed her with a purposeful look. “Here’s the plan. We lie low until it gets dark and then skedaddle.”

I was about to outline the rest of the plan when it came to me. I looked back at the curtain and then back at her. It was like someone had pulled on the overhead light erasing the shadows I hadn’t even known were there.

“What is it, Lack?”

“Your old man.”

“My father? Yes?”

“He’s a bomb maker.”

She didn’t have to deny it. I could tell by the way her face fell, the droop of her mouth, the slight tremor of her chin’s tacit agreement. Now her eyes glistened.

“It is as I have told you. I did not realize what his work for Professor Soloman had him do. He was organize the work of help refugees in warring country I think. He is a brilliant man, my father. But not a leader. It is they who use his genius, those who want power, not freedom. The criminal, the politician, the oligarch, they are all the same! He was fixing portable wireless for a friend, he said. But radio never work. He said it was missing component. Vacuum tube, he say, but wireless engineer is much more difficult than learn to speak American.”

I wanted to believe her, believe the gathering drop at the corner of her eye.

“Then yesterday night. . .” She stopped for a breath and fixed me with her gaze. “It seem so much longer than that, so many pages ago, but yes, after I was returned from our rendezvous with Max, I was sent to my room. My father was in his office and I went in to tell him I was safe. On the floor by the door was box he kept the small wireless and I ask if he has finally fix, and he say yes, it will be heard very loud.

“Then when they have their meeting I listen at the door because I must know what is the cause for all this activity. It is a very quiet time I have since I have come to this city. I am used to freedom because my mother, a school teacher, encourage to be, how you say, independent? But here I am bored. My father say I am too strong in

the head with my ideas, but I think I am much like him for my ideas. Then you, Lackland Ask, private police, come into my life and now it is upside down.”

I wanted to disclaim any responsibility for upsetting the apple cart but unfortunately my recent activity was anything but innocent such was my duck and dodge on the mean cruel streets.

“When I have listened to the door, I hear Herr Doktor speak to my father and say that information in address book has confirm what they know about location of Black Hand in America. And he ask if the explosive is ready to be used and my father say yes and I understand that he has been making bomb again.”

“Wait a minute? Again?”

“The reason he must flee to America is because of bomb that kill police officials in Salonika. They say his bomb. They say he is Soviet agent because he is graduate of university in Moscow. He was to come here and beginning again, he has told me. Now I see what it means ‘begin again.’”

“You’re sure it was a bomb? In the radio?”

A tear was poised on the brink of her upper lip. “And I will never see him again because I also hear Doktor Soloman say he has new passport and passage on ship to Rio and then another for a new assignment in Palestine.”

I put my arm around her shoulder and she wiped her nose on her sleeve. “It’s gonna be ok, kid. We’ll get clear of this mess.” I said it like I knew what I was talking about, but at the back of my mind I wasn’t so sure. My taste for revenge had got me more than a mouthful. Maybe I’d bit off more than I could chew. I was looking into the eyes of a dame who was an illegal refugee and I guess you could say, a jewel thief and tough cookie all around, whose pop was a bomb builder and possibly operating for Uncle Joe in a secret war against some mob I’d never heard of before but also some of the same guys who wanted to fit me with a pair of cement galoshes. And that was only part of the fix I was in.

She had lifted her head to look back up at me, a bemused expression haloing her bright cheeks. “Why, Lack, why did you not want to make more affection to me after we have return here and we are alone? Do you not like me? Is there something I have wrong? You have fire in your eyes when you look at me. I have seen before this in other men. But they do not have respect for me. You are different. Why?”

It was a good question and as usual I didn't have an answer. I was never all that good in the brains department. I didn't think. I just did. Sometimes I landed in hot water. Other times, I was riding the caboose on the gravy train. Right now I felt like I was about to board the good ship Lollipop. I looked into her bright eyes and spoke what was on the tip of my tongue. I told her that I didn't want to take the chance of getting any man oil in her baby machine.

Her laugh was like a string of pearls catching light. "You say such funny things! In my country you would be a poet!"

"No thanks, I've got enough going against me as it is."



She brought her lips up to mine and I tasted their delicate sweetness. It was almost as thrilling as a first kiss. Not bad for a guy who was used mostly to broads who wore cheap perfume and did their eyes up like Nefertiti. She pushed her body up against mine and I got that old familiar feeling. Her arms around my neck, she worked the tongue action like a real adult, and briefly, very briefly, I had to wonder where she learned how to do that.

I leaned her against the cutting table bringing my nose to nuzzle her neck and sweeping my hands over her body to make sure everything was in the right place. I wasn't disappointed. Her scent was intoxicating and I was drunk with urges. My clumsy fingers worked at the buttons of her blouse as I kissed her delicate skin down over the collar bone to the edge of lace.

She pulled at me urgently, uttering little breaths of encouragement. Her hands tugged at my waist and fumbled with the

buttons of my fly. She scooted herself up onto the edge of the table wrapping a leg around the small of my back. She hissed with a desperate passion. It had the desired effect.

My headache had gone away and was replaced by the pounding of my heart with special emphasis on the timpani of my ears. She moaned as my lips touched the inside of her thigh, grabbing my hair in her fists and arching her back. My hand reached under her skirt and found the top of her silkies. I pulled them down from her hips to be met with the moist miasmatic vapors of the hairy grail. Now she had me thinking like a poet, but the Billy club in my pants was draining all the blood from my brain. And besides, it was no time to be thinking.

She helped me get the bloomers down to below her knees and quickly undid my suspenders, my pants dropping around my ankles. She had her hand in my briefs and delivered another deep felt smooch.

I had to use all my concentration to keep my mind off the intense pressure of pleasure promised at letting go. And it wasn't any easier once she freed me. Like a bat, I wanted to head straight for the cave.

She had other things in mind. One of them was to drive me crazy. I glared at the ceiling cross eyed. Then she pulled me in toward her. I was tense with expectation, trying to distract myself by not looking down and get caught up in her roiling ecstasy just yet. I focused my gaze at the part in the curtain that faced the front of the shop where constellations of dust motes floated in a shaft of morning light slanting in through the wide display window. The same light was also reflected as a flash off the windshield of a big sedan that had screeched to a stop at the curb.



Cripes, it's the cops!"

She stared at me dreamily with incomprehension and sat up perplexed, looking down at herself as if it was something she did.

I was pulling my up pants. "We got visitors!" I said, "The cops! Outside!" Now I knew what a bucket of cold water felt like.

I could see the panic in her eyes as she jumped to the floor.

"Let's get out of here. Is there a back door to this place?"

She was slipping into her coat, bag in one hand, setting her hat on with the other. "Yes, down the corridor and to the left!"

I found my coat and headed for the door by the hat rack. I needed a hat. Bare headed men are always too conspicuous. And I lost mine near the back entrance to Soloman's building. I couldn't afford to be picky but they were mostly trilbys and flat caps, a few boaters, and one lone fedora. It fit a little loose around the ears but I wasn't going to worry about that now.

The shadows of men halted in front of the wide display window. One of them put his nose up against the window to peer in. I recognized the nose and the face behind it. The G-man, Nekker.

Out in the hallway I followed Rebecca dashing to the rear and an alcove to the left. She threw herself at the door. "It's locked!" she grunted in frustration.

I gaped at the large padlock and the chains. I ran back to the hallway. I could see water seeping out onto the floor from under the washroom door. It didn't look like a federal offense. And across from it, the maintenance closet. From which I had emerged less than a week ago. It was a crazy idea and I had to go for it. If it didn't work, we were trapped, no matter what.

I steered the kid into the closet, closing the door just as I heard flat feet flapping on the floor tiles and voices raised, commanding, announcing. The closet was dark and I felt my way to the opposite side, feeling for the handle of the door down to the furnace room.

The door creaked open onto a dark abyss. I knew there were stairs going down but I couldn't remember how many seeing as how

I had mostly crawled my way up them last time. My eyes adjust to the faint glow of light cast by the dirt encrusted window on the coal furnace hatch. Slowly I made my way down the steps made more difficult by the hat sliding down over my eyes and Rebecca's iron grip on my arm making my balance all the more precarious. Finally I set my foot down on the cinder littered floor. It was still all but pitch black. I could see my hand in front of my face but I couldn't tell how many fingers. I tried to remember the direction of the coalbin and took a few hesitant steps in that direction.

The noise at the top of the stairs meant that they gone into the closet. It was only a matter of time before they found the door leading down. I barked my shin against something solid but was thankful that it didn't clatter. I bit my lip to stifle my bark. A few more steps and I touched the lateral boards of the coalbin. I felt around the front for the latch to the gate. I could now see a silver sliver glistening off a few lumps at the top of the heap, the seep of daylight coming in at the top of the chute. The gate scraped open wide enough to wrench through onto the jumble of ore. I felt her hesitate. Then voices, "Find the light switch!"

"It's not working. Bulb must be burnt out"

"Go back to the car and get the flashlights!"

I scrambled to the top of the pile and felt for the edge of the chute. I whispered in her ear that I was going to hoist her up onto the chute and that she had to reach up to push open the hatch to climb out into the loading zone. She was willing enough and light enough to lift, and agile enough. I followed her up with a little more of a struggle. A voice shouted, "I can hear someone down here! Hurry up with those flashlights!" By then I was pulling myself out of the hatch and crawling onto the midmorning pavement at the rear of the building.

Rebecca stared at me from her sitting position next to a crate and the brick of the building. Then she started giggling.

Hysteria, I'd seen it before, under many different circumstances. Giggling, and pointing, pointing at me, now with the other hand over her mouth to catch any unladylike guffaws. "You are covered in coal dust, all over your face, and your hat!" That was apparently the funniest part of all. "Your hat is crushed, and is falling around your ears. You are like a Charlie Chaplin character! A clown!"

On second look she hadn't made out any better wrestling with the coal chute. She had a scrape on one knee, her hat was off to one side, and she had smudges on her cheeks and her nose. Yet she gleamed like a diamond.

I leapt to my feet. "Let's skedaddle!" And raced for the street and the narrow alleyway that ran directly opposite. It being a Saturday, the commercial traffic was light. I spotted a delivery truck pulling away further down. I raced toward it with Becky close behind. The driver hadn't rolled down the back gate and he was going just slow enough to catch up. The large truck hesitated before turning on to the street. I gave Becky a leg up and hopped on as the truck turned into traffic.



We abandoned ship when a passing cabby alerted the truck driver that he had a couple of stowaways. We landed a few blocks from my office on 9th Street. Hopper's Diner was just around the corner and down the block. I was in a mood for some honest java and a chance to get my head around what I had to do next.

"They ain't gonna think of looking for us in plain sight," I said when she stared at the wide windows looking out on to the street. There was another couple in the one booth in the back and I would have preferred to be down there, half way out of sight, instead of perched on a stool hunching my shoulders to the street. Still I had a gut feeling that we might have eluded the G-Men and I could catch my breath. From the counter man's mug he thought we looked a little rough.

Rebecca peered at me over her cup. “You have an eye that is blackening purple and a dark bruise on your forehead.”

“Yeah, I felt as much. Too bad you can’t see my headache. My head is throbbing like a sack full of kittens.”

“Should we go to the hospital?”

“Naw, that’s the first place they’d look for me.” What the G-Men wanted with me was an open question. Was it me? Or was it the kid? Maybe her old man? Kovic wasn’t going to let up until I was worm meat. And the others, who were they, and what did they want? “We gotta find a place to lie low. Change the way we look. I got a place nearby but I don’t want to take the chance that it’s being watched. I can’t go there.” Then it came to me. “But you can!”

I outlined my scheme. She would hide out at my place while I got a hold of Max and made arrangements to move the diamonds. Then we would have the cash to make a dash to wherever our hearts desired, including a ritzy hotel with room service. I could tell right away she didn’t like the idea.

“No, not Max, he is not a good diamond dealer if now he must be a pawn man. I know people, and the people I know know people, and these people will pay top rate for the diamonds. And we must also consider that by now the police have been informed that the diamonds are missing and a pawn shop is the first place they will look.”

She was right, I just naturally assumed the cops would be looking for me for whatever reason.

“Ok, you got a point. And if the diamonds are missing and you’re missing, they’re going to put two and two together and come up with you. And if they get that far, they’re gonna notice that I’m missing, too, and when they add me in, they’ll get us.” Now I had a bunch of international saboteurs on my tail to boot. And for the time being the diamonds were hot no matter how uncut they were. My ready cash had whittled down to Hamilton and his older brother, Jackson, a couple of fins, and some fish. If we were going to lie low someplace until the rocks cooled we were going to need a larger stake. And I had something I could use as collateral.

I dropped a couple of Jeffersons on the counter and pushed out the door to the street, the kid on my heels. “Where are we going?” she wanted to know.

“I got an idea,” I said as we hustled down to the corner, “we’re not gonna need those diamonds just yet.”

“Yes,” she nodded, patting the pocket of her coat. Then she stopped and patted the other pocket, and then rummaged in her bag. “Lack,” she moaned, “I can’t find the diamonds?”

“What?” I couldn’t believe my ears.

“I was certain that I had put them in my coat pocket. . .you remember, when we talked about them.”

I wasn’t remembering anything. I threw my hat to the ground and glared at her with my hands on my hips. “You lost the rocks?” I must have shouted it because a guy passing by gave me a quick look of concern. I leaned forward and growled in her ear. “You checked all your pockets?”

She fumbled with her coat. “Yes, look, the lining is ripped. It must have happened when I was climbing up the coal chute. And that pocket was the one with the hole in it.”

She looked sorrowful enough, but I got the feeling something wasn’t right. “You lost the diamonds?”

She put her hand on my arm and said with an earnestness I had to believe, “They have fallen out in the coalbin! We must go back and retrieve them!”

I was about to answer when a couple of older dames dressed up like they were just coming back from Church or a funeral brisked by. They gave me a suspicious cursory once over and then one of them reached into her purse and dropped four bits into my hat. An act of charity if it hadn’t been for the looks of pity mixed with haughty superiority.

“Right now the shop is probably crawling with feds. We’ll have to go back later. And getting past the super ain’t gonna be no picnic.”

“Lack” she said looking puzzled, “Why must you always talk about eating?”



I want you to meet my friend, Alice.”

Alice stood in the doorway of her small basement studio in a man’s shirt stained with paint and her pajama bottoms, blinking. “Lack, hello.” Smoke trailed up from the cigarette in her fingers

“Alice, this is my friend Rebecca.”

“Hi, come on in. What brings you around?” She pointed us to the two chairs and table by the small kitchen sink.

It had been a while since I’d been there. The last time I saw Grace was in this small apartment with its mattress on the floor and lopsided set of drawers. Not much had changed. The large table covered with large mottled sheets of paper and jars and brushes, cakes of color.

I’d had to admit my powerlessness at changing what could not be changed. Grace had made up her mind. She was moving to San Francisco. If it hadn’t been for Alice, I mighta been looking at an assault and battery rap. Ted had just died and it was tearing her up. And she’d lost it, in high hysteria, her grief so complete that it overshadowed the pettiness of our squabble, demanding all the attention. By the time she’d calmed down, I’d accepted what wasn’t going to change. I’d look in on Alice on occasion, help her out if she needed a few extra bucks. She seemed fragile but she was made of tough stuff.

“I got a question about something that Ted gave me a couple years ago.”

“Ok, have a seat. Nice to meet you, Rebecca. I’ll start some coffee.”

“I hope we didn’t come at a bad time.” Alice’s bob looked a little lopsided and she’d yawned a few times to unrumple her face.

She glanced shyly over her shoulder. “No. I stayed up late last night with some friends down at Sid’s. What did you want to ask me about?”

She’d found a couple of chipped tea cups and a hefty mug to set on the table.

“Yeah, remember that time Ted had the art show at that gallery down on 2nd Avenue? What, maybe two years ago?”

“Crane’s. Yeah, I remember. What a disaster that was. Ted got so drunk. He was celebrating the first one man show of his assemblages. He knew he was dying even then but kept it under his hat. Didn’t want to bother anyone unnecessarily” She turned from the tiny icebox. “Milk’s gone sour, but I’ve got a little honey if you want.” with a self-effacing smile that shouldered all the sorrows of the world. “What about the show?”

“There was this really obnoxious guy there, some stock broker, a money guy, and he was bad mouthing Ted’s stuff, you know, the little constructions and dioramas?”

“I remember it well. Such a phony blow hard.”

“I was ready to slap him silly and teach him some manners, but Ted let it slide. Then the guy sees one of the little boxes with the glass face and says that it is the best piece of art he’s ever seen. Or something like that.”

“That was Huddington, not a stock broker, but an art critic and dealer. A complete, pardon my French, asshole.”

“And offered Ted, what, a thousand bucks for it right then. And Ted turned it down, said that one was from the collection of a friend, and when this guy demands to know who owns it, Ted points at me and says, ‘That guy, I just gave it to him.’

I knew I’d get Alice laughing with that story. She held the pot over my mug. “And Huddington offered you the thousand buck and you turned him down, too.”

I caught the kid gaping, wide eyed, fascinated, I was sure as much by the story as by the lingo it was being told in. She’d stumbled tail over teakettle down the rabbit hole into the land of the real American argot.

“Yeah, I knew that was Ted’s game, get even with the loud mouth, so I told him to go pack sand. But what surprised me was that when the party was over, Ted actually gave the box to me to keep.”

“I remember that.”

“And I said, ‘You’re crazy, it’s worth a thousand bucks’ and he said, ‘You’re worth more than that, Lack. Thanks for being a friend.’” I stopped because I was feeling a little heat behind my eyes.

Alice nodded, looking away as she remembered sadly, “Yeah, that sounds like him.”

“So even after I had to move out the apartment with Grace into my office, I hung on to that box. I still have it. I promised never to sell it.”

“That’s real sweet of you, Lack” and she kissed me on the cheek. I saw her wink at Rebecca. “We’re old friends.”

“So I’m wondering if that guy Huddington would still be interested in buying that box.”

If anyone could do forlorn it was Alice. And disappointed. “Probably. After Ted built a pyre of all his paintings and assemblages and lit them afire, what he called a bonfire of vanity, because each of them was an occasion of sin, there are probably less than a dozen people who own any of his pieces. So, yeah, I’d say you could probably get more than what he’d have paid two years ago.” She narrowed her look at me and blew out some smoke. “But Lack, you said you would never sell it.”



I felt like a rat. Alice was right. It wasn’t a new feeling. I always knew I was a rat because I had to be a rat just to get by, and doing what I did, Confidential Investigations like it says on the card, is something a rat is good at, always looking for an angle, always an ulterior motive, always considering what was in it for me. I had what some might call veneer, a tough exterior that was as persuasive as my solid good looks and native charm. I could talk the talk and I rarely had to prove it by walking the walk. But I didn’t want to have to be that kind of rat.

Ted was my brother-in-law for a very short time. When I hooked up with Grace, he was already pretty sick. Alice said it was because of all the chemicals he used in his business that had got to his lungs, his brain. He refinished furniture so he could afford to work on his art. Every once in a while I helped him moving furniture

he had refinished and deliver it to the customer in his old '28 Ford when I wasn't tracking down runaway daughters or nieces or spying on the wives of poor deluded bastards or retrieving someone's possessions, like jewelry boxes.

We'd relax over a couple of long necks in his workshop afterwards and he'd explain to me why all the little boxes and scraps of odds and ends left over from a job and arranged in a certain way was called art. I never understood much of what he was saying, but what I did understand was that Ted liked me for who I was, the actual me, the guy who'd helped him lug a settee up six flights of stairs, not the tough guy that I wore when I was doing my job as a private dick. And the fact, that for some erroneous reason, he thought I was good for his sister.

I was going to have to think of another way of scamming some cash and finding a place to lie low. True to my rodent nature though, I had an idea of how I could use Alice and Rebecca to evade the eyes that might be watching my place, and buy me time to retrieve the rocks from the coalbin, if indeed that's where they were.

I watched the kid take in the cramped but comfortable carelessness of Alice's studio. The art on the walls, the sketches on the work table must have clued her.

"Oh! You are an artist!" Rebecca exclaimed and Alice joined her at the work table. "Watercolors!"

"Well, I'm not O'Keefe, but yeah. They're not exactly a big seller like oils on canvas, but after what fumes did to Ted's health, I don't want any of that mess. Anyway, I get by doing department store display sketches and such."

I could tell by Becky's eager expression that she had a thousand questions and that Alice was going to have a lot of explaining to do.



I couldn't let on to Alice about my swim in the East River and the address book that was worth a Bull Durham sack full of diamonds or that Mister K had put price on my head and that international saboteurs were after me because Rebecca stole from the diamond dealer in whose apartment a gun battle had occurred and whose father was a bombmaker without sounding like something out of a men's magazine. I was having a hard time believing it myself.

Rebecca's giggle said they were going to be good friends. Alice looked over her shoulder at me. And smiled.

I smiled back nipping at the java. "You're right, I couldn't sell the art Ted gave me. I don't know what I was thinking. I'll just have to figure some other way to go on the lam."

"Sure, Lack." She'd started another cigarette and let the smoke drift from between her lips. "But if you kids need a place to hang out for a while, that's alright with me."

We were kids now. "I'm going to need some things from my, uh, office but I can't go there myself."

"Ok."

"Maybe you and Becky can go over there and pick up an item for me." The item I had in mind was a battered leather satchel, what I thought of as my "getaway" bag. If things got too hot or too dicey I could beat feet out of town and make myself scarce. In the bag were a pair of woolen slacks, a change of underwear, a denim shirt, some well-worn kicks, and a heavy overcoat for when the nights get chilly in the back of a cross country bus. In the lining of that heavy coat was pinned a one hundred dollar bill, my "getaway" money. Alice didn't need to know that detail.

"Sure."

The bag was in a corner of the closet under a pile of newspapers and dime magazines. I said they might have to move stuff around to find it. I gave Alice the key.

"Someone got into my room about a week ago and tossed the place. I haven't been back since. That's why it's probably a mess."

“That’d be different,” Alice quipped. She’d been to my office before.

“And don’t let Curtis see you because I’m a little behind on my rent.”

“That pervert!” Alice tucked her shirt into her pajama bottoms and slipped into some Mexican sandals. “Come on, Becky, I’ll show you how it’s done on the West side.”

Becky pranced like an eager pony that made Alice grin. Then she snapped her fingers. “Why didn’t I think of that in the first place!” Her eyes widened with her really good idea. “My friend. Lee. She has a loft on the top floor.” She pointed up to make sure I knew the direction. “She went out West to visit her boyfriend’s parents. In Wyoming.”

Rebecca’s eyes grew almost as wide as Alice’s, savoring the exotic word. “Wyoming,” she repeated.

“She won’t be back for a couple weeks. She asked me to water her plants and feed her cat! It’s perfect. You’d have your privacy.”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that.” I could feel the flush of my face.

My embarrassment was funny to them. I stopped them at the door. “Oh, and see if I’ve got anything in my mailbox. I’m expecting bills but there might be a check in among them.”

Alice looked annoyed. “Do you have a mailbox key?”

I shook my head. “Naw, just use your hairpin.”



The guy stood out like a tack on a marble floor, behind the wheel of an old Plymouth, hat pulled down over his eyes, sleeping, or pretending to be. Could have just as well been a copper as a mug. I'd tailed Alice and Becky. They were too busy getting acquainted to notice me.

I left my perch from a doorway down the street from my building and headed in the opposite direction. At the next corner, a prowler car was pulled over in front of a fire hydrant. A couple of fedoras were leaning down to the open window. The low sun was just breaking through the clouds and made me wince with its bleak intensity. By the time I got back to Alice's, my eyes were watering like the wind had swept motes into them. I ducked down under the stoop entrance just as the beat cop came sauntering by. Someone called out a greeting from across the street and he gave a jocular reply.

I let myself into the studio, a space I was not unfamiliar with. Alice had a little brown Bakelite radio with an amber square panel parallel to the speaker grill off to one side of her worktable and I turned the knob to break the silence. Rapid recitation of stock averages. I twisted the dial. String music. A man talking about saving his soul and anyone else who had the faith and the money. There was an installment plan. The end of the stock report and news on how hostilities on the continent blah blah blah Precedent Roosterfelt et cetera et cetera, conscription of young men, and so on. The strings won and the crescendos were easier to take than the words I was hearing. News of a proposed draft was not at the top of my list of happy.

Alice's place wasn't exactly a dump, as if I should have been talking. It was a brick and plaster box with a tiny sink and a hot plate. A curtain half concealing Alice's unmade bed raised on bricks and lumber pilfered from a nearby construction site cut the room by a third and certainly did not making it any less cramped. Neat is not a word I would use to describe Alice. Stacks of paper with sketches and daubs of color. Portraits she'd sketched at nearby restaurants and cafes and in the neighborhood park strung like laundry to dry. I

recognized the automat in the background of one of them. Just a few precisely placed brush strokes and ink lines caught it all. There was a large portrait of Ted framed on one wall, kind of a shrine with a tiny votive candle as well as stray articles of intimate clothing under it. No telling what Alice might be doing in her sad all alone. Ted seemed more alive in Alice's rendering than he'd been in person, cigarette in hand, smiling ruefully. It was the eyes, they seemed to sparkle.

I thought I heard a noise. The coffee had somewhat done the trick and I was barely paying attention to the clanging going on between my ears. It could have come from behind the small ice box next to Ted's portrait, a rat or maybe just the old building settling further into its foundations. I turned to see the doorknob move with a click and Alice and Becky walking in.

"I didn't know you liked classical music." Alice said setting down the brown satchel.

"Tchaikovsky!" Becky exclaimed although it sounded like a sneeze. She handed me my mail.

"We ran into that creep Curtis when we were leaving." Alice was digging through the drawers of her dresser under the portrait of Ted. "I told him that we had a bag for you but you weren't in your apartment, which, by the way, is a picture perfect disaster zone." I noticed Becky wrinkling her nosy at the unpleasantness of the experience. "He didn't say anything about the rent. Probably because he was too busy ogling your 'sister'." Alice indicated a beaming Becky with a nod of her head. "From Wyoming."

Becky nodded in assent. "I love to say the word. 'Wyoming'. A place whose name poses a question. I must learn what is this *oming*."

Alice laughed a shriek. "Probably something Buddhist, honey!"

My mail consisted of an ad from a dry cleaner and laundry, two return-to-sender letters that I had mailed to Grace on the West Coast and which now had returned with their refusal to acknowledge my attempts to communicate, a familiar *Last Notice* envelope from a collection agency, and postal item-too-large-for-box slip.

I went from heartbroken to puzzled. The pink postal slip in Della's mailbox I had filched. I'd put it out of mind. But this one was for something different, deliverable to me. I was stumped. And distracted. Della's postal notice was in a bank deposit envelope

tucked behind the cash register of a cocktail bar waiting for someone with my name on it to claim. This didn't make sense. I could say I had a gut feeling about the package slip, but it was the hairs on the nape of my neck that had stiffened.

Becky pointed to the notice in my hand." I think this is package of old clothes my father send to you after you buy your suit when I first see you."

"That's so romantic!" Alice could be sarcastic.

Of course, it was obvious as the smudge on my nose.

"Becky told me you're helping her find some family jewelry stolen by a gang of jewel thieves? I guess that's better than peeping in windows." Alice gave it her sly wicked smile. "And you had to hide in a coalbin to get away from them?"

I had new respect for the kid. That was a better story than I could come up with, and believable, coming from her. She was smart, she was good looking, and she had imagination. That made her very attractive. It also made her very dangerous. A woman with a mind of her own is unpredictable. Proceed at your own risk, as the old man used to say.

"That's probably why you two look like a hobo vaudeville act."

I'd caught a glimpse of myself in the fragment of mirror above the tiny sink. My face looked like I had been bussed by lips of charcoal. The red watering eyes were sad, like a clown's.

"You can clean up in the bath down the hall. Linkov was leaving just as we came in. He's off for his daily chess game in the park and won't be back for a couple of hours."

I brushed at the sleeve of my coat. "Naw, I'm ok, maybe just splash some water on my mug. Gotta a towel? And who is this Linkov?"

"You know, Linkov, the mad Russian painter, he has the studio next door. We share the, ahem, facilities." Alice winked at Rebecca. "He likes to peep." And gave me a knowing look.

My concern must have shown.

"I just hang a towel over the hole. Don't worry. He's harmless. An old Russian aristocrat. He says he was wounded by the Reds. He was a White, apparently."

If Alice wasn't going to worry about it, I wasn't either. I glanced around at the walls of her tiny studio. There's never only one hole.



It was no use. The coal hatch wouldn't budge. It was locked from the inside. Rebecca had tried the front door to the building but it was locked as well. I'd cased the street an hour before and there was no signs of the feds or anyone else who might be taking an unusual interest in the tailor shop. Looking for the sack of lost diamonds in the coalbin was going to have to wait another day. Rebecca looked at me expectantly, crouched by the coal chute. She was going to have to try sweet talking the super again.

I pulled her to her feet. "Let's go have a drink and think this over."

"Why Lack? First it is food you must always have and then is drinking. What will we do about stones?" She returned the flashlight borrowed from Alice into her coat pocket.

"Listen doll," I said turning her to face me, "the rocks are as safe as if they were in a bank. No one knows the diamonds are down there. Just you and me. But in the meantime, I have other business to attend to so you might as well tag along."

"Where is this place I will tag to?" she asked as I pulled her along by the hand.

Over one block to the intersection of the bright lighted main drag and down another block to the granite cornerstone of the metro bank building and left past the jewelry store to the sturdy nondescript mahogany door with the amber rectangle of glass where the speakeasy peephole used to be. Even before I pulled on the door handle to open it I knew that it wasn't going to be the quiet little cocktail lounge I had ducked into over a week ago. It was Saturday night.



There was an explosion of smoke, the rumble and roar of competing conversations, cacophonies of shouts, bursts of laughter as low belly guffaws of gents or the high whinnies of fillies, the distinct clink of bottle and glass, a shuffling and scraping of chairs, and music from a coin operated Victrola over in the corner where a few couples were rubbing their bodies against each other to the lowing moans of a crooner in what passed for dancing. The heady hoppy scent of beer and sharp tang of high octane joy juice mixed in the tobacco haze that hung in the air just about at eye level. It was a lively crowd and no one noticed as I stepped up to the bar where shoulder to shoulder the serious drinkers sat on stools or leaned against it for support.

Neither of the two bartenders treading the boards pouring drinks and ringing up the sales on the big brass cash register was the tree trunk that had served me the first time when I'd stepped in to avoid a tail. I tried to wedge myself between a couple of muscle heads who weren't interested in letting me squeeze through until they laid eyes on Rebecca. Then they became gentlemen whose mouths had dropped open and whose eyes popped out of their sockets accompanied by an ahooga horn.

It just made her smile even prettier at the attention. She was what the old Jewish ladies in the neighborhood used to say, a real shayna punim: a pretty face. I'd looked into that pretty face with stars in my eyes, too. But something was telling me it was too good to be true.

We'd followed Alice's suggestion and took a breather in her friend's loft on the top floor of the building. It was a tiny place, like Alice's studio, but big enough to be crowded with large canvases hanging on or leaning against any spare wall space below the low ceiling and skylight. Becky sorted through them as if leafing through a sheet music bin, sounding little notes of surprise or astonishment. The ones on the walls looked like swabs of brush cleaning to me.

I'd cleaned up a bit. brushed the bin dust off the elbows, lapels, and knees. I washed my mug of the coal smudges. The bruises weren't in any hurry to leave. And enough time now had elapsed

since the hot grope in the tailor shop. She was still being coy but cool. It was like she knew she had me, she didn't have to tug on the string.

I had other things on my mind besides. The throbbing at the base of my skull was annoying. I'd been beat on a little too much lately and it was taking its toll. A good long sleep would probably take care of that. In the meantime, getting the rocks back was the first priority, fencing them to diamond dealers Rebecca said she knew or even Max Feathers if worse came to worse. That would generate enough cash for me to light out for parts unknown, far enough that any of Mister K's mooks might accidentally bump into me. But now Becky and I were partners, business partners, so to speak, and there's no better way to ruin a romance.

We bided our time waiting for evening to get grayer in a kind of no touch tango, dancing around what each of us might be thinking.

I thought taking the back way out of the building the safest bet and we scuttled across the trash strewn backyard to the alley behind. The less we were seen the better I was going to feel. She'd tied a scarf under her chin and I had my too large fedora down over my ears. We probably looked like an old couple out for an evening walk on the mean streets of the West Side. No cars followed us with their headlights dimmed and no mugs were tailing our footsteps. We were all but invisible. And I warned the kid. If things went south or anything happened to me or we got separated she was to amscray back to Alice's and wait till I got word to her. When it developed that getting at the diamonds wasn't in the immediate future, I had a backup option.

“Whatallitbe?”

I'd attracted the bartender's attention although not in the same manner that the kid was attracting the attention of the wolf in the pinstriped suit next to her. The leer of his oily grin wouldn't pass the Hays code.

I held up two fingers and then sideways signifying a double.

“And your little sister?”

Rebecca smiled up at me and I remember how loopy she'd got on Max's hootch.

“A Shirley Temple,” I said which prompted her to squeak with delight, “Oh, I love Shirley Temple!”

After I laid the simoleon on the bar I told the bartender that a friend of mine had left an envelope for me. I pointed to the cash register. "My name's on it."

He came back with the envelope. "What's your name?"

I told him but someone was getting loud at one of the tables and he had to ask again. So I said it louder. "Lackland Ask!"

He didn't quite hear what I said and bent his ear toward me. "Lackland Ask!" I repeated even louder. And right about then there was a lull in the barroom din and anyone who wanted to hear my name. He handed over the envelope and I pushed the two bits from my change on the bar toward him. "Gee, thanks." He said and grinned brightly.

I'd been keeping a side eye on the skunk in wolf's clothing trying out his con with the kid. She may have been starry eyed but she wasn't dumb. She wasn't going to fall for the line that he was Shirley Temple's long lost brother, Ramon. Or was she?

I nudged her with my elbow. "imtay otay ogay."

She blinked once and frowned. "But Ask, I haven't. . . ." As she turned to glance over her shoulder she saw the look on my face.

The wolf had been nudged out of the way by a snake and I felt like I'd just stepped into a frame of an Orphan Annie strip because the narrow framed ferret eyed fella in a long overcoat was a spitting image of the Asp.

He smiled one of those smiles that wasn't a smile and I expected a forked tongue to slither out from between his tight bloodless lips. Instead he said in a high pitched voice, "So nice of you to announce yourself, Mr. Ask. If you will please come with me. Someone would like to ask you some questions, Mr. Ask." He thought he was being funny but I could see by the way he was holding his hand that he had a gat in his coat pocket pointed at Rebecca and that he was very serious.

I nudged the envelope into the kid's hand and murmured "Aketay isthay." Then I turned to the large stevedore quaffing his brew behind me unaware of the little drama going on inches from him. I patted him on the derriere and when he turned to give me the mean eyes, I made a kiss with my lips. That enraged him.

He set his beer down and prepped a roundhouse.

"Ukday!" I yelled, ducking as his fist landed square on the side of the Asp's head. I goosed a couple of other saps scrambling

for the door and within seconds the place had erupted into the brawl it had been waiting for all night.



Once on the bricks I twirled undecided which way to run. Just before the end of the block was a service alley. I headed there all the while scanning the opposite side of the street lined with jalopies. I wanted to stay to the shadows so I crossed over, the kid on my heels. I figured to get to the main drag where I might flag a cab or duck down to the subway. It wasn't to be.

It was like they'd materialized from the bricks and shadows, the Asp's twin, a skinny guy in a tweed cap and a red scarf around his mug, a bruiser with a taffy colored bald head, arms like elephants trunks, ten penny nails for eyes, and a short shrimpy guy with a tall hat and high heeled shoes. Only it wasn't a guy. It was Della, Al's

redheaded sister. And I had to guess that the skinny guy with the scarf was Al.

“You have something that belongs to me!” she growled in my face.

The bruiser held me up by the scruff of my coat like I was hanging from a hook. The Asp had grabbed Rebecca by the arm as she tried to get away. She reached into her pocket and smacked him on the side of the head with the flashlight. It surprised him just enough to loosen his grip and it was all she needed.

“Unray, unry!” I shouted to her as Al started to chase after her.

Della called him back. “Letter go. This is the guy we want.” I felt the slap, the taste of blood in the mouth. “You took something from my mailbox.” There was another slap but not as hard. She may have hurt her hand the first time. “I want it back!” and a knee below the belt. That hurt, and I groaned because that was all I could do. “Wherizit!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

“You’re lying!”

The giant shook me like maybe the answer would drop from my sleeves like burgled silverware.

“You took the postal slip from my mailbox in the lobby. One of the neighbors saw you. She reported to the cops but I knew it was you from her description. That’s a federal rap you know, stealing mail.” She said it with a mean smile.

The asp-man was rubbing his head. “I can make him talk.” He examined the tips of his fingers, blood.

“Give her what she wants, Lack.” Al spoke up, “You don’t wanna get hurt. Not by Sam.”

“Al,” I said, “I thought we was pals. You said I should come to you if I needed help. Are these creeps the muscle you’re talking about, Al?”

Al shrugged. “Ya shouldna takenit, Lack. I got no choice.”

“The slip!” Della screamed in my face. Then Sam’s fist caught me between the eyes. I thought I was seeing double and hearing things, the shrill eerie cries of a banshee. But it was just Sam’s twin, and he was telling Della, “Less getoutayear! Cops eronde-reway!” and then I realized, “the sirens!”

Rough hands lifted me and stuffed me into the back of the Chrysler sedan and before I knew it I had King Kong, the Asp, and

my shadowy old pal, Al sitting on top of me while the other snake got behind the wheel with Della seated beside him, roaring off just as the paddy wagon pulled up. One of them was sticking something sharp into my spine and it hurt.

“It’s stupid to die over a piece of paper, Lack,” Al insisted.”

The pain increased. “Ok, ok! It’s in my office over on 10th Street.”

“That dump you call an office is over on 9th, meatball. I know, I been there,” Della barked. “Don’t think you’re smart.”

“Right, 9th Street. The slip is in my office. Hidden.”

“You’re lying! I tossed the place. I didn’t find anything except dirt, flies, and soiled underwear.” She gave a smile with her tiny bone grinding teeth. “You’re a slob, you know that?”

The pressure on my spine eased some. I had to come off sincere. “No, I hid it pretty good. You wouldn’t find it unless you knew where to look.”

Della told the driver to head back toward 9th. “If he’s lying, you and Sid know what to do with him.”



Curtis was lurking in the foyer with a broom and a dustpan when I came through the door. He looked up surprised to see me accompanied by the Asp brothers, the muscle bound gorilla, Al, and his sister, Della. He smiled at first. Then he frowned. “Hey Mr. Ask, where you been? The cops has come around lookenferya.” He gaped at Della. “And yer udder sister. From why oming.”

“Oh yeah, well, tell the cops I ain’t here.” I said as I brushed past him.

“Hey, you know the rule about visters affer fivaclock!”

One of the Sids grabbed the handle of the broom Curtis was holding and used it to smack him between the eyes. “Mind yer own business if ya know what’s good ferya.”

A herd of elephants might have been quieter climbing up the two flights to my office. Alice must have forgotten to lock the door and I walked right in. The bruiser had an iron grip on my shoulder. “Don’t try any funny business,” Sid warned. I flicked on the light and saw what Alice and Rebecca had seen earlier that day. Messes don’t have a tendency to right themselves no matter how long they’re left alone.

“Whooo! Open a window!” And one of the Sams started over to do Della’s bidding.

“Ah, nah, bad idea. It’s broken. Open it and it’ll never close.” I should have kept my mouth shut. Sam grinned over his shoulder and yanked on the sash lifts at the bottom. It wouldn’t budge. At first. And then it shot up like a rocket. I heard the top pane crack and shatter. Well, I hadn’t planned on spending another winter here.

“In the closet.” I said pulling myself free from the baby giant who I just noticed was wearing some kind of pajama pants. But given his size, he could wear just about anything he wanted. “In the trench coat.”

“I already looked there!” Della was trying to squeeze into the closet with me.

“In the lining.” I’d palmed the postal call slip when they were dragging me up the steps. I reached in and after some rummaging to make it look like it had really been hidden, I pulled my hand back out with the orange slip that had *item too large for box* written across the top.

She snapped it from my hand, glanced down at it, and then gave me a suspicious glare. “I already looked there. Is this some sort of con your pulling, pepper?”

“That’s them, officer!” Curtis was in the doorway with the beat cop. Dempsey. He was a large cop and what they call a hard man. Della’s genie may have been bigger but he wasn’t as hard. And he had a loud cop voice. Probably because he was deaf in one ear. “What the holy hell is going on here!” He had his fists on his hips, one of them holding his billy club, and the bulge in his back pocket was his pistol. “Who’s responsible for this mess!”

Curtis pointed at me. “That’s him, officer. That’s Lackland Ask.”

Dempsey's eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted with that particular Irish determination. He strode across the room and pulled me out of the closet. "We been looking for you! Come with me."

That was one of the few times I went anywhere willingly with a cop. "What's the beef, officer?" I glanced around the room. The two Sams were pretending to find something interesting with the wallpaper. My pal Al had the red scarf wrapped around his nose and staring at his shoes. And the oak doorway was trying, not very successfully, to blend in with the shadows. Della looked surprised and was about to say something.

Dempsey didn't pay them no mind. "Shadap! Some gents downtown wanna talk to ya. Somethin' about a dead lawyer!" He pulled the cuffs from his pocket. "Yer not gonna give me a hard time, are ya?"

When I shook my head no, he put them away. And besides he wasn't going loosen the vice grip he had on my arm. But that wasn't how I escaped.



Something must have happened in the room after Dempsey hustled me out. Curtis had been bringing up the rear and lingered at the door. The next thing I knew he barreled past me on the stairs with terror in his eyes, banging into the cop and throwing him off balance. Dempsey loosened his grip to catch his balance and I wrenched free. Down to the next landing I leaped overtaking Curtis, knocking him down, and then practically skipped the entire next flight of stairs, skidding into the wall. I caught myself and jumped another half dozen steps down the next flight. Dempsey was roaring behind me, yelling at Curtis laid out across the stairs to get out of the way. I made it down to the foyer and through the front door onto the stoop and the street. I looked both ways and then

dashed down toward the end of the block where a large delivery truck was parked. I skidded around behind it and ducked down.

I could see Dempsey pause at the top of the stoop, look around to see if he could spot me. Out of breath, he lifted his cop cap and scratched his head realizing he'd lost me. He slapped the billy in the palm of his hand a couple of times and then strode off to the call box at the other end of the block.

The night was filled sirens, but that seemed typical for a Saturday. I waited till Della and her misfits exited the building and drove away. She'd got what she wanted. Or so she thought. Rebecca was the one with the postal slip she wanted, and I had to get to her in a hurry. I cut through a couple of alleys and made my way over the few blocks to Alice's. If she'd listened to me, she would be waiting for me there. With the diamonds I'd yet to retrieve and what I had a hunch Della's package contained, I might just be looking for a place on easy street.

I rounded the corner down from Alice's studio, and there they were, a squad car blocking the street and a gaggle of blue uniforms. The cop car was stopped right in front Alice's building. I didn't like what that was telling me.

A crowd had begun to gather and some of the patrolmen were pushing them back. I wanted to get closer, make sure it wasn't what I was thinking. There was a lump lying along the iron railing leading down to Alice's. A cop was down on one knee examining it and, looking up at his partner, shook his head. Then I spotted her, sitting on the steps, wrapped in a blanket, shivering, a cigarette between two fingers. Alice. A patrol sergeant by the chevrons was talking to her and writing her answers in his pocket notebook.

I had the urge to bust through the cordon to be by her side, put a protective arm around her when I felt a tug on my sleeve. It was Rebecca. Her eyes were red like she had been crying, her lips trembling.

"Oh, Lack, it was awful!" she sobbed.

I needed details. And she gave them to me in fits and starts. She had made her way back to Alice's studio. When she arrived there were a few neighbors standing around the steps leading down. Then she saw something on the sidewalk. It was a body. She could see that Alice's door was wide open. Fearing the worst she ran in. Alice, stunned and shaking was crouched down by the icebox. On the floor was another body. It had a huge bloody slash across its

back. Seated on one of the kitchen chairs was a man. With a sword. It was Linkov.

“I screamed. And that brought Alice out of her daze. She told me not to be frightened. It was Linkov who had saved her. Two men had burst into her studio and demanded to know where you were, Lack! They were looking for you! They hit her a few times and threatened to do things to her.” She paused to see if I understood what those things might be.

I nodded, looking over at Alice, smoke trailing from her mouth as she answered the cop’s questions. “Where is he” jumped back into the forefront of my brain as a recent memory.

“She had just finished taking a shower she told me. And she said that she usually did a little dance before the portrait of Ted because she misses him so much. And that is when they burst in and began to slap her around, demanding she tell them where you were! And all of a sudden there was Linkov with his sword! He slashed them before they even knew what had happened. One fled out to the street but he is dead too, on the sidewalk.”

I put my arm around her shoulder. “That musta been pretty scary, kid, no wonder you screamed.”

“That is not why I scream, Lack. I scream because they are the same men who come to Rabbi Joseph’s apartment and start the shooting. They have the goggles and the kerchiefs the same.”



The country was going to the dogs and was being led there by the rats under the spell of the pied piper in a wheelchair. That's what the guy sitting down the counter from me said. He wasn't saying it to anyone in particular. What he was saying was that war was inevitable. I'd heard it all before. I didn't care for the Marconi Messiahs or the broadcasts from the big tent evangelists predicting the storm that everybody knew was coming. If a guy wants to strut around on a stage pretending he's god-almighty Charlie Chaplin that's his problem and maybe he should see a head doctor, but it's none of my beeswax. And now some squinty eyed guy by the name of Hero He Too across the wide Pacific was getting too big for his pants. If there was a war then I faced the prospect of being drafted and I wanted to avoid that at all costs. I could always take a hike to Canada but I was no dogsled jockey. South of the border, the islands, Cuba, Chile sounded exotic and full of señoritas, and all more appealing. Mister Loony, Herr Mustache, Hero He Too didn't mean nothing to me. No matter the drumbeat, I wasn't marching.

He was going on about other things, Commies, getting loud, angry, until the cook waved a big metal spatula at him and told him to turn it down. I was looking at my hands trying to be invisible, hat pulled down over my ears, dark glasses no matter that they looked like beach wear. A problem had developed. Because of Sam's frap between the eyes, the bruise around both of them had turned the color of a ripe eggplant. I didn't think my nose was broken but it was still throbbing the next morning.

After the crime scene had closed down, after they led Linkov away in bracelets to the paddy wagon, his white hair in unruly spikes and his pointed beard and swirling moustache held up defiantly beneath blazing eyes, after watching Hogan in a huddle of high priced suits with Nekker and his G-men while the body from Alice's studio was carted out to the coroner's van, after the crowd had drifted off in clots of twos and threes and only a few of the neighbors were still giving Alice their sympathies, after that I stepped from the shadows from where I had been watching. Rebecca had managed to get closer

to Alice and finally led her away, down to her studio. I followed close behind.

It wouldn't have taken much to upset the clutter of Alice's tiny space. The chalk outline on the floral carpet only partially contained the spread of a dark burgundy stain. The sergeant had given her the name of someone who could clean it up for her.

"Why am I struck by the total modernity of that composition?" she asked, a cigaretted hand flailing at the floor and giving that silly grin that precedes an immediate collapse.

I caught her before she hit the floor. Rebecca helped me stretch her out and then prop her feet up. I got a pillow from the bed for her head.

As I crossed the room taking in the disarray, I saw that Ted's portrait was slightly askew, the gleam in his eyes gone. And I thought of Linkov. The peeper. I bet I could find a hole on the other side of that wall where he was accustomed to watching Alice's sexy dance in front of the portrait of her deceased lover. If it hadn't been for Linkov's voyeurism no telling what harm might have come to Alice. He was the real hero.

She came to as Rebecca was patting her cheeks, eyes blinking and looking around and moaning, "I can't stay here."

Up in Lee's loft, Alice sat on a small rickety chair holding the cup in both hands, sipping strong coffee, shivering still wrapped in the blanket, dragging the smoke out of a cigarette, and looking up at the skylight as the first of early morning brightened the flat pane. "What in the hell happened?"

I had to tell her about how a swim in the East River led to the possession of a valuable piece of information that could garner a small fortune in diamonds and how Rebecca had rescued me from the double crossing diamond dealers in the face of a gun battle between them and unknown assailants whose description resembled the men that attacked her in her studio, and helped me escape to her father's Used Clothes shop where she revealed that in fact she had absconded with the diamonds and then the G-Men showed up because as it turns out her father is a bombmaker followed by the escape through the coal chute where the diamonds dropped from Rebecca's pocket and later that night when the attempt to retrieve the diamonds from the coal bin failed I went to the cocktail lounge to collect the postal slip stolen from Della's mailbox and ran into a gang from the funny paper who kidnapped me so Rebecca got away

but only to come upon the body in her studio and that maybe her and Rebecca going to get the traveling bag from my office wasn't such a good idea and hadn't fooled anybody because they had been followed.

Alice looked at me blankly for a moment and then down at her cup. "What did you put in this?"



The counterman came by and reheated my joe. He jerked his paper hatted head in the direction of the loudmouth. "'Don't mind him. He shouldn't read the newspaper. Gets him riled up.'"

I nodded and took a sip from the cup. "Thanks. I don't pay him no mind."

He indicated my eyewear with his chin. "A little trouble with the missus. You're showing purple around the edges of your fancy glasses."

"Naw, ran into a light pole last night."

"Howdya do that?"

"I was walking in the pitch dark and was afraid I might tumble over something and hurt myself so I went toward the streetlight,

tripped over the curb, and falling into the pole. Caught me right between the eyes.”

“At least the light was better.”

I laughed for what it was worth. And he walked away and came back with a box from under the cash register. It contained a collection of lost eyewear. “Might find something better than what you borrowed from the little lady.”

That had been Alice’s suggestion earlier before Rebecca and I left the loft. “Take Lee’s sunglasses, she never wears them. You don’t want to walk around looking like a ghoul from the Saturday matinee. Somebody’ll notice you.”

As if no one would take a gander at my beat up mug wearing a pair that belonged on a Hollywood dame. I held them in my hand as I had then to compare. There wasn’t too much of a selection in the box, mostly a tangle of round wire frames and cracked lenses. At the bottom was a square set of black lenses, the kind you might see on a blind man. I tried them on and they fit with a certain weight that felt comfortable. I turned on the stool and looked at my reflection in the diner’s front window. I was unrecognizable. I slipped Lee’s pair into my jacket pocket and smiled even though it hurt. “Whadayeoweya?”

The counterman shook his head and waved away my offer. “All you need is a cane.”



First Alice was hysterical. “What were you thinking!? They could have killed me!” I wanted to say “or worse” but I knew enough to keep my mouth shut. Then she got angry. “You bastard! How dare you!? You put my life in danger with your stupid stunt. I could have died!” Then she got quiet and that was the worst because those eyes shouted their disgust with me.

Rebecca had tried to explain that there was no way they could have suspected that they were being followed from my office. “Did they ask for Lack by name? How can you be sure that it was him they were looking for?” Alice said she didn’t remember but who else would “he” be but me. And that’s what I was thinking. That he was me and a gang of goggle wearing bandits wanted to kill that me. But who were they? I thought if I knew I could figure out how to avoid them.

I could tell by the look on Rebecca’s face when she settle on the stool next to mine that she hadn’t had any luck with the tailor shop building’s super. “There is police seal on door to my father’s shop and padlock on door to boiler room and coal bin. I do not know how we will be able to get to the diamonds.” Her shoulders hunched, ready to release a sob. I held her hand and she looked up at me.

“They are very dark your glasses, Lack. Can you see from them?”

I got the feeling she wanted to change the subject. “Yeah, I can see with them just fine. And my eyes don’t hurt as much in the bright light.”

She gave a weak smile and let out a sigh. “What will we do?”

I shrugged. I knew I had to get out of town before Kovic and his mugs caught up with me. I had an idea but didn’t let on to the kid. I would go down to the coal yard in the morning and find out who the supplier for that address was and then I’d look over the delivery schedule and get to the place before the coal was delivered and make like I was from the coal company and say I was there to inspect the chute because there was a problem last time like maybe the chute was blocked or something like that. But that would take

time and I didn't have the time or the expense account. I had to think of something.

I had started out with the idea of getting revenge for being stiffed by Kovic. It seemed like a simple enough plan. Walk up to him and fill his face full of holes. If I could get close that is. But in my state of mind, I didn't care. I wasn't going to get beat out of my fee or beat down trying to collect. And I almost got it, too. But I got a consolation prize instead, Yamatski's Black Hand address book. Then I'd been rooked out of that by Solomon and his boys. I shoulda been smarter than that. They got the book and I got nothing. Unless you count the kid and the promise of pilfered diamonds.

I looked over at Rebecca and past her at the guy in the battered fedora and the equally beat up traveling case handing his business card to the counter man who inspected it with one eye closed and a squint of the other, and shrug. "We don't need no novelties. We just sell food here," he said.

I had a card in my wallet. It was Yamatski's card, the one that promised a reward if his address book got lost and found and gave a phone number and an address to return it to. My original idea of taking a look at his setup and maybe taking something that might be worth my trouble came back into play. It would be dangerous and I didn't think I should drag Becky into the scheme which was essentially a burglary. But when I told her I had to be someplace, she gave me such a sorrowful look and pleaded, "What will I do while you are gone? Alice is still very angry with you, with me. I have no place to wait."

I felt bad for the kid. Against my better judgement, which was starting to seem like a bad habit, I let her tag along. When you take a shine to someone, it comes with responsibility. Maybe that was why.



The streets were wet with rain again. I hopped a crosstown bus. One of the passengers, an elderly woman, let me have her seat thinking I was blind. It was Sunday, and she was in her Sunday best as were a few other women and men in their best dresses and suits, coming from or going to services. I wasn't going to argue. I was just being cautious. Rebecca took a window seat. We stood out like Raggedy Ann and Andy in a collection of porcelain dolls.

At the end of the line the late afternoon sun passing behind a cloud defined a horizon of ship yard cranes and a thicket of masts. Fenced lots echoed with the barks of loud vigilant dogs and the brick warehouses, some seeming abandoned, maintained a grim silence. The rail yard was nearby, and a block of shabby businesses: a café and bakery, a corner grocer's, a laundry, a hotel, a snooker parlor, and the address I was looking for.

I kept to the opposite side of the street in the shadows of the elms alongside a dilapidated board fence. From behind wood pallets stacked on the bed of an unhitched horse drawn freight wagon I cased my destination.

The sun had broken through the clouds glancing orange off the plate glass of the café and blindingly into the eyes of the man standing on the stoop of the address. A large Oldsmobile breezed up and he shaded his eyes, or maybe it was a salute, before climbing down to an arched double doorway to let the big car into the garage. Yamatski's digs weren't the sleazy walkup I'd supposed. That gave me pause. So did what Rebecca said next.

"Lack, look at the sign above the door!"

I'd seen it. I couldn't make out what it said. It was Greek to me, like you might find on a fraternity house near the university uptown. CC with an upside down N or maybe a U. It coulda been a mook's version of the YMCA for all I knew.

"Serbskiy Sotsial'nyy Klub," she breathed. "They are connect to Black Hand. It is social club for fascist."

I got it. It wasn't going to be easy. The social club was like a brick fortress. There was no way I was going to go in the front door, not with that mug guarding it and whoever else was behind it.

The blinking neon sign in the plate glass window of the bakery said Café Latino. It suggested I needed another cup of coffee to think things over. And while I was at it. I ordered a half a dozen donuts.

"These donuts I have had before. Sweeter than a bagel. More like cake. I have seen them eaten in the movies. Donut must first be immersed in cup of coffee," Rebecca demonstrated.

"No, no you're doing it all wrong! Didn't they teach you anything in that fancy Swiss boarding school of yours?" And I showed her how, breaking off a piece and dipping it in the coffee just enough to wet it but not get it soggy. "That's the way it's done, kid."

She smiled and that always got me. I had no defenses against it and any doubts I had about her, about me, just disappeared. "I like when you call me 'kid', it makes me feel very American. And you are right, it is much better to dip than to soak. I am learning much from you."

I didn't want to think she could be putting me on. And I didn't want to be the one leading her astray even though there was no doubt that's what I was doing. I had to put all that aside and concentrate on my next move. It was like she could read my mind.

"What will we do now, Lack?"

Above the café was a fleabag known as the Lattimer Hotel. I'd followed a wife and her boyfriend there once years ago when I was just starting out in confidential investigations. There was a narrow two shoulders wide alley between the hotel building and the social club. The room number on the address of Yamatski's card was 404. I guessed that made it the fourth floor and to the rear. The hotel building was a floor taller than the social club at five stories. I knew what I had to do. And I had to make sure that Becky was out of the way when I did it.

"I think we should get a room." I said and tossed my bit of donut in my mouth.



There were water spots on the wall where at one time rain had leaked in and no one had bothered to paint over them. The bed looked like it belonged in an Army hospital and maybe it had at one time. A recent occupant had been a cigar smoker. There was a cracked mirror above the basin sink but the facilities were down the ratty carpeted hallway to the rear. A grimy window with a torn shade overlooked the roof of the building next door. I stood at it pulling on a cigarette. Becky sneezed as she sat up on the bed and looked at her surroundings with an expression that said she would have rather been somewhere else. I was waiting for the last of the light to fade before I made my move.

The desk clerk had barely looked at the register where I had signed Mr. & Mrs. Samson Delilah as he passed me the key to the room. He looked like he had other things on his mind. A racing form was spread out on the counter. He pointed to the sign leading to the stairs that said No Credit, No Elevator, No Towels, No Ballroom,. It was indeed a small hotel. And they'd missed the obvious, No Class.

I led the way up the five flights and the high ceilinged room at the end of the hallway. She hadn't objected, looking away from me like she was preoccupied by a kind of sadness. I figured the stress of the last couple of days was getting to her, she was just a kid, no matter what she said she did in the mountains where she came from. When the door closed she pulled me to her and kissed me, hard, the sadness magically evaporated, replaced by a hungry passion.

I was tempted, pulling her up against me, her head tilted back at my response. My judgement when it comes to women hasn't always been the best, and maybe I could even blame my lapses on my inability to figure them out even when I gave it a try. The hardest part of this jobs was resisting that urge. How many unfaithful wives of unfaithful husbands had offered themselves as partial payment or as a bonus for my peeping, and every time I gave in I was reminded soon after of what a mistake that had been. I couldn't afford to be swayed.

“We need to talk,” I said. I sat her on the bed and explained my plan to cross the narrow gap between the two buildings and make my way to Yamatski’s room to grab anything of value in partial repayment for my attempted murder. She would wait in the room until I made it back.

There’s a word for the look she gave me and it’s usually reserved for idiots and fools. “No, Lack, stay with me. I am being frightened. Please.” She pulled me to the bed and had me lie next to her. “Tell me why you must do this. It is dangerous. We can wait.” She indicated the room. “Even here.”

She dropped her hand on my chest which predictably affected me below the belt. She was smiling in my face and gave me a look. Even in the long shadows of the room, I could see that it was one of those, mischievous and deadly serious. That’s all it took.

Afterwards she wanted to talk about how happy she was and what she was going to do once the recovered diamonds were sold. I admired her confidence in the future. She said she was undecided whether to go to Hollywood or find a big city like Chicago or New Orleans in which to begin her American life. Her eyes were alive either from previous excitement or at the possibility of fulfillment of her dreams.

I told her that Hollywood was just a big slum of broken dreams with better looking people and overnight millionaires who could just as easily find themselves penniless by the morning. She’d stand out like an easter egg in the dozens of hardboiled and overcooked. I told her that her best bet if she wanted to stay incognito was a college town, they had high turnover and nobody asked a lot of questions. If I was going to ground, that’s what I’d do. But I could see by the set of her mouth that the lime light appealed to her. I told her if she was dead set on it, once she got to Chicago on the Broadway Limited, the Super Chief would take her to all the way to Los Angeles and it was just a trolley ride to Hollywood.

“Stay with me, Lack, you could teach me many things.” She had wrapped her arms around mine as if to hold me.

I nodded, staring at the ceiling, and lit another smoke. I got to my feet. I had to do what I was going to do.



The gap between buildings was too wide to jump across. The wind was starting to pick up again ahead of another storm and rattling the rickety rails of the fire escape. Across the gap was the roof to the social club, a sloping metal affair ending at a stubby brick parapet like you might find on a tower to a castle. I thought of braiding a couple of sheets together to make a rope and maybe swing across but I'm no Tarzan. It was maddening. I was so close. There was no way I could take a running jump and make it. And the prospect of dropping five stories did not appeal to me.

I went back to the room and Becky smiled like she had won an argument.

“You have change your mind?”

“Not on your life, sister.” I was staring at the bed. I overturned the lumpy mattress. Just as I thought. A wire grid and springs attached to the frame at the foot and head of the bed and held together with wing nuts. And maybe just long enough to bridge the gap. It was worth a try. The nuts had been painted over but I managed work the ones at the foot loose. The nuts at the header looked like they'd been welded on. I was working up a sweat while the kid watched me like I had gone crazy. Maybe I had. I was a mad man in a frenzy trying to prove something to myself with no idea what that might be. Frustrated I gave the frame a kick. The header gave a groan as only metal can and folded ever so slightly forward. I gave it another nudge with my foot and it gave way a little more. It was better than nothing.

Rebecca helped me cart the frame down the hallway to the fire escape door. Getting it through the door and out to the fire escape was a little more challenging. The header was the problem. It had bent only so far yet was still too wide to fit through the door. Having moved furniture with Grace's brother, Ted, I knew enough about angles to clear the bed frame through the narrow door with a minimum of bangs and backups.

Out on the skeletal pipes of the fire escape, maneuvering in line with the gap wasn't a walk in the park either. But I gotta give it to the kid, she was a real trooper. Lightening opened up a bright gap

in the darkening sky and I could smell the approaching rain. Not that it mattered, I was sweating like a steamed up window.

I was right about the bed frame bridging the gap but wrong about the way it might be accomplished. Attaching the header to the railing as a hook the bedframe missed the opposite roof by half a foot and maybe a couple too high. Not perfect but I could chance using it as a ramp to lessen the jumping distance. I jammed the bedpost into a corner against the bricks but it was no guarantee that the bedframe wouldn't come tumbling after me and I would have no way to get back. I had to take that chance.

I hauled myself carefully up on to the rail and took a cautious step forward. The kid was putting all her weight against the header frame and I took another step. I heard and felt the welded nuts groan and begin to give, the frame dropping a few inches. I needed just one more step and leapt. And it started to rain.

The bedframe rattled free of my weight and sent shocks to the fire escape which sounded like an explosion of small hammers. I looked up and could see Rebecca's silhouette as the rain began to sheet down. The bedframe had held. I'd landed in the narrow gutter space of the brick battlement and it was filling quickly with water shedding off the roof. There was a peaked window with a metal ladder leading up to it I had spotted earlier as possible access in to the club. Either an attic or a loft. There was no light behind it. I had to assume it was unoccupied. I made my way up to the ladder to take a few steps up and peer in. Sheltered by the overhang I could see into the shadowed gloom of the space beyond. Maybe an attic but not a living space.

I heard the noise and turned. The kid was standing on the bedframe about halfway across and the header had come loose from where I'd jammed it. It moved forward and down under her weight. I heard the bolts snap and the frame separated from the header out from under her feet.

She threw herself forward and managed to grab the edge of the abutment. I got to her and reached up under her arm and her other shoulder and dragged her into the gutter. The bed frame made a racket rattling down the shaft and bouncing off the bricks on the way down.

And then it was quiet. And raining. My escape route, never too realistic in the first place, was gone. Plus, now I had the kid to worry about.

“I am so sorry, Lack, but I did not want to be leave alone.”

I was too wet to be angry. “Let’s get out of the storm.” And led her up the ladder to the attic window.

I broke a pane with an elbow and reached around to undo the latched. The window stuck and then creaked as it swung open. I put my head in and sniffed the air. Dust, and mold, and something else, machinery? I pulled myself through the narrow opening. It was dark but not pitch. There were a set of attic windows on the opposite wall of the peaked ceiling letting in a dim light. Rebecca followed, still apologizing, but her way.

“I should not have followed. It was foolish. And now we are in a musty attic with boxes and old furniture. And if you do not believe in coincidence, another attic we have found ourselves.”

“Relax, and pipe down. There’s gotta be a way off this floor to the ones below. And that’s where I’m going! We just have to make sure the coast is clear and no one is making a fuss about the clatter.”

I’d already made out the shadow of a railing to a stairway leading down under the row of windows. I listened at the top and heard nothing. I could see that they led down to a doorway by the shadowy gleam of the knob. I stepped quietly awaiting the inevitable groan of wood. I put my ear to the door. Nothing, and gave the knob a turn. The hinges sighed as the door opened into the dim overhead lights of the hallway. Now I could hear what sounded like a burble of distant voices coming up the stairwell. Someone raised their voice and some one answered back louder, closer. The tread of feet thumped the risers heading up.

I hurried back up the steps to the attic pushing the kid ahead of me. She didn’t need any urging, she knew the drill. I ducked behind a large crate covered with a tarpaulin just as an overhead bulb lit up. I could hear the door open and the unhesitant footsteps advancing.

“Naw, nothing up here, quiet as a moose,” a rough voice called out. “Dey musbe hearing tings.” Another voice responded, and the first voice answered back, “Yer right, proly it’sa hotel next door. Some crazies live or dere.” There was an affirmative answer and the voice faintly in going down the stairs, “Let’s finish up the game. We can have time for one more hand before the meeting starts.”

And then they were gone. But they’d left the light on.

I came out from behind the crate. The wood smelled fresh. There were a few more near it with the turpentine tang of newly milled lumber. Black arrows were stenciled on the outside pointing up and a script I wasn't familiar with. But the red skull and crossed bones spoke clear enough.

"Lack, look!" Becky had found a set of flags in the corner. One was red with a white circle and an X with its legs broken, a green, white, and red one with an axe and a bundle of sticks like you might see on a dime, and a white one with a big red circle in the middle. She held up another, on a black and white ground. It looked like a red checker board pasted onto a pot of fire. "Fascists! Like I have tell you!"

The lid of one of the crates had been pried up and I lifted it off. All of a sudden I felt like Ali Baba minus the forty thieves, and I didn't have to say Open Sesame. Nestled in among the packing straw were five Thompson machine guns, gleaming with oil as if they'd just been foaled. This was my ticket out. Any one got in our way they'd get the business end of old Tommy.

There was only one problem. Not a one had a drum or magazine. Without the ammo all I had was an exceptionally well-made stick. There was a claw hammer on a work bench along with a bucket of nails. I went to work. It was no use. All the other new crates were the same, Tommy guns, but not one bullet. And I was back to square one.



Then I had another think coming. My hands began to sweat. It wasn't like I'd lost my nerve and even if I had, being suicidal wasn't going to help me find it. Mister K's operation looked like a little more than just controlling the waterfront action and trucking companies. The kind of firepower I was seeing here would outfit a small army. And that other think arrived to tell me that I had to get the hell out of there, fast. There was no going back the way I had come. Down the stairs and into the social club was the only way out. If we stuck to the stairwell we had the chance of cheese with a rat and the only hope was that the rat was on the cheese wagon.

"You still got your peashooter?"

She frowned obviously distracted by the same dilemma I found myself in. "A shooter of peas?"

"Your little Lady Remington. Your piece." I made my fist into a gun.

"No, Lack, I have left it at the loft. It was foolish. . . ."

"Never mind, these mugs would chew those slugs like licorice candy. We're just going to have to take our chances. Like I said before, if there's a dust up, run, I'll hold 'em off as long as I can."

She gave me a smile that said I was her hero. "We are in this together, Lack. I will stay by you."

I opened the door from the attic stairs to the top floor hallway. A globe fixture at the head of the stairway illuminated the next flight down. I peered cautiously over the banister to the further dark abyss of the interior stairwell. There were muffled sounds of laughter. Other voices drifted up and caught my ear because of the intensity of the conversation. I could only make out a few words, but I recognized the speaker, Yan Kovic. Out of the frying pan into the fire. I had him right where he wanted me. The indistinct dialogue seemed a few landings below, not inside one of the rooms where the raucous laughter was coming from.

"Why can you not find this weasel who has killed Milosh?" Kovic demanded.

The other voice sounded lower and all I got was “more important matters” and Kovic insisting that “everything taking care off.”

I knew we would never get past them and even though I would have loved to get my hands around Kovic’s neck, right now wasn’t the best opportunity. There had to be another way down, a fire escape or a back set of stairs. I went to the window at the end of the corridor and looked out. The rain was still pouring down. I lifted the sash and poked my head out. I saw my way out. A metal ladder out of reach from where I was standing reached from the roof to a small terrace one floor below. Off to one side of the terrace was a fire escape leading down to the back alley. All I had to do was descend one more floor without being noticed, make my way to the terrace and down the fire escape.

The treads were carpeted although each step held the potential of a riser’s groan, but the joint was as sturdy as a jail and my luck held. I crept to the end of the hallway where I judged the terrace would be. I could spy the edge of the parapet from the window and assumed that access would be through the large oak door set into the wall. There didn’t seem to be a lock and the brass knob turned easily. The hinge was as silent as the whisper of air being displaced. I found myself in a large room with a couple armchairs, a long table, a bar along one wall, and double glass doors leading out to the small terrace. The setup looked like it was a kind of meeting room. A map and a scattering of papers were spread out at one end of the table under the light of a green shaded banker’s lamp. An RCA tabletop radio sat on a side table between two leather armchairs.

Rebecca let out a gasp. She had one of the sheets of papers in her hand. “I am not very good reading Serbian but I think this is timetable for an attack!” She had moved to the map on the table and was studying the symbols. “Here with this symbol, where is this?”

It took a bit to swivel my head in the right direction but when I did I saw that I was looking at a map of the waterfront, and part of the downtown area. X marked the spot near the customs warehouses. I was familiar with the area. It was near where Annie Bassinger’s tug, The Narcissus, was berthed. The other was an arrow pointing to the district where the Federal Courthouse was located. I was trying to formulate a correlation of some criminal intent and about to give vent to my hunch when I saw the look on her face. Horror.

She was pointing at the two armchairs and the table with the radio between them. She stumbled back with her hand held over her mouth and in doing so knocked the banker's lamp off its perch with a shattering crash. "The radio!" she gasped.

I didn't think she could blame the radio. It wasn't even turned on. That wasn't my worry. I had a feeling that we might not have been the only two who heard the sound of glass breaking.

"Forget it. Let's get out of here!" I caught her by the arm and led her to the double doors.

"But Lack, the radio! I know that radio! It is the one my father. . . ."

I didn't let her finish. There were the sounds of fast approaching footsteps and voices, one of them saying loud enough, "It come from up here, try the smoking lounge!"

That's what they called this place but I wasn't gonna stick around to admire it. Outside the rain had let up and left behind a misty scrim in the warm night air. I made for the corner of the terrace near where the wrought iron scaffolding of the fire escape was attached to the bricks of the building. I had underestimated the distance between the parapet of the terrace and the iron rail. Only an acrobat was going to take that leap and make it, and it wasn't me. Besides the racket was going to be a dead giveaway. There was a narrow ledge just below the parapet that ran along the façade but hardly wide enough for my size twelves.

An overhead light switched on in the smoking lounge and threw a beam across the wet tiles of the terrace. I chanced a glance through the glass and saw the three bears, the one with the bald dome I knew was Kovic. I put my ear to the hinge to catch what they were saying.

"Hey, wadya know, the lamp fell and broke."

"Who broke it?" Kovic demanded, "who is up here!?"

"Naw, boss, it just fell. Everybody's down below playing cards."

"That noise we heard earlier, Mr. K, they said it was from the hotel next door."

"One moment! This radio, where is other radio?"

"Oh, yeah, guy, radio repairman, come by this morning. This is the loaner while he fixes the other one."

"Radio is broken. No one tells me."

“I didn’t know either, boss, but he said somebody called and said it was broken and that he should come fix it. Said he’d need to take it to his shop to do that.”

“Someone call? Who does this? Sergei, bring others up here. I want search of entire building.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, Mr. K, here let’s turn the radio on, maybe listen to a symphony broadcast.”

“Yeah, boss, maybe a ballgame, or Amos and Andy.”

“Has anyone think to look on terrace?”

That was my cue to make like a leaf and leave. I turned to see Rebecca standing on the edge of the parapet, fingers splayed clinging to the bricks and edging a bare foot onto the ledge and aiming to close the distance with the fire escape.

The door behind me opened and Kovic’s gorilla nonchalantly stepped out onto the terrace. He sniffed the air and glanced at the misty night drifting across the inky black of the dark alley below. He didn’t want to believe his eyes when he spotted me, but then his surprise grew grim before turning into a grin as he reached under his arm and unholstered the large pistol and took aim.



The blast blew the double doors off their hinges, showering glass and splinters and knocking the goon with the gun off his feet and sending him flying across the narrow terrace like he was nothing but a dead leaf in a tornado. The building shuddered. The terrace tiles quaked. The doorframe buckled, coughing out bits of brick and plaster. I dropped to one knee to keep from toppling over. My ears were ringing from the explosion. Dust and acrid smoke filled my nostrils. When I got over the initial shock I looked over at Rebecca. She was gone.

Coughing, I stumbled to the edge of the parapet. She had been trying to reach the fire escape. I stared over the edge focusing on the darkness below. Nothing, no sign of her. She had fallen forty

feet and even if I could see her all I would have seen was her body sprawled on the pavement, dead.

A sinking gut churning sorrow overtook me. That little glow of hopefulness that had come into my life when I first met her, the sense that my crappy life might be worthwhile after Grace and I had split, was snuffed out like someone had just squelched the wick of a guttering candle between their two fingers. I let out a sob. It was an angry sob. I wanted to kill.

The palooka moaned and tried to sit up but couldn't. He might have broken something. Amid the scattering of debris at his feet lay his pistol. I picked it up and hefted in my hand. My temples were pounding. He was going to be the first one and I pointed the gun at his head. I heard the crunch of broken glass behind me and a low howl of pain.

Kovic leaned against the blasted brick of the doorway with one hand, a bloody gash across the top of his bald pink dome and a smear of blood below an unfocused eye. He was trying to say something, but I wasn't gonna let him. I raised the revolver and aimed for his head.

It was his fault. Everything was his fault. If he hadn't tried to dun me out of my fee for finding his hophead daughter. And he did it over a lousy C note. Left me to rot in an upstate ditch. The guy had no class. Maybe I wouldn't have been so set on getting mine back but if that's what he thought of me I was gonna make him regret it. I'd tried once before. That ended me up in the drink. Along with the guy who had put me in the ditch who was too dead to swim. Kovic had my lawyer snuffed and put a hit out on me. And then Rebecca. Yeah, it was his fault. Here was my chance. He deserved to die.

My knee went numb and folded as pain shocked through me. I turned to find the cause and caught the brick full in the face. My arm went numb from another blow and the gun dropped from my hand. The next thing I knew I was laid out flat and Kovic's ugly mug was dripping blood on my face.

"You!" he snarled, "You, the lousy private dick? You did this?" He grasped me by the front of my jacket and brought my face close to his. "You are as good as dead!" he spit.

"I'm better than dead," I spat back.



When I came to I was tied to a chair. My feet were sunk in a couple of large buckets. A bright spotlight shone in my face and lighted up the guy with the shovel as well. He was mixing something with sand and water in a large tub. He noticed when I raised my head.

“Hey boss, the pigeon just stirred.” He ladled a shovelful of cement into the bucket around one foot.

I heard a chair scrape across the wood floor and Kovic say, “Everything to go as planned. But first I have take care of this budala. He will swim with Milosh.” Then his hot breath on my throbbing face as he grasped a handful of hair and jerked my head back. His teeth shone in the light. He had a bandage over one eye and part of his dome. “Your death will give me great pleasure, American swine. You think you can kill me, Yan Kovic! I am a powerful man and you are nothing but bug I will crush.”

He landed a slap that numbed the other side of my face. “Hurry up with cement, I want to watch when we drop him in river.”

The dankness of the air made sense. They had me in an abandoned warehouse along the river.

“Going as fast as I can, boss.”

“Make it hurry.”

“It still has to set before it’ll do any good.”

“Add big rocks! I must not have to be doing this work for you!”

“Boss! Hey!” The distant voice echoed in the large warehouse space. Then there was a gunshot, and then another. A muddle of gunfire from all directions followed. I felt a bullet whizz by an ear and tipped myself and the chair over, the half full buckets wrenching at my ankles. The guy with the shovel had a gun and was firing off into the shadows. Muzzle flashes sparked orange flames in the dark cavernous space. Kovic fired back as he scrambled away. His goons were holding their ground. There were screams and curses and more shots. The cement mixer went down with a groan and a big red hole in his neck. I heard movement near me and looked

over to see my old pal, Al. He was crawling across the floor toward me with a pained look on his old drawn face. He had a gun in one hand and a knife in the other. He gave me a nod and dug the knife into the rope holding me to the chair. I tumbled free and worked to shake my feet out of the metal boots. A shot spit up near where I was and I lay still for a moment. Al snapped off a shot and got one in return. I heard him draw in a breath. The pained expression had left for one of surprise. I crawled over to him as the sides traded more gunfire. He was holding a hand over his chest and blood was leaking out between his fingers. He looked up at me as if asking why? I had my own questions I needed answering.

“Al, why are you here?”

“You pulled a fast one on us, Lack. You switched the postal slips.” He coughed and a little blood edged the corner of his mouth.

“The postal slip? What’s so important about that lousy postal slip?”

“You still have the slip from Della’s mailbox. That’s the one we want. We have to have it!” he tried to sit up and this time coughed up a lot of blood. “We followed you. We saw when they took you outta the building and brought you over here. You got the ticket and we want it back.”

Rebecca had the slip. Rebecca. She never gave it back to me. She still had it. But she was. “Rebecca” I breathed aloud.

Now Al’s expression grew curious. Even as he was fading, he had a question. “We saw you go into the hotel with her. Does she. . . ?” But there was no more.

The warehouse had grown silent. No one was popping off any shots and there were only the faint rustles and death rattles of the wounded and dying. Distantly there was the sound of sirens or it might have the wind vibrating the tin siding.

I got to my feet cautiously. I’d lost a shoe to the coagulated mess and had to pry it back out of the bucket. They were no longer the supple pair I had once worn. I pricked up my ears and swiveled my head. I could hear labored breathing in the shadows beyond the arc of light. I tilted the light in the direction of the sound.

Al’s sister had propped herself against a pocked stanchion, leaning one shoulder on the beam, head bent forward trying to catch a breath, an old dogleg Mauser in one hand and a snake of blood trailing down the inside of her other arm. She looked at me with blank eyes.

“What was so important about that postal slip?” I demanded. A slight smile flexed her upper lip. “The Empress’s Cucumber.”

“The what?” I was about to ask and then I remembered Max’s story about the precious jade artifact that had belonged to the Chinese Empress. How it was key to the restoration of the Dynasty. “You had that hunk of jade?” Then it hit me. “You mailed it to yourself!”

“You don’t know,” she groaned, her body slumping forward. “We’re the Thieves of Bombay. That tattoo on the inside of Al’s arm, I have the same one on my shoulder blade. It’s a Sanskrit rosette that spells out our motto, ‘nothing too light, nothing too heavy for our diligent skills’. Al and the boys stole the jade from a prominent art collector in one of their penthouse heists, see. They gave it to me for safe keeping. Then my lousy boyfriend decides he’s gonna pawn it. He took it around a couple of places and musta realized that it was worth more than he thought. Someone probably told him he could get big money from the right people. So he hung on to it. That’s when you come into the picture.” Her eyes narrowed and brimmed with venom. Or maybe pain.

“You had me trace his new address and once you had it you went there ahead of me and bumped him off figuring I might get there around the same time as the cops and take the rap.”

“He was dead when we got there. But I got what I wanted, the box with the Empress’s jade. You’re the rat who stole the postal ticket from my mailbox. You thought you were smart by switching them and leaving me with a bundle of old clothes.”

The sirens grew closer and I could hear the screeching of tires and the loud thumping of vehicle doors being slammed shut. I watched Della stiffen as a pain tore through her. She wanted to point the Mauser at me but didn’t have the strength. “We’ll get you, you bastid, the Thieves is a worldwide organization. When they find out what happened to us, they’ll come after you and rub you out like the no good rat you are. You can count on that.” She tried to spit. “May the curse of Kali be upon your head. . . .” She gave what sounded like a little feminine giggle and a bubble of blood formed on one nostril before bursting. She closed her eyes.



I was looking down the barrels of half a dozen police specials while they slapped the cuffs on me. I don't think they suspected me of causing the carnage but they were it playing safe. I had started to explain but a police sergeant with the shoulders of hod carrier and face like a splintered plank told me to shut my yap until the lieutenant got there. They'd called for an ambulance and the coroner's meat wagon. The ambulance was for the hulk in pajamas from the Bombay gang. From what I'd seen, the Asp twins, Al, and Al's sister, Della, all had an appointment with a slab at the morgue. Kovic's boys hadn't fared much better. The guy with the shovel and one other unlucky goon in a pinstriped suit would be joining them. Mr. K and whoever else of his mob had made their escape. The nurse with the ambulance looked me over and gave a shrug and smile. "He'll live," she told the sergeant, "Looks like his face knows its way around a knuckle or two."

I was about to make my usual wise crack about she shoulda seen the other guy when I saw the detective coming up under a full head of steam. I might have guessed. It was Hogan.

"You!" He pointed a finger in my face. "Tell me you didn't have anything to do with this, wisenheimer!" He was giving me that withering guilt inducing stare that cops and priests can do so well.

I had to tell him that I did and didn't. He didn't like what he was hearing so he dragged me over to the fender of a big Chrysler that I recognized as belonging to the Thieves. He had me repeat the first part again.

I told him I'd been kidnapped but in order to explain how I'd been kidnapped I had to explain about the explosion at the Serbian Social Club. I couldn't talk about the explosion at the social club without saying why I was at the social club and I knew that I didn't want to admit to why I was there so I had to say that I was rescuing a damsel in distress who unfortunately had been killed by the explosion or the fall that it had caused.

Hogan was shaking his head all the time I was telling him. "You believe this bum, O'Malley?" he asked the sergeant who was

nodding in agreement. "You gotta lay off the dime detective fare, pal. It's turning your brain to pulp!"

"He's right about the explosion at the social club down by the railyards, Lieutenant. We got a call early in the AM about an explosion and sent a squad car to investigate. They were told that it was a boiler blew up and that they didn't need any cops, what they needed was a plumber. All the same the squad did a perimeter inspection and didn't find anything suspicious except for some debris that appeared to come from three floors up."

"They didn't find the body!?" I blurted.

Hogan didn't try to hide his disbelief. "A body? Whose body?"

"Becky! The girl I'd gone to, uh, save. She fell from the terrace when the bomb exploded."

"Now there's a bomb." I could tell that Hogan was starting his predictable slow burn by how red the tips of his ears got.

"Uh, right, the bomb that was planted there to take out some of the fascist mob."

Hogan raised his eyes as if imploring the heavens.

"And they have crates of Tommy guns hidden in the attic!"

Now Hogan brought his face close to mine. "Tommy guns, you don't say."

"Right, and Kovic and his gang were planning something, something big. I saw the map of what they were planning,"

"A map."

"Something is going to go down, I heard Kovic say that they were gonna do it soon. They had the custom shed and the federal building downtown staked out."

Hogan frowned. "The Federal building? That's where the grand jury's meeting to indict Kovic for tax evasion. Today." He turned to the sergeant, "Get Neckker and his boys on the horn. If this palooka's right, Kovic is going to try to ice the jurors. And get a couple of squads to following me down to the docks and the customs shed." And then to me, "You better be right."

"How about you take me out of these cuffs?"

The sergeant shook his head. "We've been looking for you, Ask, in connection with the murder of Ralph Silver, a two bit ambulance chaser."

"Naw, you can't pin that on me. That was Kovic's doing. He had Ralphie killed and then waited for me to show up and discover

the body. Ralphie and me, we go way back, I'd a never. Just ask Hogan, he knows."

Hogan nodded and the sergeant reluctantly keyed the bracelets.

I was curious. "How did your guys know to find Kovic down here at the abandoned warehouse?"

O'Malley explained. "One of the squads spotted this Chrysler as fitting the description of a car involved in a robbery at the Westside Post Office. When he got out to take a closer look, he heard the gunfire and called for reinforcements. By the time they got here the shooting had stopped."

I glance into the backseat of the Thieves' car, and there it was, the bundle the tailor, Rebecca's father, had mailed to me. I yanked open the door and pulled it out.

"This is mine, it's addressed to me. I'm taking it." I insisted.

"No you're not." Hogan took it from me. "It's evidence. Because if it is what I think it is, why would these guys hold up a post office on a Sunday to get a bundle of old clothes. You got a lot of explaining to do, Ask. You're coming with me. And when we get this matter at the customs shed settled, you're coming downtown and we're going to have a talk, a real long talk about how you come to be involved with Kovic in the first place."



It was just like those crime shows you hear on the radio. They put out a Calling All Cars bulletin. The patrolmen jumped on the running boards and were hanging on to the door frames, cranking the sirens and lights blazing. The squad car took a corner on two wheels and everyone in the back shifted toward the center of gravity. Reaching for a grip, Hogan let loose of the bundle and it landed on the space at our feet. And then we were there. A police van pulled up behind and unloaded half a dozen guys with long guns. Hogan took charge and deployed his men. Before long the robbers who had been trying to bust into the customs shed were being led away with their hands over their heads.

They'd forgotten about me. And I was just as glad. I picked up the bundle from where it had fallen and made my exit from the cop car. There were still uniforms heading for the fray, pistols in hand. I tried to make myself invisible in the dawn's early light.

The commotion was drawing a crowd of shipyard and dock workers just arriving to begin their shifts or leaving after a long uneventful night. Anything out of the ordinary was going to attract them like moths to a flame. Unfortunately I wasn't invisible enough to get past the police line. They weren't letting anybody in or anyone out. I scanned the faces of the crowd of workers being held back by the coppers. I recognized one of them, from Annie's tug, The Narcissus, the tall one. I could tell from his expression that he recognized me, and he turned away quickly to disappear into the crowd. I lurked in the rapidly shrinking shadows dreading that Hogan would notice I had gone missing and raise the alarm. I did not at any cost want to go downtown to have a little chat and explain about Rebecca. Then I saw her, perfection in a sea of broken faces. It was Annie. Her mate had gone to fetch her. She caught my eye and gave a nod. She was up to something.

As they were marching the bad guys into the back of the black Mariah and the cops were wrapping up their operation, I could see Hogan by the side of the squad car looking around like he wanted to find something. Just then the crowd surged against the police line.

A fight had started in the crowd and the cops on the line rushed in to break it up. That was my cue to fade into the melee. I felt a tug on my sleeve and looked down to see the short one of the Annie's crew leading me to the opposite side and away from where the action had been. We skirted the cargo bins and piles of pallets. The next thing I knew Annie was striding alongside me. She was smiling. "First the cops were looking for you and now you're working with them. Who are you, mystery man?"

"It's a long story."

"You can tell it to me over a cup of java." She cast an appraising eye over me. "You look like you might need it."

I handed the bundle of clothes to her. "I thought I'd return these to you."

She raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think I'd ever see you or those rags again, but from the looks of you, I'd say you better hang on to them."

Once below deck I settled behind the little table in the galley and sipped at the scalding hot brew. "Thanks for getting me out of that jam. Again."

She gave me that beatific smile that always spun my head. She had a lot of miles on her but she was still a beauty and I guess she got a hint of what I was thinking because she kinda blushed and said, "Always glad to help a sailor in distress."

"I ain't no sailor."

"Don't give up. You're still young."

I groaned. "After the last couple of days, I don't feel that young." And I had to tell her how I ended up with Rebecca and how I'd foolishly let her follow me when I went to get my revenge on Kovic. I left out the part about the diamonds, but I had to tell her about the Thieves of Bombay, and how my friend Alice had been attacked by goggle wearing bandits and was saved by a former Russian aristocrat peeping tom, and how Rebecca's old man was an anti-fascist bomb maker and that it was his bomb that had caused her death even though I held myself partly if not completely responsible. And how I ended up at the docks and the customs shed because I had no idea what Kovic was planning there except that my alerting the cops had stuck a stick in his spokes.

"Gold," she said with a frown, "Gold and jewels. People are fleeing the war in Europe and sending their wealth abroad. It's an

open secret. Everybody on the docks knows about it. But it's scum like Kovic that's gonna try and heist it."

I nodded. "Yeah, now all the more reason for me to lie low. I got the cops, the Thieves, and Mr. K all trying to get a piece of me."

"You're safe here, mystery man. Nobody needs to know you're not part of my crew."

I shook my head, "I don't want to get you involved in this, it's dangerous. I got people after me that want to fill me full of lead, fit me for a pair of cement socks, or lock me up and throw away the key. I need to go to ground till the heat blows over. And I just thought of a way to do that."



Maybe the blow on the head knocked some sense into me. I didn't want let on about the rocks, but my plan was to go find them in the coalbin and I had to do that in a hurry. I looked into Annie's eyes as I stepped from the gunwales and onto the dock. I waved this time. "I won't forget you."

She waved back. "I'm not counting on it. Good luck. You know where I live."

I grabbed a trolley to my office on 9th. I waited outside for about an hour and no one looked out of place. I tripped up the steps and through the door. Half way up the flight to the second floor, I heard the super's door creak open. When I got to my office there was a new padlock, and I didn't have the key. I heard the shallow breathing behind me and turned to see Curtis peek his head above the railing.

“Why’s there a new padlock on my door, Curtis?”

When I didn’t scream at him he stepped up to the top of the stairs. “Yer behind on yer rent. So th’owner said. . . .”

“I don’t care what the owner said. Curtis. I have to get into my office. It’s my place of business. I have business to conduct so that I can get paid and in turn pay my rent. You don’t have to go to Yale to figure that out.” I’d lowered my voice partly because I was exasperated at another road block. But Curtis was interested in my argument because hardly anyone talked to Curtis—they just told him what to do or listened to his excuse. He cocked an ear and strayed closer.

“Listen, I got five bucks here in my pocket. I can put it toward the back rent or you could forget I gave it to you.” He gave me a baleful look considering the offer. I made like I was going to pull the money from my pants but instead snagged his skinny arm and slammed him against the wall, not hard, but enough to get his attention and let him know that I meant business. “You got the key, Curtis?” The ring of keys he carried on his belt made him feel important and he never went anywhere with them.

“No,” he said feeling his face where it had hit the wall.

I wrenched his arm and bumped him with my chest. “See this face? Yours is gonna look worse. I don’t have time to mess around and I won’t mess around.”

He got the hint and fumbled with his keyring. Once the door opened I shoved him in ahead of me. I looked around. I wasn’t going to miss the dump although it had kept the rain off my head and was not a sidewalk where I could pass out drunk. It wasn’t a place I’d bring a dolly to. More of a lair where I could go lick my wounds. There wasn’t anything that had any value to me in the jumble of junk except for the one item squirreled away under a blanket in the closet. That was Ted’s diorama.

I grabbed a handful of change from my pocket and threw it on the floor. “For your trouble.” I said as Curtis scrambled to gather the coins.

I made my way over to Alice’s studio with the art piece under my arm. She wasn’t home but I knew where she kept the key. Inside the smell of fresh brewed coffee said she would be back soon. I stripped off the clothes I was wearing and put on the working clothes that Annie had insisted I keep. I found the satchel where I’d left it under the kitchen table and stuffed the suit, vest, and pants into

it. The cement damaged shoes, too. I placed Ted's art piece under his portrait on the wall and found a pencil and wrote on a scrap of paper "I'll be back to pick up my things later today. We have to talk." I looked up into Ted's eyes. They didn't move.

Pulling the flat cap down over my eyes, I made my way over to the coal yard. There was a queue of coal wagons backed to the chutes and I figured the guy with the papers in his hand was the foreman. Holding a sheaf of papers was not a hard job but the scowl on his face wanted you think that it was. He didn't like the look of my mug, either. I asked him if he knew the coal company that delivered to the address of the building where Rebecca's old man had his used clothes store because I had to do some work in the basement and didn't want to do it if they were going to dump a load in the bin. The foreman was distracted by a wagon that had not pulled close enough to the chutes and the ore was spilling onto the ground. "Ore-ville Coal Company!" he yelled as he ran to chew out the coal wagon driver.

The coal company was a few blocks over from where the used clothing shop was located. The secretary looked like she'd had a rough Sunday and could barely keep her eyes open. I had to repeat twice what I'd come in for, the coal delivery schedule. She grumbled at having to lift the heavy ledger covers and ran a meticulously manicured finger down a row of entries. She shook her permed thatch and muttered. "This time of year, we're on call, no more than once a month, if that." I was out the door before she finished.

I found the super sitting on a stool inside the doorway to the building. I told him that I was with Oreville Coal Company and that there'd been a complaint about the way the coal chute operated. That was a surprised to him but he agreed to let me take a look and fix the problem. I glanced at the door to the tailor shop. There was a government seal over the lock. The super had to tell me all about how the G-Men busted into the building after a crazy woman, girl, actually, and her father who were obviously some sort of criminals or saboteurs if the feds were after them. He led me through the closet and to the stairs down to the basement. It looked familiar and the overhead light worked. I made a bee line for the coal bin. It had been dark the last time I'd passed through just days ago but judging by the amount of coal in the bin, it didn't appear to be any more or less, and the super confirmed that he hadn't used but a couple shovels full to keep the furnace going being the weekend and all. I scanned the

greasy smelling chunks but nothing looked anything faintly resembling the little white pouch the diamonds had been in. I got that sinking feeling. I wasn't going to find the diamonds because they weren't there.



I waited for the loudspeaker to announce the boarding of my cross country bus from a booth with a view of the door in the Happy Trails Bar and Grill next to the terminal. There were a few salesmen at the bar with their hats on the back of their heads washing away the taste of exaggerated claims with another shot, not looking forward to telling more lies to the missus behind the white picket fence in the suburbs. I'd spotted a few eyes I wanted to dodge but so far the mug in the flashy suit only had them for the young gal who'd just got off a bus in a summer dress, her best Sunday hat, and a suitcase tied with a length of rope. The beat cop was too busy paying attention to the giggly woman at the Traveler's Aid desk. I nursed my beer and shoveled in another spoonful of chili. It was my second bowl. I was famished.

After I'd left my disappointment in the coalbin, I made my way to the railyard by the Serbian Social Club. There were a couple of squad cars parked out front and the guard at the front door was now a boy in blue. There was no chance that I was going to get close or even inside the building. Becky was gone, I had to face up to that. Kovic's mob probably dumped the body somewhere it wouldn't be found any time soon. If anyone looked like a sad sack that day, it was me. I had no choice but to pick up my gear at Alice's and head out of town.

Alice was all smiles when I got to her studio but I didn't like the looks she gave me once I told her what had happened to Rebecca. She'd wanted to tell me that someone was interested in buying some of her art but I kind of rained on her parade with my news. I couldn't tell if she was mad at me or that the news hurt her so bad that it made it look that way. Either way it was a crushing realization. I was responsible. Rebecca had been swept up in my blind quest for revenge. I should have ditched her and gone after Kovic on my own. Now I'd lost her for good. I needed a drink.

But Alice wasn't having any of it. She walked me through the ordeal she had suffered when Ted died. She had gone on a binge she reminded me. And I remembered finding her a few times at Sid's or Sammy's Shamrock, and helping her home and to bed, limp as a washcloth wrung out of all her tears. She still felt the pain of the loss, and bitterness, and disappointment with herself that she hadn't done more or noticed sooner. Most of all she was lonely. Drink wasn't going to bring Rebecca back and I'd only end up doing something stupid. She was right, and I listened.

The plan that had come to me while I was on Annie's tug involved taking the bus upstate to the one horse town of Ridley up in the Three Lakes district where my granny had lived. She'd passed away but I still had cousins up there I hadn't been in touch with in more than a decade. Back then, when the market crashed, folks lost everything, businesses closed and homes were foreclosed on, and the streets crowded with homeless families looking for a handout. The only people with money were crooks and politicians although I don't know how anyone could tell the difference. Granny had been smart, her mortgage paid off, managed to keep up with taxes so she still had a couple of acres of apple trees and a ten room two story house to which the less fortunate of her children and grandchildren flocked when the money ran out along with the jobs. I'd heard that

it had become a zoo, and fortunately for the old gal she didn't last much past the repeal because then it became a drunken zoo. I aimed to become part of that menagerie.

Alice promised to ask around for a legit buyer for Ted's art piece. I was going to need the moola once my safety c-note ran out. And she gave me a goodbye present along with a heartfelt hug and squeeze, one of her mementos of her dead lover, Ted's fedora.

"It suits you well," she said as I flicked the brim. "Too bad it doesn't hide your shiners. You look like you're wearing a black mask."



I'd waited till the last person in line had boarded and the driver was about to close the door. The man behind the wheel gave me the 'there's one in every crowd' squint as I made my way to the back and humped my satchel onto the seat next to me. I'd given a quick eyeball of the occupied seats and what I was seeing was a smattering of overdressed travelers, men and women looking out the window, some with children in their laps. Some were obviously vacationers heading up to Big Lake, one of the three lakes and most popular summer resort. And some, by their defeated expressions, were going back where they came from with only the clothes on their backs. Maybe I fit into that last category, but behind the dark glasses I had picked up at the terminal newsstand and my hat tipped back once the bus turned onto the road leading to the outskirts, I didn't care. I had a half pint of Old Hickory and a pack of Lucky

Strikes to while away the three hours it would take to get to where I was going.

Ridley was named after Colonel P.J. Ridley who owned the local livery and dry goods store and was given the rank of colonel for providing horses to the Army for its war in the South. It was a one horse town on the way up to the lakes and the resorts.

There were three lakes, Big Lake, Middle Lake, and Little Lake. The resorts were mainly clustered around Big Lake, and since the repeal they'd added a night club or two. Middle Lake was a not quite as big overgrown snake infested swamp and provided mosquitoes for the entire area. Little Lake lived up to its name, but it was clean and deep and cold. I know because granny kept a cabin up there where I'd spent a few summers as a kid. It didn't have a big sandy beach like Big Lake and was bordered mainly by big rough outsized boulders and it had a mosquito population almost as dense as Middle Lake which didn't make it as popular and inviting.

I'd gone through about half of the Old Hickory and smoked up the rear of the bus with a cigarette haze by the time the bus rolled into Ridley. I found my feet once I stumbled off the bus and watched it kick up the road dust on its way out of town. Ridley didn't seem to have changed much since they last time I came through. They'd added a gas pump in front of the livery barn and a sign on the side that said *mechanic*. There was a streetlight I didn't remember from before out front. Granny's house was down the elm shaded road running behind it.

The sun was just settling on the horizon and it was still light enough that I found the old house without any problem. I was surprised by how run down it looked. The front yard was overgrown with weeds, the rusty metal gate squeaked, and one window on the upper story looked like it had a black eye or there'd been a fire. There was a familiar scent in the warm night air, rotting fermenting apples.

I glanced around the littered porch. It wasn't the cozy welcoming place it had once been. I gave the peeling green door a rap with my knuckles and looked over both shoulders like I didn't want to be caught by surprise. I waited before I gave the door another paradiddle. I heard a sound on the other side and then the handle turned and the door opened a crack. A dark eyeball stared at me.

"Go round the back," it said and slammed the door.

I made my way through the overgrown path alongside the house to the covered porch that led to the kitchen. It could have used a coat of paint and the screen door was hanging crooked off a hinge.

Inside, the door to the kitchen was open and I stepped to it. The dark woman at the stove looked up with a frown. "Ain't got no work. I can give you something to eat but you be on your way when you finish."

I nodded and took off my hat. "Thank you, but you see my this is my granny's house and I'm. . ."

The cook reached for the knife on the cutting board just as the door from the dining room opened and Ruth stepped through. She was a cousin, distant, about five years older than me. Tall, she'd kept the square shoulders, always kind of a tomboy and bully, beating on the younger kids, me included. Her hair looked like it belonged on Ritzy Ritz as did the big black spidery lash eyes. Her nose was cute as a button. The only thing that spoiled it was that she had a jaw like Joe Palooka. And maybe a little hint of a moustache.

"Sissy said that there's a blindman begging at the door." She had her fists to the hips of her polka dot house dress looking at me.

"Even if I was blind I could still hear you, Ruthie. Being blind ain't the same as being deaf," I said with a smile.

I thought her eyes were going to leap off her face and she got that set to her big jaw like she was going to let me have it.

I kept the smile froze on my face.

She gave me another gander. "Cousin Lack? Lackland Ask?"

Now the jaw didn't look so bad supporting the big smile.

"Hello Ruthie, long time no see."

"Whatever brings you all the way out here? I never thought I'd see you in a million years. Someone told me you were living in the city doing some kind of investigations, is that true?"

I could tell she was a little confused and asking herself the same questions.

"And why are you wearing sunglasses at this time of day?"

I took them off and even the cook gasped.

"What happened?"

"Funny you should ask." And so I told her she was right. I was a private investigator. I even showed her my card where it said, *Lackland Ask, Confidential Matters Investigated*. I explained how as the result of an investigation I ended up on the wrong side

of a mob boss and he had some of his goons work me over. The cook was looking at me with narrowed eyes but Ruthie was fascinated. I told her that because of my investigation, the assassination of a federal judge and a gold heist had been foiled. Ruthie shivered at the word "heist." Because I was a witness I had to lie low to avoid being knocked off. She mouth the words "knocked off." "Nobody is likely to look for me in Ridley because they think I'm a born and bred city rat. So maybe I can lie low. . . ."

As I was talking the eyes that had met me at the front door peeked from behind her mother's akimbo arms. She looked about seven, then a sullen looking boy of about ten, his hair freshly shorn, came to stand in the doorway, and a younger barefoot girl in a faded shift clung to the calf at the hem of her mother's dress.

And it came to me. "Out at Little Lake. Does the cabin out there still belong to Granny?"

She had to think about that for a minute. "Granny's will said that the summer cabin belonged to all of us so I guess it does, but no one goes there anymore. It's falling apart. No one has any money to fix it up. And it's so out of the way." She said it like Ridley was the cat's meow. "And the mosquitoes."

"Sounds like just what the doctor ordered. Maybe I can spend my time out there fixing the place up. But no one can know I'm out there. If anyone asks you who is staying out there, just tell them my name is. . . Stan Gardner, a distant cousin, and I'm writing a book and need the peace and quiet."

Ruthie nodded and said, "Oh, alright, Stan, the gardener. I don't suppose Cousin Mack and Cousin Myrtle need to know. You can bunk in the shed out back where Uncle Ned tied his flies for tonight."

The cook handed me a plate. "Siddown. You gonna do all that, you gonna need something to eat."



Ruthie came to visit me that night. She wanted to catch me up on some family history, and maybe add to some of it. I was beat and the Old Hickory helped numb the fact that the dusty cot was missing a rib and it was like trying to sleep over a washtub on a mattress that wasn't much more than a mangled washcloth. There wasn't much light coming in through the one grimy window of the shed. I banged my knee against something large and hard under a ratty tarpaulin trying to find my way around in the dark, a machine of some kind before stumbling to the workbench and the cot beside it to set down my bag. I was moving dust that hadn't been moved in a while and it made me sneeze. And I remembered the smell. Uncle Ned was a drinking man, and the walls seeped the familiar vapors of old alcohol. I'd heard my old man say that the only thing his cousin tied in the shed was "one on." I toasted Uncle Ned with the last corner of the half pint and set about to make myself comfortable.

She ducked in the doorway with the wick on the lamp trimmed short so that just a dim pale glow lit part of her face. It looked like a face out of a Hollywood photo magazine. All of a sudden I wasn't all that tuckered out as I thought I was. She came closer and I saw she was wearing a quilted house coat open at the front to reveal a frilly shimmering slip. And she'd perfumed up.

"I just came out to see if you were doing all right." She glanced around. "I was just about to turn in myself. I hope this is comfortable enough." It was the smile that said everything.

After the cook had served me and I was allowed to sit at the kitchen table. Ruthie's daughters had had difficulty restraining their curiosity, the boy, though, keeping a wary distance. And Ruthie, once she got over her surprise, had to explain to the kids who I was and where I placed on this branch of the family tree. "His father was Uncle Ned's nephew by his sister's brother who was Granny's nephew by her brother."

I'd been curious when I realized that Ruthie and her three kids, and the cook, seemed to be the only inhabitants. "Is your husband working late?" seemed like an imposition as soon as I said it.

Ruthie made a mad mouth and frowned. “Angel’s daddy works at Big Lake Resort and this is the busy season so he’s almost never home,” she said resentfully indicating the youngest. “Polly and Paul’s father went off to find work on the railroad and I ain’t heard from him since.”

The cook was giving me an eat your food and mind your own business glare.

“I heard that more of the cousins and family lived here.”

Ruthie cocked her head to one side and gave a big sigh. “Well, they did and then they didn’t. You musta heard that it was a real three ring circus out here, especially after Granny passed. The boys were always fighting with one another and getting thrown in jail. Or beating up other boys who were showing interests in the girl cousins. Eventually the girls left with their husbands or went to try their luck in the city. The boys kept fighting and causing mayhem so Constable Thorndyke told them if he found them out this way again he was gonna throw them in jail.”

The cook nodded her head. “It took him a few tries but they finally got the message. Ain’t been by in a long while. Ain’t seen hide nor hair of them.” She gave a good riddance nod of her chins.

That explained some of it, and explained why Ruthie was visiting me once the lights in the house had gone dark.



The cook handed me the steaming java and looked me up and down in the daylight spreading through the kitchen window. “You ain’t like the other ones, but I doubt miz Ruth knows the difference. You don’t want to be here when Thorny come around. You smart to get out to Lil Lake, far enough he won’t pay no mind when he finds out another man been here.”

“Thorny? Who’s Thorny?”

“The Constable.”

Just about then Ruthie sauntered through the door tightening the sash on her bathrobe giving me the lowered sultry lashes and then flashing a mind-your-own-business frown at the cook.

Before she could say good morning, I said, “Hey Ruthie, I noticed Uncle Ned’s old motorcycle under the tarp in the shed. Do you know if that old Indian is still working?”

She sipped at the cup the cook had handed her and slid in the chair across the table from me. “Whadya want with that old thing?”

“Well, if I’m going to be staying out at Little Lake I’m gonna need some way of getting around. That would save me walking the five miles just to get a soda pop or scare up some grub.”

“He was always taking that thing apart and putting back together again. If he wasn’t tying fly, or drinking, always a lot of that.” A little cloud crossed her brow. “Funny. Old Ned sure liked the fishing up at Little Lake. That’s where he spent most of the summers toward the end.”

“Moonshiner on the property next to yourn was probably a good part of it, too, I’d say,” the cook interjected.

“Oh, Crazy Wilson, he doesn’t believe repeal happened. He and Ned had a deal, fish for hootch. You’ll have to watch out for him if you’re out there.”

The cook nodded emphatically, “Shoot you soon as look at you.”

“Ok, I’ll remember that.” I stood up and pushed back the chair to go see if the old Indian would kick over.

Ruthie fixed me with a regretful gaze that I wasn't going to stick around to chat and sigh. "He also has a daughter who lives out there sometimes. She's just a little older than Paul."

"All the more reason to watch where you step," the old cook said, "Might be a bear trap. Lose your leg."

A quick once over told me that Uncle Ned and his old Indian Scout had had two things in common, they were both battered and well oiled. The tires were in need of some air, and something had been nibbling the edges of the leather seat. I rolled the motorcycle out into the backyard with a little effort. I throttled up and gave it a kick. I got a chuckle from the pistons. At least they weren't frozen or screaming. Now that I had its attention, I gave it another go and it sputtered like it might do better next time. I goosed the gas and it caught with a loud shot and then a roar. But it didn't last long, a cough and a shudder, and it was dead. I knew I would have to be poking around in places I wasn't too comfortable in. But other than that, the motorcycle had definite possibilities.

I rummaged around in the shed and uncovered a pair of saddlebags that fit over the rear wheel. They were outfitted to carry fishing gear, one rod still attached under canvas straps. In one of the pockets I found the tire pump and a repair tin. And a half pint of clear liquid. I unscrewed the top and took a whiff. I drew my head back in a hurry. It hadn't gone bad, it had started bad.

Uncle Ned, a bachelor all his life, kept his space orderly for the things that meant something to him, mostly fishing, his machine, and his booze. The tools I was going to need were rolled up neatly in a canvas tool bag. I figured I could poke and prod the best I knew how, and if worse came to worse, the Ridley Livery advertised a mechanic.

I spent a couple of hours fiddling with the iron pony, taking one thing off and putting another thing on, I'd spent enough time in the old neighborhood watching curbside mechanics make a machine behave. It is slow, methodical work, and I finally got it running, roughly, but running.

When I was about done and admiring my work, cook came down to the shed and handed me a bag. "Preserves, apple butter, pickles, cow's tongue, and such until you get yourself set up out there. After a while you be eating fish and berries." She smiled a wide smile, "Just like a bear."



I pulled up to the pump in front of Ridley Livery and shut the engine off. A lanky gent in blue coveralls squeezed through the gap in the barn door wiping his hands on a greasy rag and sauntered over, eyeing me and eyeing the motorcycle.

“Gimme fifty cents worth, Ace.” I dismounted and moved the goggles up onto my forehead, thinking again as I had when I’d first found them in a pocket of the saddle bag, the guys that had attacked Alice had worn similar pairs, and the crew that shot up Rabbi Joe’s place, they had, too, and that made me think of Becky, and thinking of Becky only made me hurt.

“This old Indian is Ned’s, ain’t it.” He unscrewed the gas cap and inserted the pump nozzle. “You buy it?” and he gave me the skeptical eye.

Adjusting the strap holding my satchel in place, I met his eye. “Just borrowing. Ruthie Walker is my cousin, you can ask her.” I fished out the change and handed it to him. “Heading up to Little Lake.”

“Yeah, Ned liked to go up to the cabin.” He held up a finger as if a thought had just struck him “You look something like him, but younger. My pop has pictures of a fishing trip up in Canada, of him and Ned. You’re an Ask, then?”

I put a finger to my lips, “Yeah, but keep it on the QT. I got in a bit of trouble and now I need to lie low.”

He drew his head back a bit. “You don’t say?” And squinted an eye again, “Rob a bank?”

I laughed, “Naw, nothing like that. I was having some fun with this young gal and her husband didn’t appreciate it.”

“That why you look like a raccoon?”

“It coulda been worse if she hadn’t beaned him with a frying pan.”

I’d impressed him, “Now that’s something!”

“So if anybody gets to wondering, just tell them my name is uh. . . Dick Sales.”

“Dick.. .Sales,” he repeated and nodded not knowing what to think. He pointed at the motorcycle. “Sounded kinda rough when

you pulled up. Ned always had it purring like a pussy cat. Start 'er up, might just be a valve adjustment. It can be tricky.”

I did as he said and he reached under the tank and fiddled with something and the rough sputter of the engine turned to a throaty growl. He stood up, proud of himself, “That should do it. You tell Ruthie Walker if she ever wants to sell this old Scout, I’ll give her a fair price for it.”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself? She lives right down the road.”

He shook his head. “No, Thorny found out I’d been round to see her, I’d get nothing but grief.”

Thorny again. I thanked him and handed him another two bits for his trouble. I got some advice in exchange.

“Stay wide of the Wilsons. He’s the old coot with the still and the shotgun, ready to shoot, on the property next to Ned’s family cabin .”

“So I’ve heard. Thanks for the tip.”

“Oh, the old guy ain’t so bad so long as you don’t set foot on his property. It’s his daughter you got to watch out for.”

“His daughter? I heard she was just a kid.”

“Not any more. One day she was just this skinny little tom-boy and the next thing you know she’s fully equipped and anxious to put it in gear. Only problem is that Crazy Wilson’s property line goes all around her. You set foot or any other part of yourself on her and you got a problem that’s more than just a angry husband.”



About half a mile out of town a large billboard advertising Big Lake Resorts, Sandy Beaches, Motor Boating, Shoreline Cabins, Fine Dining, Night Club Entertainment punctuated with a martini glass and a large arrow pointed the way. On a post nearby a smaller white plank shaped like an arrow with a crudely printed *Little Lake* indicated the rough dirt road branching off.

The road was familiar in that I recognized the climb toward the rolling hills across the wide open farmland dotted on either side by towering elms or stately oaks. Wild grasses and cattails, pollywogs and frogs ran wild in the ditches I liked to remember. Fields of young corn and rows of walnut trees glimmered in the sunlight. Towering white clouds edged with gray on the horizon added to the mugginess. I noticed a few flashes of lightning in the direction I was headed and figured the chances of my getting wet were pretty good. I had to get out of the open before the storm reached me. I gunned the Scout and it leapt forward like a good pony.

By the time I reached where the road butted into Lake Rd and Little Rd, I could smell the rain in the air and my skin was itchy with sweat. Both roads followed the lake shore around where the summer cabins were located in groves of sycamores and birch and the scattering of pines and firs. No one lived at the far end of the lake where the dam marked the beginning of the wide mosquito marsh and swamp known as Middle Lake.

Lake Rd was a well-travelled double track with only a stubble of weeds growing up the center. It got a lot more use because most of the summer cabins were on east side of the lake, and that down the road a bit a farmer had a stand selling local produce to the summer vacationers. Little Rd was rougher and overgrown, the double rut not as clearly visible. Granny's cabin was off Little Rd, about a mile down.

Thunder was rolling overhead as I set off and a large raindrop splashed on my cheek. About the time the overgrown ruts had turned into a single trail, the clouds let loose and I was drenched to the skin in less than a minute. The dirt track had turned to mud

just as quickly. I had to dismount and push the motorcycle ahead of me. It felt like I was swimming underwater through the white haze of heavy downpour. I could barely see two feet ahead of me but I trudged blindly forward. At that point I realized that I had no idea where I was or how far down the road it was to the entrance of Granny's property.

Eventually I saw a parting in the weeds alongside the road and realized that it was a narrow dirt scar of a clearing crossed with a gushing rivulet wending its way down to the lake. I set out to follow it. The white of the streaming rain changed to a few shades darker as immense black clouds moved overhead. The stands of trees and clutter of underbrush added their own shadows and limited my vision even more. In my memory the track to Granny's cabin took a similar turn and I was looking for the shelter of the shanty around the next bend. Just then a flash of lightning lit up the entire understory of whipped and moaning trees and illuminated for just a brief second a sign that had been tacked to a tree. It was immediately imprinted on my brain.

NO ???? I WILL SHOOT U

I believed every word and did an about face back toward the road. I had to assume that it was Wilson's place so Granny's couldn't be much further. The intensity of the rain slowly changed to a steady insistent pelting instead of the sheets of white water disgorged from buckets of clouds. I plodded through the mud until I found a less obvious track through the undergrowth but one that now was much more familiar and lifted my spirits so that I found the extra energy to slog through the stream cutting grooves in the path to the lake and the cabin. Partway down I found the proof positive that I was on the right path. There was the little sign that Granny had Ned carve for her. It read *ASK N U* (picture of a shell) *B* (picture of a wishing well plus a comb). Granny always loved her word puzzles and rebuses.

Another flash of lightning revealed the old cabin as clear as if it were daylight and the thunder let out with an earsplitting bang before rolling away in a series of less loud concussions. I could smell the fried air as I hurried the motorcycle onto the shelter of the tiny front veranda. I stood there for a minute catching my breath and watching the rain wildly leaping off the eaves. The accompanying

wind battered the tarpaper sides of the small cabin, blowing swirls of tree debris in every direction. Then the chill of being soaked through caught up with me and I pushed open the door to the shelter of the cabin.



Something had died. Not recently. But the stink of decay took up a lot of the air I was breathing. I had to step back out onto the porch. I left the door open and the stench streaked out like a flock of smelly ghosts in need of laundering. I waited a while, gazing through the steady rain to where I could see the dark waters of the lake agitated with tiny whitecaps. I would have to move everything into the cabin as day got darker I realized, including the Scout. I reached into my inside jacket pocket and carefully extracted my half pack of Luckies praying they weren't soaked. I was in luck, the pack was wet but the inside foil had managed to keep them pretty dry. I fired up my trusty Ronson and filled my mouth with smoke. I figure that a nose full of tobacco smoke might help with some of the reek.

The Scout was a tight fit getting in through the narrow door. The one double window, given the circumstances, was letting in as much light as it could,. Most of it fell on a tabletop covered by a ratty oilcloth and barely illuminating a variety of indistinguishable objects. The corners were deep in shadows. I switched on the headlight and that helped some. I could make out what looked like a cot against one wall. Across from it was the shape of an old tin stove with the pipe snaking up and through the roof.

I steered the handlebars in a wide arc, memory filling in what I couldn't completely make out. The narrow ladder I remembered led to the loft where us kids used to sleep, packed together on thin mattresses. Granny had her room at the far back and the dark rectangle of the doorway reminded me that we were not allowed in there. If we did get too curious, there was always a switch to remedy that. I felt a kind of excitement course through me, like the kind I used to feel when I was a kid. When I was going to do something daring. Or foolish. Or dangerous. And I could feel myself smiling.

Looking behind me at the back of the door, it was where I thought it would be, the old kerosene lamp, hung on a nail next to a greasy leather apron. It was what us kids used to call the "outhouse lantern" in case it was the middle of the night and more than the spirit was moving you to unload your bad conscious and you didn't want to be stepping on anything that might be out there crawling around in the dark. Mostly it was the adults that used it, the kids were no strangers to wetting the bed. And to my unbelievable luck, there was a handful of wood matches in the apron pocket, just like they'd always been. I carried the lantern over to the table and held it up to my ear. I heard a faint slosh. I lifted the glass chimney and sniffed the wick. There were enough fumes that it might catch. I scratched a match on the window sill and it burst to life like a sulfur flare. I rolled the flame carefully along the wick, adjusting the length. The flame leapt alive just as the match was about to burn my fingers. I lowered the chimney and the dark cabin held a warm amber light.

I didn't waste any time reorienting myself and getting a better idea of my situation, memory now rushing in to fill in the gaps. The old footlocker that Uncle Ned had brought home from when he served in the Great War and in which he kept his tools, an axe and a couple of types of saws, among other things was where it always was behind the door. And the red kerosene can with the capped spout

at the top. A good shake revealed that it would refill the lamp a couple times or more. Leaning on the wall next to it was the old portable stove with its legs folded up. I remembered that the well and the pump were on the up side of the cabin along with the washtubs, and on the down side, the rickety old outhouse. I was in no hurry to use it, not with the rain still pouring down and the thunder rolling through the clouds. I was looking out the window in the direction of the outhouse, outside now much darker and shadowed than when I had arrived. I heard another loud crack and immediately fingers of lightning crackled up from the ground on a further shore of the lake. I'd forgotten how spectacular they could be. I figured the way things were going I'd soon see another one.

That wasn't what surprised me. The next lightning strike was right outside the window, multiple times of blinding light illuminating the entire landscape, outhouse and all. I jumped back instinctively. In the dark the lamp had illuminated my reflection on the warped glass pane, but as the white flash of electricity lit up the outside, I saw a face staring back at me, and it was not mine. And just like that it was gone. The face of a young girl. My mind leapt to the only person it could be, the person who had been on my mind almost constantly the last few days. It was Rebecca.

But it wasn't. I raced out the door and around the side of the cabin where the warm glow of the lamp shined out onto the empty blackness of rainswept trees. I could have sworn it was her. My mind was playing tricks on me and I hadn't even had a drink. But I knew where I could get one. I took the half pint of everclear out of the saddle bag and gave it another sniff. It wasn't nearly as bad as whatever it was that had died. It even had a smell you could get used to, the tang of oblivion.

—*To Be Continued*—