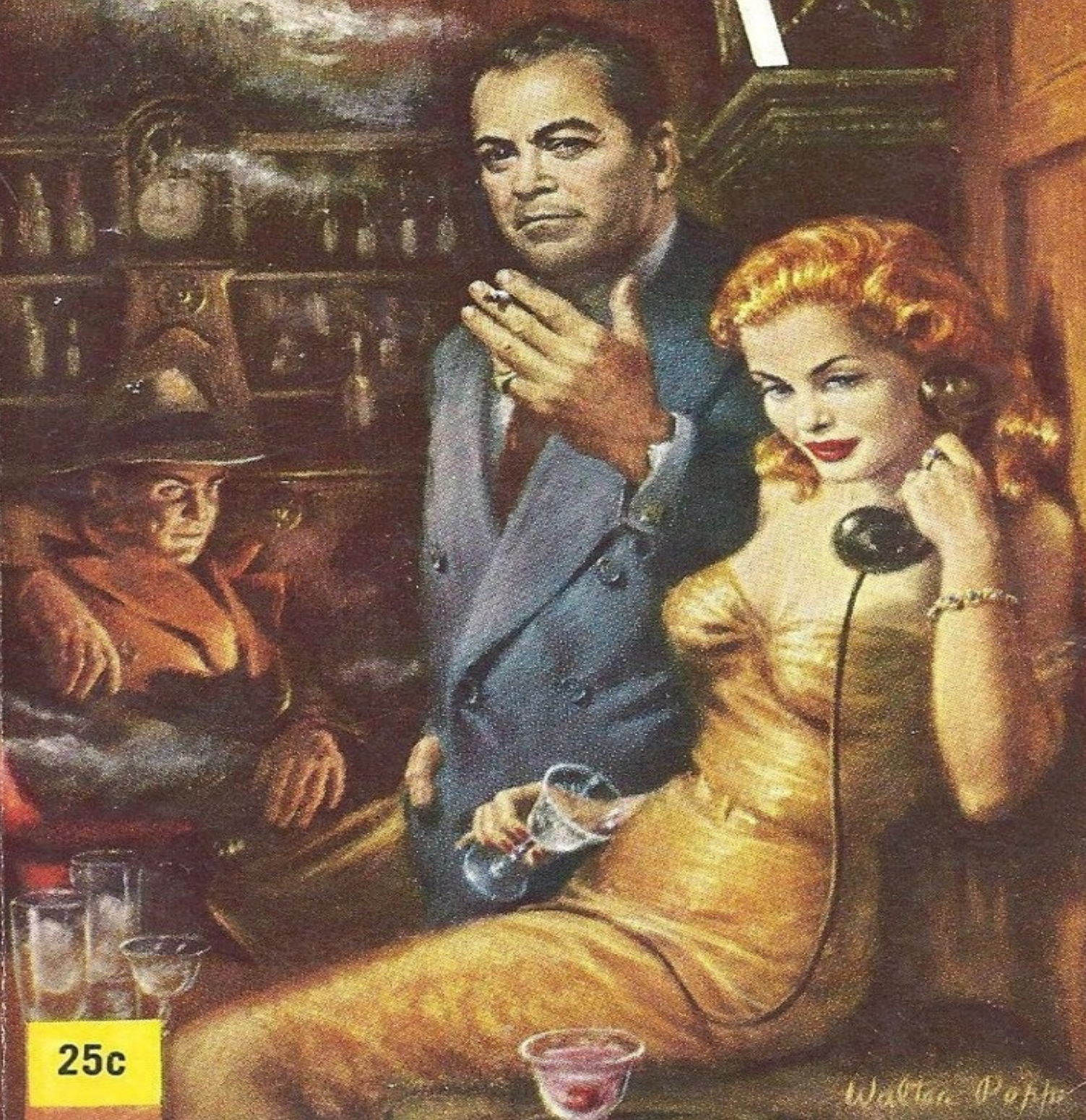


A GRAPHIC
MYSTERY

MILTON OZAKI

DRESSED TO

Kill



25c

Walter Papp

Dressed to Kill

By
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1954

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PART ONE. Blonde Baggage

ONE

. Blood in Bloom

IT WAS a blistering August morning and before I'd been behind my desk ten minutes my shirt was plastered to my back by a layer of sweat as sticky as maple syrup. I wriggled in my chair, eyed the pile of mail disgustedly, and thought of the cool breezes which soon would be soothing the suckers in Arlington Park. Such was not for me, alas. The checkbook indicated an urgent need for funds. Unless some sterling client had come through with a pretty piece of negotiable paper—a circumstance which I had reason to doubt—I had no alternative but to go out and start digging. Even a private eye has to eat once in a while.

I went through the mail anxiously, tossing the second-class stuff into the wastebasket unopened and pursing my lips over the rest. Bills from the utilities. A bill from the landlord. A reminder from the Blue Cross. I snorted something one-syllabled, snatched the familiar blue envelope of the Automobile Recovery Association's weekly flyer from the pile, and kicked back my chair. I got out of the office.

Five minutes later I was sipping iced tea and basking in the air-conditioned comfort of the Thompson's restaurant downstairs. My number one problem was still: dough. Remembering the A. R. A. flyer, I got it out of my pocket and ripped it open.

It was meaty, very meaty—containing the engine number, year of manufacture, color, "body style," license number and state of origin of every insured car lost, stolen or missing during the previous week. I went through it critically, paying particular attention to the Cadillacs, Lincolns and Packards listed as missing in the midwest. Not that I'm a snob. I was merely using my head. The bigger cars cost more dough and the insurance companies scream louder when one is missing—which means the end of any deal would be a lot juicier.

After playing optical leapfrog with the statistics, I pencil-checked three Cadillacs, two Lincolns and one of the Packards as having some potentiality of being routed into Chicago. I pondered the matter. There was no use stalling. I needed money worse than the world needs penicillin. But where to start? Mentally I reviewed the various possibilities and recalled that the Cadillac agency's garage on Wabash Avenue was air-conditioned. That settled it. I cast my vote for the Caddies.

In case you're wondering how the set-up works, here's the gimmick: A guy owns a brand-new Lincoln convertible and, while he's getting a haircut or snatching an indoor smooch from a girlfriend, somebody admires the car and drives it away. Okay, right away the guy does two things: He screams to the cops and he notifies the insurance company which stands to get stuck for several thousand bucks if the car isn't retrieved pronto. The cops, of course, are highly abashed at the theft and run right out to get on their horses and chase after the thief. Theoretically. In actual practice, a car owner sometimes has a hard time even convincing the cops that his car has been stolen and, for reasons which should be obvious, the insurance company is not going to wait for the local gendarmes to get the lead out. So as soon as the report comes in, the company notifies the Automobile Recovery Association, which maintains offices in New York, Kansas City and Los Angeles. The A. R. A. screens the data and dispatches it to myriad private detective agencies throughout the country. The agencies, when things are slack in their divorce and dead-beat departments, put their idle operatives to checking local cars. You'd be surprised how often an agency picks up a quick hundred bucks this way.

Now here's the trick which makes the clock tick for yours truly: In a big city like Chicago, a

operative can't go walking around the streets checking license plates and serial numbers. Not unless he's nuts, anyway. So I play it this way: Sooner or later every car needs servicing, and that stolen Lincoln convertible may show up at an authorized Lincoln garage. There the mechanic will list the engine number on his work sheet, and if I happen to drop around, I can spot said number—and everybody starts sighing with relief, except the guy who thought he'd gotten away clean with a snazzy convertible. Result: the insurance company gets the car, the A. R. A. gets a fee—and so do I. My end of the deal ranges from \$50 to \$500, depending upon the insured value of the car.

In actual practice, of course, it isn't as simple or as frequent as it sounds. With most agencies it's just a way of keeping otherwise idle operatives on the go; with me, it's a possible method of jacking up the bank account in an emergency.

I strolled into the Cadillac agency's building and sighed with relief as cool filtered air embraced my damp shirt. A salesman, engaged in extolling the merits of a shiny blue sedan to a bald-headed old geezer in a natty silk suit, nodded to me slightly and gave me a banker's smile of, understanding, returned the nod casually and walked to the rear, where the office and garage were located. Scotty Harris, the chief mechanic, was standing outside the office, energetically swabbing his grease-film-covered arms with a grimy towel. He raised one eyebrow and said sourly: "How're things, Rusty?"

"So—so. Thought I'd stop in and give the work sheets a shuffle."

"You know where they are. Just don't mix them up."

I found the work sheets on a shelf of Scotty's two-by-four office and sat down at his desk to check them. I went through them methodically, comparing the recorded serial numbers with those on the A. R. A. list. Suddenly I blinked and did a doubletake. One of the serial numbers matched the third one on my list! Almost holding my breath, I went over the work sheet with a pencil, checking off the items. Color—correct. Body and year—correct. License—Illinois, should have been Arizona. Mentally, I leaped into the air and kicked my heels together. This was my lucky day. A switch of license plates was to be expected and everything else checked. I'd stumbled into a hot baby!

I ran out of the office, waving the work sheet. "Hey, Scotty!" I shouted.

Scotty poked a grizzled head out from under a coupe de ville.

"Remember this job?" I bent down and shoved the work sheet in front of his eyes. "A yellow sedan. You fixed the carburetor and put in a new oil line three days ago."

"Yeah." Scotty nodded. "So what?"

"What happened to it?"

"How the hell do I know? All I do is fix 'em."

"Did you see the owner?"

"No, but I saw the owner's friend." His gray eyes softened and squinted a little, like an old man trying to remember his wedding night. "Some babe. Built like... you know!" One of his hands cut a series of curves in the air.

"Young?"

"Yeah. Blonde, too."

"When did she pick the car up?"

"She didn't."

"You mean it's still here?" I almost shouted the words.

"Naw, one of the guys delivered it to her hotel." He started to pull his head back under the coupe.

"Wait a minute, Scotty!" I pleaded. "Which hotel?"

"Crilton."

"When?"

"About an hour ago. Now leave me alone, for chrissake, I gotta get—"

~~An hour ago. My heart sank. The car might be sixty miles away by now!~~

"What was the blonde's name, Scotty?"

"Can't you read?" came from beneath the coupe. "It's on the receipt, ain't it?"

He was right. Giselle Kent, Crilton Hotel. I put the worksheet back on the pile in his office and got out of there like a cat who'd accidentally backed into a puddle of kerosene. The parking lot where I keep my car was five blocks away. I got there in about five seconds. The inside of my Pontiac was as hot as a baker's oven, but I hardly noticed. All I could think of was a possible \$500 fee racing away from me with a blonde at the wheel.

The Crilton is at Rush and Ohio Streets. I came sailing south on Rush and braked my car to a stop in front of the hotel just in time to meet a yellow Cadillac sedan going north. It whizzed past too fast for me to catch its plates, but I did get a glimpse of a mass of blonde hair behind the wheel. With what I thought was considerable presence of mind, I goosed my car into motion again, circled the block and got back on Rush, headed in the right direction. The yellow Caddy was at least six blocks ahead of me but still pointed north. I raced ahead, clipping the traffic lights and angling around other traffic, until the distance narrowed to two blocks. Then the Caddy caught a red light. I maneuvered around and got behind it. The plates were Illinois—and had all the right numbers! I exhaled slowly and settled down in my seat.

The Caddy went north to Lincoln Park, cut into the Inner Drive, cruised a mile or so at 35 m.p.h., then worked its way onto the express lane of the Outer Drive. The blonde began to lean on the gas, but the Caddy leaped ahead and the space between us widened rapidly into a chasm. The bright yellow of the Caddy made it stand out like a banana in a bowl of grapes, though, and I managed to keep it in sight all the way to the end of the Drive. She made a right turn and slowed down, then, evidently undecided whether to follow U. S. 41 or Illinois 42. While she was making up her mind, I narrowed the gap between us. She decided on 42 and continued into Evanston at a normal and conservative clip. I dropped behind a little so as not to become conspicuous, and stayed there while she cruised on through Wilmette, Winnetka, Highland Park, Lake Forest, Waukegan and Zion.

As we approached the Wisconsin state line, I began to worry. I hadn't had time to fill my tank and wasn't prepared for an extended chase. If she were headed for a spot in the wilds of northern Wisconsin the odds were in favor of my ending up at a gas station, stranded like a bride at the church—~~and even more frustrated.~~ I toyed with the idea of overtaking the Caddy when it slowed down and forcing it to a stop. But the A. R. A. frowned upon such tactics. The blonde might get nervous and run the car up a tree. Worse, she might get wise to the pitch and give me the slip, but fast. No, I had to wangle a peaceful possession and my only hope was that her tank was low, too, and that she'd stop to refuel within the next hundred miles.

When we reached Kenosha, sure enough, the Caddy turned into a Sinclair station. I scooted past the next block, where I could see the red crown of a Standard Oil station. While the attendant squirted gas into the Pontiac, I paced up and down, keeping an eye on the Caddy. As soon as it nosed into the road again, I flung money at the attendant and got the Pontiac moving.

I was right behind her as she went down Sheridan Road... and a good thing, too, for she abandoned the marked highway suddenly and went toward the center of town. Reaching the business section, the Caddy began idling along as though searching for something. Then, rounding a corner, it stopped. The blonde climbed out, giving me a glimpse of nylon-sheathed legs and a slender blue-suited figure. She high-heeled it into a store.

I went on to the next corner, made a U-turn and came back. She had gone into a drugstore. I parked

and strolled across the street. I looked into the drugstore. There were several customers perched on stools at the soda fountain and a scattering of customers in the rear. The blonde was not visible. I deduced that she was somewhere in the rear of the store, probably making a phone call. No one was looking my way. Whistling tonelessly, I went around to the front of the Caddy and lifted its hood.

I rubbed the plate on the engine block with my thumb and stared at the numbers. They checked. I slapped the hood down and tried the door beside the driver's seat. It was unlocked. Luck was certainly knocking itself out for me today. I opened the door and climbed in.

She'd taken the ignition keys out, the smarty. Grinning, I got a ring of master keys out of my pocket and started jabbing them into the lock. The fourth one fitted. I stepped on the starter and the engine purred affectionately.

With considerable pleasure, I eased the clutch in and felt the Caddy move smoothly away from the curb. At the same instant, a screen door slammed violently and heels clattered frantically on the sidewalk. A girl's voice began to scream: "My car! Stop! Stop!"

Without bothering to look back, I drove to the end of the business section, made another U-turn and came back. There was quite a crowd in front of the drugstore and the blonde was stamping one foot, waving her arms, and pointing in my direction. A tall cop in a blue uniform broke away from the group and ran into the street, pawing at his pistol holster as he did so. I wiped the grin off my face, but I didn't change my plans. I drove the Caddy to within a few feet of my Pontiac—and parked.

"All right, All right!" the cop hollered, gesturing authoritatively with his gun. "Climb outa that car, mister!"

"Why?" I asked, keeping one eye on the blonde. She had stopped waving her arms and was striding wrathfully toward me, obviously as mad as a ma-dog who'd just lost a pup.

"Because you're under arrest! I order you to climb out and surrender!"

At that instant, the blonde arrived. Her taut cheeks wore a flush. Her blue eyes were opaque with anger. "That's him!" she cried, jabbing a red-tipped finger at me. "I was in the drugstore. That's my car—and he stole it!"

"No kidding," I said mildly, admiring the ripe red of her lips and the way her white teeth flashed.

"I saw him!" she shrieked. She took a deep breath, making the front of her gray suit bulge dangerously. "It's my car! He's a thief!"

"Out!" the cop ordered ominously. "Come on, wise guy! Out of this lady's car!"

"No, thanks." I shook my head slowly. "I intend to stay right here." I eyed the gun and wondered if it were loaded.

"Why, you—!" The cop's neck began to get red and the gun rose an inch or two.

"Just a minute, officer," I said quickly. "Before you stick your neck out too far, it'd be a good idea for you to identify the parties involved and at least make a pretense of trying to ascertain ownership of this car. After all, you don't know either of us, do you?"

"Why, the idea!" the blonde gasped, looking as though she'd swallowed an egg. "The insolence! I saw him—"

The cop frowned. "You mean you deny that this lady owns this car and that you took it from the front of the drugstore where she had it parked?"

"That's the idea," I told him. "This car does not belong to her and because it doesn't, I suspect she's no lady. My name is Russell Forbes. I'm a licensed investigator, acting in behalf of the Automobile Recovery Association. This car was illegally removed from the state of Arizona and I am merely taking peaceful possession of it in a public thoroughfare, as required by law. If you'll lower the cannon for a minute, I'll show you my credentials."

"That's a lie!" the blonde screamed, pawing at the cop's shoulder. "It's my father's car and I parked it there just a couple minutes ago! These people saw me! He just got in it and—"

"Look," I interrupted. "I have documents which show that this car was stolen in Arizona." I smiled at the blonde. "If you have a bona fide bill of sale, of course, that's another matter and I'll have to suggest that the car be impounded until its ownership is straightened out with the insurance company."

The cop lowered his gun. "Let's see them documents," he growled.

I got out my wallet and showed him my Illinois investigator's license. Then I unfolded the A. R. A. list, underscored the data applicable to the Caddy, and handed that to him. Apparently he'd seen an A. R. A. flyer before, because he just glanced at the heading, then went around and lifted the hood. He checked the serial number carefully, stared at the license plates, then pushed his hat onto the back of his head and holstered his gun.

"I'm afraid he's right, miss," he said slowly. "This is a stolen car and this man is a licensed detective. He has the right to take possession of it. Unless you have papers to prove differently, there isn't anything I can do. As a matter of fact, if he wants to press charges, I'll have to arrest you. You've violated a federal law by driving this car across a state line."

"Oh!" The anger went out of her like water down a drain and a frightened look leaped into her eyes. "There must be some mistake! I'm sure my father didn't—" She stopped, bit her lip, and narrowed her wide blue eyes a little. "Is it because he missed one of the payments? If it is, I could pay it to you, and that'd make it all right, wouldn't it? Then I could keep the car, couldn't I?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. I have to follow orders. The usual procedure is to notify the insurance company and ship the car back to the point of theft."

"But you can't-!"

"I can and I am," I told her, thinking that she was probably the prettiest girl I'd ever repossessed a car from. "As the officer just explained, I can have you thrown in the local clink. But all I want is the car. If you'll surrender the keys, I'm willing to forget the rest."

"You better do like he says, miss," the cop advised. "He's got the law on his side."

Without a word, she thrust a pair of keys at me. There were tears in her eyes and her lower lip trembled. I took the keys and gave her a sympathetic grin. "A job's a job," I explained. "I'm going to take the car back to Chicago. If you want to ride along, I'll be glad to give you a lift."

She hesitated. A tear trickled down one cheek, leaving a faint eroded trail on her make-up. She brushed the tear away impatiently, then stamped around the car and opened the door. When she was seated beside me, I locked the ignition, got out, and, with the help of two high-school kids who'd been watching the excitement, lined my Pontiac up behind the Caddy, and attached a steel tow-line between the two cars. That done, I got back into the Caddy, waved farewell to the cop, and eased the two cars into motion.

It's fifty-eight miles from Kenosha to Chicago's Loop. For the first ten, she glared at the radio and kept her pert nose pointed straight ahead. I kept my nose straight ahead too, but it was difficult. Her perfume filled the sedan subtly but potently, reminding me that detectives are merely men and men are human. She was young, not much over voting age and built like a calendar model.

She was first to break the silence. "Do detectives make a lot of money?" she asked abruptly.

"No," I admitted. "It's a lousy racket."

"Suppose I gave you a check for seven-hundred-fifty dollars. Would you let me have the car?"

"No."

"A good check."

"Don't tempt me, honey."

"Suppose I gave you the check and three hundred dollars in cash."

Temptation tugged at me and I waltzed with her a moment, but I shook my head.

"I've got some—some jewelry. You can have that, too." A note of desperation tinged her voice.

"Look, baby," I said. "You rolled the dice and it turns out you made a bad pass. I'm vulnerable to fast buck; most guys who have to scramble for a living are. But you're trying to tempt me with peanuts. Suppose I took the check, the cash, and the knickknacks. It doesn't add up to big dough—only a little over a grand altogether, probably—and I could get my neck chopped off for it. That cop's got my name in his notebook, as well as the license and serial number of this car. I advise you to make a new connection when you get back to Chi, get another car from your boyfriend, and then begin your trip again. What's a couple days to a kid like you?"

"What do you want, then?"

"The car, honey, nothing but the car. The insurance company's going to pay me a nice fat fee for latching onto it—and, as the bridegroom said to his best man, this time it's all strictly legit."

"But I can't let you take it away from me like this!"

"Why not?"

She bit her lip. "Well.... because."

"That's a hell of a reason."

Silence fell between us again. As the miles continued to unwind, I glanced covertly at her from time to time. She sat huddled in the corner of the seat, her wide blue eyes fixed straight ahead and her small chin tight and set. I began to wonder if and when the big idea would hit her. She looked like a sweet young kid, but she had a woman's equipment and something in her voice and manner had given me the impression that she had been around. If I were right, the call of the wild should be sounding any minute...

I hadn't long to wait. She began by loosening her legs and wriggling her shoulders a little. Then she made a small moaning sound. Keeping my eyes on the road, I said: "What's the matter, kid?"

"I—I think I'm going to be sick—"

"No kidding?" I tried to look worried.

She put a limp arm across her forehead. "My head is pounding and my stomach feels as if it's going to roll over." She massaged the offending organ delicately, unbuttoning the gray jacket to do so. I got a side-eye view of some very pretty scenery.

"Think a coffee might help?"

"I... ugh, no. It's—the way the car sways, I guess."

"Car sickness," I said brightly. "Sort of like sea sickness." I pretended to ponder the situation. "Well," I suggested, "I suppose we could stop a few minutes." I glanced at her, adding: "If you think that would help."

"Could we?"

"Sure. There's no rush."

"I'd sure appreciate it."

"I'll pull into the first decent-looking place I spot."

Deliberately, I passed up the ordinary roadside eating joints and chose a rather elaborate, freshly painted establishment which billed itself in vari-colored neon as The U-Need-Rest. Needless to say, it consisted of a huge frame building which housed a combination grill and tavern and which squatted within a semi-circle of little frame cabins like a mother hen among her chicks.

"This place looks okay." I announced casually. Slowing the car, I pointed it at the whitewashed driveway and parked near the main entrance. I turned off the ignition.

"You're sure you don't mind—stopping?" she asked in a small voice.

~~I faced her and dropped an arm along the back of the seat. I grinned. "Hell, I've got all day, honey"~~

She managed a grateful smile. She had beautiful eyes, smoothly curving red lips, and lovely skin. I studied the area of skin visible in the V of her blouse and involuntarily moistened my lips. She was a sweet dish—and I love sweets. She was playing a game—and I am a guy who likes sports. She was calling the turn fast enough to suit me, though, so I decided to help her along. "Maybe you ought to lie down a while," I suggested, looking ostentatiously around and nodding toward the cabins. "They probably rent one to us for an hour or so."

"I'd like that," she said quickly. Too quickly. "But—" Remembering that she shouldn't be too eager, she dangled the rest of the sentence like a good little actress, colored slightly, and fluttered her eyelashes in a way calculated to denote embarrassment.

"Think nothing of it," I reassured her. "The management is probably used to drop-ins. I'll tell them we've been driving all night and want to grab a couple hours of rest."

"All right." She smiled brightly. "They don't know us, so it doesn't make any difference what they think, anyway."

"My sentiments, exactly."

I got out of the car, taking the keys with me, and entered the grill. A blase fat boy in a Hawaiian motif sport shirt took my application, made in the form of a folded five-dollar-bill, and jotted down the license number of the Caddy in a dog-eared notebook. I signed—with quite a feeling of roguishness—Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Matthews, Chicago, on the line below. Fat Boy inspected the signature glumly and gave me a hotel-size key on a formica tag. The tag bore the numeral G. I thanked him graciously and went back to the Caddy.

The blonde was no longer sick. Giving me an expectant half-smile, like a bride waiting to be lifted across the threshold, she asked: "Is it all right?"

"Sure." I matched her smile. "We're in cabin six."

I got the cars going and, with minor difficulty, maneuvered them around the circling driveway to the rear, where one of the chicks bore the proper numeral. Parking was not an easy matter because of the shallowness of the space between the roadway and a high iron fence which stretched across the rear of the cabins. I solved the problem of getting the Pontiac out of the road, finally, by detaching it from the towline and driving it around to the other side of the cabin. While I was so engaged, the blonde strolled to the cabin and unlocked the door. She went in, leaving the door invitingly open. I looked at it and my red corpuscles began to get redder. Conscience tugged at me. I pushed it away. She was calling the turn, wasn't she? And if she didn't know what she was doing, she deserved to find out.

I glanced at the rear of the Caddy as I turned toward the cabin—and stopped. Frowning, I stared at the broad strip of yellow immediately beneath the edge of the trunk compartment. It was streaked irregularly with slanting stripes of brownish-maroon, as though a thick liquid had been spilled within the compartment and, urged by the movement of the car, had drained toward the rear and seeped over the bottom edge. I touched one of the streaks with a curious finger. It was quite sticky, not unlike the simple syrup. But it wasn't syrup. It was blood. Drying blood.

With fingers which trembled, I unlocked the trunk compartment and thrust the lid up. My stomach began to climb toward my mouth. Jammed into the steel-lined interior was the body of a man clothed in blood-soaked blue gabardine. A wide mouth of ugly flesh gaped at me from beneath his chin, where a razor-sharp knife had passed across his throat.

Ordering my stomach to behave, I reached in, twisted my fingers in the thin, brownish hair at the head, and pulled the face toward me. It was a round, ordinary mask of flesh with a fattish, large

pored nose and staring dark eyes.

He was no one I knew.

TWO. The Errand Girl

WHEN I entered the cabin, her suit skirt and jacket were folded neatly on a chair, her blouse hung sedately from a wire hanger, and her high-heeled pumps were at attention beside the chair. She was lying on the narrow bed, clad in a frothy bra and a sheer half-slip. Releasing a startled gasp at the sound of the door closing, she flung an arm protectively across the front of the bra, as though it had never occurred to her that a man might enter the open door and interrupt her siesta.

I slammed the door shut, locked it, and stood in the center of the small room, staring at her. She made quite a picture. Stretched indolently on the bed with a fluff of soft blonde hair framing her prettily made face, and with a blend of come-hither and sweet innocence in her wide blue eyes, she was vibrating the sort of chord which men harken to and which keeps our divorce courts busy. The whole get-up, from the way the sheer hose molded her long limbs, ending in coy garters which peeped through the sheer half-slip, to the way her navel winked up at me from the flatness of her bare belly, was arranged to excite the age-old hunger of man.

But, at the moment, murder dulled my appetite.

"Ohhh—" It was a satiny sigh, and as a final touch, she lifted her arms and stretched like a lithely lazy kitten. "What took you so long?"

Without answering, I strode to the chair holding her clothes. Under the skirt lay her purse, a black rectangle of leather the size of a gift box of cigars. I picked it up and tugged at the zipper. It came open with a metallic whisper.

"Say!" The bed creaked as she sat up suddenly. "What do you think you're doing?"

Ignoring her, I up-ended the purse, shaking its contents onto a nearby table. A gold lipstick, several bob pins, a comb, three keys on a beaded chain, a gadget for crimping eyelashes, an emerald board, a tired pack of Viceroy's and a packet of matches rattled onto the bare wood. I shook it again, and a tiny red memorandum book and a flat wallet of worn red leather joined the rest of the junk. I dropped the empty purse onto the chair and gave my attention to the wallet.

"Why, you—!" The satiny tone became sandpapery. She flung herself at me, her fingers clawing frantically for the wallet. I knocked her hands down, then gave her a push which sent her skittering toward the bed. She landed on it with considerable impact, enough to clip short the nasty name which had been about to leave her lips.

There was a sheaf of crisp bills in the wallet—several hundred dollars' worth, I estimated—and the usual celluloid flaps containing identification cards and snapshots. Her name, according to a vehicle operator's license issued by the state of Illinois, was Giselle Kent and her residence was 162 Maple Street, West Frankfort, Illinois. Also, she was blonde, blue-eyed, five-six, and weighed one-twelve.

She scrambled off the bed, making sounds of great fury, and got one of her shoes. Clutching it hammerwise by the toe, she tried to drive my ear into my head with the heel. Fortunately, her aim was bad. I caught the blow with my shoulder, slapped the shoe from her hand, and administered another push. She and the bedsprings screeched as one.

I inspected the snapshots with cursory interest. One was a glamor shot, highly retouched, in which she exhibited pearly teeth and much bare shoulder. The next, a poorly focused full-length view

showed a laughing blonde—either herself or a sister—in a very brief bathing suit, leaning against the willing shoulder of a grinning youth who, I deduced by the chain of dog-tags hanging from his neck, was a member of the armed services. Her family was next, of course. Papa looked well-fed and strong, mama, the taller of the two, was stiff-backed and impatient-looking. The front porch of what I presumed was the family manse was in the background; although slightly out of focus, it looked like an old-fashioned concoction, the kind peculiar to small towns these days. The last picture was a pose studio shot on matte paper, obviously cut down to fit the celluloid flap. It featured a sleek, dark-haired man in three-quarter pose, who smoked a cigarette and wore a large black-stoned ring on the third finger of his left hand. There was something familiar about him, but the picture rang no bells.

I discarded the wallet and riffled through the pages of the memo book. There were a lot of tightly written names and addresses and a profusion of telephone numbers. The cover of the book bore the printed blurb MR. MEL—Your Hairdresser, followed by the phone number of a beauty salon on East Walton Place. I dropped the book into my pocket for further study and continued my search.

Her blouse had been designed, quite successfully, to cover but not to conceal anything. I tossed it aside and examined the skirt and jacket thoroughly, finding nothing. I picked up her shoes, studied the heels, thrust fingers into the toes. Again, nothing. Staring at her, I took a step toward the bed. She was crouched against the headboard, her face pale with fear and taut with anger.

"Where is it?" I asked hoarsely. "Where did you hide it?"

"Wh—what?" The word came out of her throat with a rattle, as though it were glad to be released.

"The check," I rasped. "Give it to me."

"What ch-check?"

"You little fool!" My knees banged against the edge of the bed as I leaned toward her, reaching for her shoulders. "You told me you had it. Where did you put it?" I shook her impatiently.

With panicky fingers, she tore a cup of her bra and turned it down. Pinned inside was a moldy fold of brown paper. I brushed her trembling hands aside and unfastened the pin myself. The check was damp from the intimate contact with her warm flesh. I unfolded it carefully. It was drawn on the Cosmopolitan National Bank of Chicago and made out to G. Kent for \$750.00. The signature, written in the large, careful script of either the very old or the very young, was: Arnold J. Richmond.

"Arnold J. Richmond," I muttered. "Who the hell is he?"

"None of your business!" she flared. "I don't know who you think you are, but you won't get away with this! I've got friends. Even if you are a private cop, you can't—"

"Shut up," I snapped. "Who's this guy Richmond?"

"What difference does it make?" Her voice rose a triumphant octave. "It's made out to me. Do you understand? It's no damned good to you unless I endorse it—and I swear to God you'll have to kill me first!"

"When did he give it to you?"

"This morning. I tell you, you can't—"

"Listen, honey." I bit my lip and inwardly cursed the panic which was threatening to get the better of my reason. "I don't want the check. All I want to know is who Richmond is."

"Why?"

"I'll answer that in a minute. Tell me who Richmond is."

"He's just a guy I know; a businessman."

"What kind of business?"

"How would I know? And what difference does it make, anyway? The check's mine and—"

"Maybe it isn't yours," I suggested.

"Like hell. My name's on it and that makes it mine." She flicked a finger at it. "See? G. Ken
That's me!"

"But it isn't yours unless you've earned it—and you haven't earned it yet, have you?"

Her eyes blanked out. "What do you mean by that?"

"You were supposed to ditch the Caddy—and you haven't."

Her lips flattened into a thin red line of outraged intelligence. "Are you nuts? Why would I want
ditch a car like that? Don't you know what it's worth?"

"Richmond paid you to ditch it."

"He didn't! I was taking it up to his sister's place for him."

"For seven hundred and fifty dollars?" I laughed shortly. "For that kind of dough, he could have
hired four guys to carry it up to Kenosha on their backs!"

"It's true. That's all I was to do!"

"I suppose you were to knock on her door and sing Happy Birthday, too," I said sarcastically.

"No. All I had to do was park it in front of her house and take the next train back to Chicago. Her
said she wasn't home but that she was expecting the car, and that it'd be all right to just leave it there."

"Did he tell you to wipe your fingerprints off the steering wheel, too?"

"Of course not. Why?" A scared look jumped into her eyes again. "Say, what are you getting at
It's no crime to deliver a car. And I didn't know it was stolen. So why would he tell me to—"

"Giselle," I interrupted gently, "did you happen to look in the trunk?"

"You mean in back?"

"Yes, in back. In the trunk compartment. Did you look in it?"

"No. Why?"

"Get dressed, kid. I have a surprise for you."

Something in my voice must have convinced her that I wasn't kidding, for she scrambled off the
bed and got into her blouse and skirt. When she had her shoes on, I tossed the car keys to her.

"Go out and have a look," I told her. "If anyone's around, make sure they aren't watching you."

She was gone less than two minutes. When she came in, her face was as grayish as an o
hashhouse platter and she ran past me, headed for the bathroom. I listened to the ensuing sounds
violent up-chucking and decided that either they were authentic or she was adept at using her
forefinger. I shut the door and locked it again. When she reappeared, she looked as pale and limp as
piece of wet macaroni. She handed the keys to me and sank upon the bed.

"Did you lock it again?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Anybody around?"

"There was a fellow in a car, a couple cabins down. But he couldn't see... it."

"Good. Any idea who the dead guy was?"

She bit her lip. Reluctantly, she nodded.

"Who?"

"Eddie Sands."

"The name sounds familiar. Who was he?"

"He managed the Silver Cloud."

"The jive joint on Clark Street?"

"Yes. Maybe he owned it. I don't know."

I whistled softly. "No wonder they wanted to get him out of Illinois. If what I've heard is correct
Eddie Sands was pretty warm stuff. You'd better give me the whole story, Giselle. We're both on the

spot, you know."

"Honest to God, I don't know anything about it!" She shook her head slowly and a haunted look slid into her eyes. "I was to drive it up there and leave it parked in front of his sister's house. He gave me the address and told me how—"

"Wait a minute. The agency's garage delivered the car to your hotel this morning. Right?"

"Yes. Something had been wrong with the carburetor or something, and—"

"What time was that?"

"About eight-thirty, I think—"

"What did you do with it?"

"I drove out to visit a friend for a few minutes, then I—"

"When you say 'a few minutes', how long do you mean?"

"Oh, ten or fifteen. Not any more than that. She'd been sleeping, and I'd gotten her out of bed, so she didn't stay long. She—"

"Where'd you park the car?"

"In her driveway. What—"

"Who is this friend and where does she live?"

"Her name is Ginny Evans—Virginia Evans, that is—and she lives on Bellevue Place. I'm sure she'll give you the address—"

"Did Richmond know you were going to stop there?"

"Of course. He told me to stop there."

"For any particular reason?"

"I was to get his sister's address and the check from her."

I stared at her incredulously, trying to make sense of the story she was handing me. Either she was a congenital idiot or this was all a wacky dream from which I would awaken suddenly. "Why didn't he just give them to you, himself?" I heard myself ask.

"Oh, he had to leave town last night. He tried to reach me, I guess, but I was making the rounds with some friends, and he couldn't, so he left a message for me, saying that the car was being delivered to my hotel and that I was to go and see Ginny right away."

"Didn't that arrangement make you suspicious?"

"Why should it? I've done errands like that for him before."

"Errands as screwy as that?"

"Oh, sure." She nodded negligently. "You wouldn't believe some of them, if I told you."

I snorted skeptically. "Okay. You got the car, then contacted Ginny. Then what?"

"I went back to my hotel."

"Why to your hotel? Why didn't you head for Kenosha?"

"Gosh, I couldn't go driving up to Wisconsin in an evening gown, could I? I had to change into a suit."

I took a deep breath. "Let me get this straight. Where were you when you got Richmond's message?"

"At the Frolics Club. I usually stop in there at the end of an evening, and Mr. Richmond knew I'd be there. He gave the message to the bartender. Naturally, as soon as the bartender told me what Mr. Richmond wanted, I went right—"

"Not so fast. What time was this?"

"Oh, somewhere between seven-thirty and eight o'clock. I guess."

"In the morning?"

"Sure. I said I'd been making the rounds, didn't I?"

"I thought the closing hour for joints like that was four a.m."

"Like it says in the papers, you mean?" She sniffed scornfully. "Just because the window signs are turned off and the front door is locked doesn't mean a joint is closed. A place like the Frolics stays open as long as anybody's willing to spend a buck."

"Okay, you got the word at about eight o'clock." I frowned. "Why didn't you go to your hotel, change clothes, and then go see Ginny?"

"I had to ditch my escort, didn't I? He was kind of sore about it..."

"What was his name?"

Her forehead crinkled. "Dick something. I never did hear his last name; at least, I don't think so. There was always a crowd around, and everybody was laughing and talking and dancing, and I guess I wasn't paying much attention. He was young and kind of nice, but nothing to set a girl on fire, if you know what I mean."

I grunted. "So you went straight from the Frolics Club to the hotel, got the Caddy, drove to the Evans girl's apartment on Bellevue Place, and got the check and an address in Kenosha from her. Then you went back to the Crilton, changed clothes, and headed for Wisconsin."

She nodded.

"Where did you park the Caddy while you were changing clothes?"

"On Ohio Street. There was a space around the corner from the hotel, so" —she shrugged— "I parked it there."

"You weren't told to park it there?"

"Don't be stupid. How would anybody know there'd be a vacant—"

"Okay, okay!" I interrupted. "I'm just trying to figure the play. The body sure as hell wasn't in the back of the car while it was being worked on in the garage. So it was stashed there after you got out from the garage, and, judging by what you've told me, they only had one opportunity to do the job—and that was while you, Giselle, were in the Evans girl's apartment."

Her lips formed a silent O of shocked comprehension. "You mean-!"

"Exactly. I think Richmond's being out of town was merely an alibi, strictly for the purpose of getting you to chauffeur the Caddy to a place where the body could be safely loaded into it. In fact, I give you eight-to-five that Richmond doesn't have a sister and, if he has, that she doesn't live in Kenosha."

"But—"

"Listen, honey." I leaned forward and squeezed her shoulder, stopping the flood of questions which I knew were beginning to brim in her mind. "The Caddy was hot and Richmond must have known it. It didn't cost him much to abandon it, just the seven-fifty he paid you—not much of a fee for driving a dead body across a state line and ditching it for him. Hell, you took all the risk. Figure it out yourself. Even if you were spotted and trailed, the backtrack to Richmond was obscured because your contacts were the bartender and the Evans girl. If necessary, he was alibied for the whole deal. He could wash you off simply by swearing that your story had been cooked up out of thin air. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

A muscle in her jaw did a nervous do-se-do. "B-but Ginny knows it's true. She's a friend of mine. She'll tell them that Richmond gave her the check and—"

"Sure," I snapped, "Ginny's your friend—but Richmond's got dough, hasn't he? Is she such a good friend that she won't listen to the whisper of money?"

Her head jerked as though I'd punched her in a vital area. "She wouldn't lie! She wouldn't dare"

"I'd... I'd..." Her voice faltered wildly and scratched to a stop.

"You'd what?" I asked grimly. "What could you do? Richmond will be taking care of Richmond. And if Ginny can be bought—where does that leave you?"

Her fingers began to writhe. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I want the truth!" I snapped. "All of it!"

"I've told you-!"

"You haven't kept anything back?"

"No. Why should I? I wouldn't want to be involved in a... in a murder, would I?"

"You are involved. That's the hell of it. We're both involved." I stood up abruptly and began to pace back and forth. "I hate like hell to throw a kid like you to the cops. But the Caddy has got to be turned in. Besides needing the fee, the fact that I took possession of it is a matter of record now. So I've got to drive it in and surrender it. If it weren't for the body, the insurance company would take the car and no questions asked. But one look at that blood and everybody's going to start screaming themselves hoarse. The fact that the stiff is Eddie Sands doesn't help, either. We're liable to get it from both directions. Especially you. I hope you're used to bright lights and loud voices."

She swallowed slowly. "Couldn't we—?" Her voice broke. "C-couldn't we d-ditch it s-someplace?"

"Where? It isn't as easy as it sounds. Why do you suppose Richmond was willing to shell out so much for the job? It isn't like hiding a peanut or burying a cat." I grinned mirthlessly. "Besides, it's illegal."

Her mouth started to open, then stopped.

I heard it, too—and froze.

Through the thin board wall of the cabin, our ears had caught the sound of a powerful engine roaring into life.

I leaped for the door, clawed at the lock, got it open. The yellow Caddy, veiled in a film of protesting dust, was shooting into the driveway. A thin-faced guy, wearing horn-rimmed glasses, was behind the wheel. I shouted and ran toward the car. He braked viciously, then flipped the shift and spun the wheel in unison. He grinned pleasantly at me and waved a hand in farewell. The Caddy went into a swift crouch and then leaped away down the driveway.

I said a one-syllabled word.

THREE. A Very Busy Man

I SAID the word a second time, with even more vehemence.

What had happened was pretty obvious. I wasn't the only name on the mailing list of the A. R. A. The thin-faced guy was probably a shoe-string investigator, located in one of the small towns nearby who made a practice of keeping a finger on the pulse of the motels. He must have eased the Caddy's hood open, checked the serial number, and teased it down without actually snapping it shut. And while I'd been yakking away at the blonde, he'd been making hey-hey with the ignition. Slick of him—and stupid of me. I felt like heading for the nearest latrine and shoveling myself under.

I stormed into the cabin.

"What happened?" she asked expectantly.

"The Caddy went bye-bye," I told her bitterly.

"What!"

"You heard me." I gave her a smile like dry ice. "Let's get out of here."

"But—"

I cut her short. "No buts. I'm moving." I turned and stalked out. Her shoes clattered on the floor following me.

I still had the Pontiac, thank God. I got in and jabbed the key into the ignition. I kicked at the gas pedal. She got the door open and flung herself in. I gunned the car out into the driveway.

"You could at least—" she began angrily.

"Shut up," I gritted.

I was sore as hell, sore at myself, principally, but I had to let off steam somehow, so I took it out on her and the car. I drove like mad for twenty miles, ignoring highway warnings and trying to overtake everything on the road. I kept seeing the yellow Caddy pulling away from me, leaving me with a surplus blonde and no fee. Worse than that. It left me tagged as a guy who stopped at a roadside motel to frolic with a pick-up, thereby diluting business with pleasure, while a dead stiff sweated outside in the trunk of the car I'd repossessed. I could envision the thin-faced guy parking the Caddy, walking around it triumphantly, and his horn-rimmed spectacles bobbing with shock when he opened the trunk—if he opened it. Sure, he'd open it. With half an eye, he'd spot the stains, just as I did. Then he'd run for the cops. The cops would run for the motel. The fat boy would be questioned. My description would be broadcast. And from that point on I'd be eligible for the services of a mixed quartet, the kind which sings at funerals.

How long would it be before they got enough dope for a general alarm? An hour? Two hours? No longer. With luck, I'd have two hours to scam around before the roof fell in. How should I use that precious time?

No matter what I did, it would look bad. It would be idiotic to tell my story to the cops. Even if they didn't laugh themselves sick, I'd become persona non grata to the A. R. A. and might even get my state license revoked. That would be better than burning, of course, but not much better. The only possible thing in my favor was the fact that I had a thin edge of knowledge: I knew that Arnold Richmond was behind the deal and that a girl named Virginia Evans had Addled a distractible obligato while Eddie Sands' body was being loaded for transit. It wasn't a hell of a lot to work on. But it was better than nothing.

"Look, kid." The rasp of my voice surprised me; nerves had made my larynx tighter than a rusty screw. "I'm going to drop you off at Bellevue Place. I want you to call on your pal Ginny and see if you can get your hooks into her for some information. Pump all the facts you can out of her. If necessary, give her the whole story. It's only a matter of hours before it'll be in the papers, anyway."

"All right." She gave me a nod the size of a fingernail. "Then what?"

"Then we try to squirm out of the mess." The dash clock showed 12:17. We had been buzzing right along and were nearing the north entrance of the Outer Drive. I braked the Pontiac a little. This was my time to haggle with traffic cops.

"Meanwhile I'm going to nail down Richmond. Where does he usually hang out?"

"Gosh, I don't know. He's got an office some place, I guess, but I don't know where it is."

"What kind of an office?"

"A business office. You know."

"What kind of business?" I snorted. "Stop making me drag it out of you. What's his racket?"

"He sort of sold things."

"Sort of sold things!" I mimicked. "What kind of a racket is that?"

"Honest to God, Mr. Forbes, that's what he did!" she protested. "I've known him nearly a year and every time I've seen him he was around one of the joints, taking orders for something. You can ask Ginny. She's the one who introduced me to him originally. She's bought lots of things from him."

"What things?"

"Well, she bought a fur coat, a couple of suits, and a lot of lingerie and things like perfume. I've bought stuff from him myself—nylons and some Chanel Number Five."

"You mean he's a peddler?"

"No, not exactly. According to Ginny, he has connections and can get nearly anything real cheap."

"Wholesale?"

"Even cheaper than wholesale. He lets us have nylons for only two dollars a box. Real nice ones too. See?" She jerked her skirt up several inches and extended a leg. I didn't know about the hose, but the leg was fine. "In the stores, I'd have to pay nearly two dollars a pair!"

"Sounds like his stuff is hot."

She shrugged. "I suppose. I never asked."

"When you talk to Ginny, ask her about Richmond's racket. Maybe he works out of a store or an office and she can spot him for me. Does he hang around any one of the joints particularly?"

"He hits all of them, I guess, but I know he stops in the Frolics nearly every night. I think he tells people to call him there, in case they want anything; or maybe Frankie, the bartender, just takes orders for him."

"I'll talk to Frankie. This morning you mentioned running some errands for Richmond. What sort of errands?"

"Real crazy. Once he paid me fifty dollars to drive all the way to Gary, Indiana, and buy six tins of sardines for him! I could have gotten the same brand and everything on North State Street, for maybe thirty cents a can, but he made me go all the way to Gary." She laughed tightly. "I didn't give him an argument. I needed the fifty."

"What else?"

"Well, another time—this was a couple of weeks ago—he left a package at the Frolics with a note telling me to sit in the lobby of the Sherman Hotel with it until someone came up and asked me how my Aunt Maggie was. At first, I thought it was a gag, but there was a hundred-dollar bill pinned to the note, so I did like it said."

"What happened?"

"Oh, I sat around for a couple hours, and then a man came in and walked right up to me and said something like, 'Good evening, my dear, and how is Aunt Maggie?' He didn't crack a smile and I didn't either. I gave him the package and walked away."

"Was he anybody you knew?"

"I never saw him before or since."

"How big was the package?"

"About like this." Her hands described a two-foot square.

"Heavy?"

"Not very."

"Sounds screwy."

"I told you. Crazy."

"I believe you, honey. I just can't figure the set-up."

The jaunt into Indiana for sardines suggested dope-running, of course, but the rendezvous at the Sherman was certainly something else. A package of dope two feet square would contain too valuable a cargo to entrust to one messenger. Richmond evidently had his fingers in many pies.

I stuck to the Outer Drive as far as Diversey Parkway, then cut into Lincoln Park and continued south.

"What about Eddie Sands?" I asked. "What was his connection with Richmond?"

"How would I know?"

"Did Richmond do business at Sands' joint, the same as he did at the others?"

"I suppose so. The Silver Cloud isn't much different from any of the others, is it?"

I had to admit that it wasn't. At Bellevue and Rush, I slowed the Pontiac, saying: "Point of Ginny's building to me, Giselle. I'll drive on past, but I want to make sure which one it is."

"It's the one on the right. The red brick with the fence."

I nodded and studied the building as the car crept past. It was a three-story apartment which looked as though it had been remodeled recently. A wide concrete driveway hugged one side, leading to a full garage at the rear. Though it was nearly one in the p.m., four of the six front apartments had the shades drawn.

"Where is Ginny's apartment?" I asked.

"Third floor. Front."

"When you stopped here this morning, did you park in the driveway or street?"

"In the driveway, as I told you. I knew I wouldn't be there very long, so I thought it would be a right."

"Did Richmond tell you to park there?"

"Well... not exactly."

"Either he did or he didn't."

"He didn't tell me to, not this time, but once before, when I was doing an errand for him, he told me to keep his car off the street as much as possible."

"You weren't using the Caddy then, though, were you?"

"No. He had a Packard, then. This was the first time I'd used the Caddy."

I parked the Pontiac. "Okay, kid. See what you can dig out of Ginny. When you get through, go to your hotel and stay there until you hear from me. What room are you in?"

"Seven-twelve."

"Stick there, understand? I'm depending on you."

"I'll be there." She remained in the car, as though trying to make up her mind about something. "Mr... ah... Forbes," she began, coloring slightly, "I don't know how to say this, but—" She unsnapped her purse suddenly and fumbled with her wallet. "I want you to take this money. You'll be having expenses and.... well, please take it, will you?" She thrust Richmond's check and most of the bills at me.

"Nix, kid, I don't need it," I lied.

"Please! You said you were an investigator—and, after all, it's mostly because of me that you're in trouble. You can call it a retainer, if you like—but please take it."

"I don't need that much—"

"You may. You'll need cash—and I don't want the check. After seeing the blood and... and everything, I couldn't possibly spend the money. You'll be doing me a favor, actually."

"Okay." I plucked the lettuce from her fingers. "In that case, thanks. I'll give you a receipt later. Incidentally, most people call me Rusty." I rubbed the palm of my hand across the short, thick, reddish growth on my head. "The hair, you know."

"I'll remember, Rusty." She unlatched the door, then hesitated again. "I'm sorry about all this—about getting you into it, I mean. It'll come out all right, though. I know it will!"

"Sure," I said.

She slipped out of the car and smiled reassuringly at me. Then, squaring her shoulders, she walked

briskly down the street toward Ginny Evans' apartment. I sat there, trying to figure the score. Nothing seemed to add, though.

I got the Pontiac rolling.

FOUR. Of Rats and Men

THE FROLICS CLUB, on Ontario Street in the heart of the gin-and-din area, was as unpretentious as a piccolo in a military band. No ornate neon signs blazed across its two-story facade. No murals depicting intimate female anatomy marred its draped windows. No painted canopy marked its sedate gold-lettered entrance. Nor did a gilded doorman loiter on the sidewalk to give come-on spiels to suckers.

Just the same, the Frolics catered to a very special clientele, definitely not penny-ante stuff. Big-time horse-players, for instance, who required a quiet place to discuss the antics of the nags at Hawthorne. Well-heeled gamblers whose ears appreciated a respite from the nervous click of dice. Nice-smelling dolls who needed to rest their slender ankles and replenish their juices between calls. Musicians, actors, dancers, singers, con men and jeweled ladies—in short, guys and dolls of talent—all flocked to the Frolics as regularly as book-lovers to Kroch's.

When I entered, although it was still luncheon time by the clock, the long mahogany bar was sparsely populated. The bartender, a chunky man with the reddish sort of face which denotes high blood-pressure, finished polishing a glass to his artistic satisfaction and shuffled my way. The smile he gave me was as narrow as a mortician's.

"Yes, sir?" With one hand and a damp rag, he made a fine pretense of cleaning the mahogany in front of me.

"Scotch. Make it on the rocks."

"White Horse all right, sir?"

"Fine."

He eased two ice cubes into a shallow glass, poured a generous jigger of scotch, and, with the dedicated air of a priest anointing a baptismal candidate, transferred the liquor over and about the cubes. With a slight bow, he set the glass before me.

"Frankie off duty?" I asked casually.

"Yes, sir."

"When will he be on again?"

"Not until tonight, sir."

"Hell." I laid an engraved portrait of Hamilton on the bar. "Any idea where I can contact him?"

"No, sir." His eyes touched the bill and the tip of a tongue appeared, briefly moistening his thick lips. "Anything I can do?"

"Well... maybe." To tease him a little, I made him wait until I'd rinsed my teeth with the scotch. "I'm trying to get in touch with Arnold Richmond."

"Mr. Richmond?" His interest spiraled like the cost of living.

"Yeah. Know him?"

"Yes, sir." His eyes darted the length of the bar and came back. Hamilton disappeared beneath his fingers. "I'll see what I can do, sir."

He left me alone with my drink while he shuffled to the center of the bar, where an expanse of mirror was broken by the bloated body of a heavily chromed cash register. He pressed various buttons. The register chimed pleasantly and released a drawer. He pushed around in one of the drawers.

compartments until he found a slip of paper. From where I sat, the slip seemed to contain much information. He frowned at it for quite a while, then replaced it. On the back of a bar tab, he penciled a line, then closed the drawer and returned to me.

"Hope this will help you, sir." He slid the paper toward me.

"Thanks." The number had a Delaware exchange, which meant that the phone it rang would be somewhere in the near-north area. "Got a phone I can use?"

"There's a booth in back, sir."

I drained my drink and dropped a buck on the bar to pay for it. The phone was where he said it was. I squeezed into the booth, shut the door, and deposited a dime. I listened to the dial tone a while, then spun out the number. The phone at the other end rang six times.

"Yes?" a voice said tentatively. It was a quiet voice, almost sexless and only mildly interested.

"Richmond?" I asked.

"Speaking."

"My name is Forbes. When can I see you?"

"I don't know anyone named Forbes." The statement was as clipped as a two-bit haircut.

"A friend told me about you. I'm anxious to transact some business."

"What kind of business?"

"I'm interested in buying."

The wire hummed between us, long enough for him to file a couple of fingernails or to read his astrological forecast for the day. "Where are you now?"

"At the Frolics."

"I'll meet you there in a few minutes."

The line went dead before I could suggest any other arrangement. Feeling like a commuter who has missed his train, I went back to the bar. Another twosome had joined the congregation, and the bartender was rattling a shaker in four-four rhythm. I tried to signal him for a refill, but his eyes were devoted to the girl, who wore a sweater which bulged in a way which shouldn't happen to pure virgin wool. The fellow with her had the lip of a bugler and the hair of a bowling ball. I sighed.

I had just gotten my third scotch and was raising it to my lips when the door opened and a somber-faced gent in a blue serge suit hurried in. He was a tall, large-boned man, carrying considerable flesh on his frame. Besides being somber, his face featured pale eyes, a nose which jibbed a little, and a chin sharp enough to chop ice with. I figured his age as being in the early fifties; and judging by the sheen on the serge, he was a man of sedentary habits. He nodded to the bartender and came straight down to my end.

"Mr. Forbes?" It was the same soft voice I'd heard on the phone.

"Right," I said.

Without offering to shake hands, he jerked his head toward a rear table. I picked up my glass and followed him to it. He sat down with a grunt, dabbed at his forehead with a huge handkerchief, and stretched his legs. The pale eyes scanned me swiftly.

"You mentioned a friend," he began quietly. "Has he got a name?"

"I was talking to Eddie Sands," I said. I mentioned Sands confidently, knowing he was in no position to deny our friendship. "He said you might be able to do me some good."

His eyes crept toward me. "When were you talking with Eddie?"

"Couple days ago."

"Eddie's okay." It was a flat statement, the kind a man might make when discussing the merits of a cigar. I didn't argue about it, because, if being dead is okay, Sands was indeed that. "What kind of stu

are you interested in?"

"Anything that will move. What have you got?"

"I can get nearly anything. What's your set-up?"

"Another guy and I plan on doing the pushing," I offered, hoping I wasn't making a wrong play.

"Here in Chi?"

"Yeah."

He grunted, somewhat skeptically. "Anything I sell has to be cash."

"Sure."

"How about men's suits?" He sucked on his lower lip and narrowed his eyes, counting the hangers on a distant rack. "I can let you have a hundred immediately. Nice assortment. Mostly Kuppenheimer, Eagle and H.S. & M."

"How much?"

"Two bits a throw. You can double up, or better, on the deal."

"Hell, I'd need a store."

"Get one. That's the smart way to operate."

"What else have you got?"

"Watches. Bulova or Benrus, most of them gift-wrapped."

"How much?"

"Ten bucks a copy. That's special. I've got damned near a truckload of them."

"Sounds like a good item," I said. "What else?"

"Nylons. Lingerie. Neckties. Accessories like cuff-links and—"

"None of that small stuff," I interrupted. "We're interested in the big money."

"Guns?"

"Nix. Too dangerous."

"Office machines?"

I shook my head. "We might be able to move some typewriters, but I don't know... got any cameras?"

"We don't stock them. I can have them picked up, though, for a third of list." He brightened a little.

"How about photographic film and paper? If you can move it, you can make a hell of a score."

"How much is there?"

"A whole shipment." He wet his lips. "Worth about four-hundred grand."

I whistled. "Sounds interesting."

"Damned interesting," he agreed, "but kinda tough to handle. That's why you can get a real deal on it." His eyes flickered toward me. "Think you can handle it?"

"I'd have to have details."

"Well, here's the story: A couple guys hijacked an Eastman truck. They thought it was liquor, but it was this film and stuff. They've got it in a garage and don't know what to do with it. So far, nobody's been able to handle it. Too hot, you know. The shipment was interstate, which makes it a federal racket and everything's numbered and dated. I've been scratching my head over it for a month."

"How cheap could I get it?"

"The guys are plenty nervous. I think they'd settle for one percent."

"One percent?" I echoed. "Four grand?"

"Maybe less."

I pretended to consider. "Where will you get yours?" I asked.

"Off the top. The boys will cut me in," he licked his lips again. "Think you can handle it?"

"I'd have to see the stuff."

"Natch. I'll fix it."

He got up abruptly, moving with decision, and strode back to the phone booth. By moving my chair sidewise a few inches, I could see him through the glass door of the booth. He dialed a number, talked briefly with someone, nodding emphatically while he talked. He finished, deposited another dime, and dialed a second number. This time the party at the other end did most of the talking, while Richmond nodded his head gravely, like a banker listening to an application for a loan. He ended the conversation suddenly and pronged the receiver.

When he returned to the table, I was sucking water from the remaining ice cube in my glass. He sat down heavily. "It's all set," he informed me. "You can see the stuff right now." He eyed me expectantly, as though waiting for me to break into a Northwestern cheer.

"Okay," I said. "Where is it?"

"Not far. You've got a car, haven't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, let's go." He stood up. This was not the way I had planned it, but I had no alternative. I got up, followed him out of the joint, and pointed to where the Pontiac was parked. When we were in the car, he began doling out directions. We went north to Diversey, west to Halsted, north to Belmont, west again for a couple blocks, then a block south.

"Here," Richmond said abruptly, motioning me to park.

I braked the car and swerved it to the curb. We were in front of an old frame residence, all the shades of which were drawn. Richmond got out of the car and started down a gravel driveway, toward a large ramshackle building in the rear. I looked up and down the deserted street, then hurried after him. He reached the building, glanced around to see if I was with him, then rapped loudly upon a small side door.

A male voice inside asked: "Yeah?"

"It's me," Richmond growled. "Let us in."

A bolt rasped back and the door opened several inches. Richmond shouldered it impatiently and swung back, banging heavily against an inner wall. "Come on," he said, holding the door open for me. "Get in quick."

I stepped past him—and immediately realized my mistake. His hand rammed against my shoulder, hurling me into a sprawling fall, like a kid belly-flopping off a low pier into shallow water. I made a five-point landing on rough concrete, rolled over once, and got groggily to my feet, trying to push the skin back onto my nose.

Richmond stood with his back against the closed door.

"You sonuvabitching shamus!" he gritted harshly.

I backed away from him, trying to orientate myself. The building, in spite of its ramshackle outward appearance, was solidly constructed. It looked as if it had been a barn at one time, for its walls and ceiling were sturdily beamed and the far end of it was still divided into what might have been stalls. Lately, it had been used as a machine shop. Along one wall, a machinist's workbench stretched, the wall above it bearing a display of assorted bench tools.

I saw that much—and then my eyes found the owner of the other voice. He was big, muscular, built high and solid as a concrete John. His greasy coveralls stretched taut over thick arms and wide shoulders, making him look like a khaki-skinned giant who'd been wallowing in oil. He grinned at me and made a noise in his throat.

"Get the bastard, Sam," Richmond urged. "Kick some of the crap out of him!"

"You're making a mistake," I said, moving back warily so I could keep both of them within my range of vision.

"Like hell!" Richmond snorted. "Go after him, Sam. By God, if you don't, I will!" He began peeling off the blue serge coat.

Sam made another noise in his throat and approached, swinging his arms, waiting for me to make a break.

Frankly, I'm no hero. But the army forced me to learn some of the tricks of close combat and if I'm pushed I'll fight as dirty as the next guy.

"I kill you!" Sam muttered, proving that he could talk too.

"What are you waiting for?" I jeered. "For me to get dizzy and fall down?"

He lunged, punishing the air with a huge fist. I bent my knees and came up inside his swing. While he was still off-balance, I planted a left and a right below his belt, where I thought they'd do him the least good. They were solid punches, so solid that my elbows seemed to rattle, but it was like tickling a sandbag. He grinned, blew spit at me, and getting an arm about me, he pulled me toward his chest and socked a knee into his groin and smashed the side of a hand under his nose. He yelped like a dog whose paw has been stepped on—and loosened his grip slightly. I gave him the other knee and stabbed my spread fingers at his eyes. He yelped again and backed up, giving me a chance to slip under his arm and away.

Richmond bellowed, "You had the bastard! You let him get away!"

Sam stopped rubbing his vitals and narrowed his eyes with new respect. "Me get!" he promised.

I was short of breath and my heart was pumping like an old one-cylinder gasoline engine, but I had to make a noise like a man and keep anger clouding his one-way brain. "You muscle-bound ape!" I taunted.

With a bellow, he rushed at me, thick arms punching away like pistons. His left grazed my ear and nearly removed it. As his right shot toward my face, I caught his wrist with both hands and jerked with all my remaining strength. Realizing I'd tricked him into loss of control, he gurgled a hoarse scream and kicked his legs wildly. The momentum of his lunge carried him over my shoulder and smash head-first into the concrete floor. He twitched once and lay still.

Sensing danger behind me, I spun around.

Richmond, with a smile stiffer than a wrought-iron fence on his somber face, was closing in with his knife. The weapon had a long, slender, keen-looking blade, and he held it low in the loose, balanced way of an experienced slasher. His pale eyes, excited by the anticipated kill, had the translucent quality of seedless grapes, yet seemed more shiny, as if oiled by hate.

I leaped sidewise, forcing myself to ignore the knife and to keep my eyes on his. As though we were treading pie crust, we circled cautiously, each trying to guess the other's next move. I started to give ground, hoping to maneuver my way across to the workbench and snatch a wrench or hammer before he closed in. He guessed my intent, and, without changing the tempo of the dance, began forcing me toward the other wall.

"Is this the way you got Eddie Sands?" I said. Richmond was a fellow devoted to his work and allergic to conversation. Without varying the tightness of his smile, he crept closer, holding the blade close against his side. I caught a faint flicker in his eyes a split instant before the blade snaked toward me. I leaped into the air, rolled back, and kicked both legs into his belly.

He bent double, groaning like a man who has lost a dear friend. The knife rattled on the concrete and came down hard on my shoulders, rolled over, and crawled frantically toward the knife.

I never reached it. I had forgotten Sam, but Sam had not forgotten me. A beam from the ceiling

fell across the back of my neck.

FIVE. The Passion Play

A CLOCK was ticking. Each tick sent a long tentacle of feeling thrusting through my protesting body. I moaned softly. The tentacles reached my arms, then my legs. Something told me that I was prone and that I didn't want to remain that way. With considerable effort, I clicked at the mental switches which should have changed my position to supine. Nothing moved except a few sharp pains which blazed through my legs toward the emptiness where my stomach usually was. I moaned again, not quite so softly.

"He's coming to," a voice said.

Stupidly, I listened to the voice, trying to understand what it said. The clock kept ticking, louder and more monotonously, and the tentacles kept reaching. Gradually, like scenes from a defective projector, things began flashing through the tired darkness of my mind: Sam. Richmond. Garage. Knife. Fight. Dead. That last was a definite thought which ballooned into a question: dead? It repeated itself several times, then triggered a rapid deductive process: Heaven? No. If so, not as advertised. Hurt too much. Probably Hell. No dancing flames, though. No naked devils. If not Hell, then—?

"So what?" another voice asked. "He isn't going anywhere."

This voice was familiar. The projector started flashing again and gradually steadied on an image of Richmond. The image became clearer. Arnold J. Richmond. Then: trapped. That did it. Consciousness swept back and I knew, once again, the what, where and why of things.

I was lying on a sofa, bound and gagged, with my head only inches away from an ornate, gold-trimmed clock. I was not in the garage. I was in someone's apartment. Richmond was in the room talking to someone. I forced my head to turn toward the voices. Richmond came into focus. He was sitting stiffly in a Morris chair, gnawing at his lip and glaring disgustedly at me.

"What I've suggested is the only sensible course of action," the first voice said smoothly. "Killing him will remove him from action—that's true. However, it will leave us with another body, another murder—and considerably more heat upon us. Doing as I suggest will solve all our problems, nearly all of them, and will make it possible for us to continue operating."

With difficulty, I strained my neck around until the other side of the room came within my range of vision. He was a short, chunky guy with graying, curly hair, a square face freshly shaven and nicely talcumed, dark eyes, and the prettiest brown plaid suit I'd ever seen outside of a tailor's window. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but I didn't recognize him until he paced slowly in front of me, folded his hands behind him, and gave me the considering stare of a man who's studying a fly on the end of a pin.

Then his name popped into my mind: Leo Gold! I didn't groan, but I felt like it. Gold was king of the local shysters, a great guy with the bright boys and smart girls, the kind of lawyer who rarely had to soil his manicured nails by touching briefs or law books.

"I don't like it," Richmond said flatly.

"Of course not," Gold agreed in dulcet tones. "I don't either. It's simply a matter of choosing the lesser of two evils. Fortunately, you had sense enough to consult me before you did anything irrevocable." He lifted his eyebrows delicately and looked at Richmond. "I'm a businessman, Arnold. I'm interested in making money—and I assume that you are, too. The less violence we have, the better for both of us."

"But for chrissake, Leo, the guy's wise to us!" Richmond snapped. "The only way to stop him from

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