

## CHAPTER ONE

Nothing tops off a hard day like a quick trip to the morgue. Even a few minutes, which is generally all it takes to compare a photo and ask, for instance, was it that slash across his neck that killed him, can be the perfect corker to an afternoon spent chasing dead ends and asking futile questions—all the more galling because the big break came as an out of the blue phone call from a junior coroner I slipped five bucks to keep his eyes open. Having left my office early, I was heading back out of the Hall of Justice just a few minutes shy of five o'clock. The desk sergeant, a lanky fellow I didn't know but had seen once or twice, mopped his brow and gave me a sarcastic leer. "That your nigger?"

I busied myself with a cigarette, so I was spared the necessity of a response. I offered up a noncommittal salute instead, using the hand shielding my match. I pushed the door open with my hip, then stumbled out onto the sidewalk and drew a hearty sample of summer air to flush the smell of chemicals and death from my nostrils.

Portsmouth Square usually has plenty of cabs available at that time of day, but I felt like walking and did so, heading south on Grant then west up California. Tossing the butt of my second cigarette into the gutter near Powell Street, I joined the tourists aboard a streetcar and headed back toward my office. That had not been the plan when I'd set out for the morgue. No matter what I'd found, I'd figured a mother could use one last hopeful night. But that was before I saw the kid lying there. His skin had been black and yet somehow, also

gray. His face, so vibrant and alive in the photograph, looked dull and worn, but mostly just young.

Besides, I had other calls to make. For instance, Andy Smoke, to whom I'd farmed out some of the leg work over in Oakland and from whom I'd not heard in a day or two. I do have a telephone at my apartment, but I'm not so keen on taking work home with me.

For my professional services, I rent two rooms on the third floor of the Rooker Building. Actually, it's more like one and a half rooms, since the one connected to the hall is little more than a foyer with aspirations. It has a receptionist's desk as well as two chairs people might conceivably wait on, but I have not yet, nearly a year after signing the lease, gotten around to hiring a receptionist. Nor has business exactly gotten to the point that lines are forming at my door.

I situated myself behind my desk and dialed Smoke's number just as the clock on the wall proclaimed the hour six o'clock. A service answered his phone, and I left another message for Andy to call me, offering up both work and home numbers to facilitate the process. Sometimes, you have to make allowances. I then sat staring at the phone another five minutes wrestling with my old friend should-I-or-shouldn't-I?

She deserved to know. She'd paid me a ten dollar retainer and sat right there in that chair opposite my desk and made me promise to find her baby and bring him home. She'd wept but not hysterically—just enough to make her employer, a white lady who had accompanied her, I supposed, for moral support, uncomfortable. Personally, tears from a prospective client are pretty par for the course in my line of work, but Moral Support fluttered and fidgeted, waving a handkerchief she never bothered to offer over, and said things like, "Now, Ruthie, you need to buck up," and "Ruthie, crying won't help a bit!"

She'd been an interesting bird, Moral Support, introducing herself as Miss Dix and looking well over forty but dressed like a woman half her age and size. Her platinum hair, powdered skin, Kewpie-doll lips, and painted eyelids offered quite a study in contrasts alongside the small, plain huddled figure of her maid,

Ruth Paige. Her only other contribution to the process, besides the platitudes, was when I asked Mrs. Paige if she wouldn't rather hire a Negro PI. Her son's friends and neighbors would more likely be forthcoming, I said.

Miss Dix had sat forward in her chair, adjusting the strip of fur that kept trying to slide off her round shoulders. "Well, of course she would. But how would it look, me going into the office of a colored man?"

Of course, you might assume, as did I at the time, that when the discussion turned to remuneration, Miss Dix might interject again. After all, she had to be there for some reason. But she stayed silent, lifting her nose slightly as if money talk offended her, which was when I settled on the Moral Support notion. And, figuring Ruth Paige had already been fleeced on that front, she deserved some special consideration from me. I asked for only ten bucks to get the ball rolling.

That was Tuesday. Three days later, sitting there trying to think up some excuse not to make that call, I probably owed Andy Smoke three times the retainer Mrs. Paige had paid me. So, not only would I be bearing bad news, but I'd have to compound the injury by inquiring where I might send the final bill. Which at least cinched it in my mind. That could wait. I got up, retrieved my hat, and locked up the office again.

Out on the street, I decided I ought to fill the tank thinking vaguely of Jack's on the corner and a Denver Omelet with home fries, but just after turning the corner onto Bush, heading west, an old Model B sedan pulled alongside me, slowing to match my pace, and a window lowered allowing a man riding shotgun to ask if I was Declan Colette.

I tossed him a glance without really devoting too much pivot of my neck, just enough so he might catch a glimpse of my frown, and kept walking. Not that I generally object to men calling to me from cars—but that Ford was Lincoln green and in need of a thorough wash.

The car sped up enough to allow it to turn into the alley a half block farther along. It stopped, blocking my way. This time the man

riding shotgun opened his whole door and climbed out, waiting with a foot on the running board, one long arm propped on the roof of the car and the other atop the door frame. He was tall and spindly, with a long pointed chin and nose to match. His suit, likewise, matched his car. Both had certainly been all the rage back in 1929.

“You’ll want to look into your manners,” he told me.

I proceeded right up to him, stopping with about a yard of sidewalk between us, smiling to show it wasn’t personal. “Mrs. Post might assert that one should offer his own name before demanding another’s.”

He scrunched his face up like I was speaking Chinese and before he could reply, the rear door opened and another fellow climbed out. This one was shorter of stature, but apparently quite equal in taste. Or lack thereof. He clearly patronized the same haberdasher. Stepping aside, he gestured toward the open door. “Get in.”

A third fellow was seated in the backseat on the far side, which put the occupancy, including the driver, at four already. Not that my hesitation stemmed from any notion of overloading that old workhorse. But I was definitely hesitant.

I hefted my shoulders then let them drop. “I prefer to walk.”

The shorter man reached out to take hold of my shoulder, hoping, I gathered, to offer some witty remark such as, “Cut the comedy.” He succeeded at neither task. I slammed my right fist into his chin, shutting his mouth and sending him stumbling toward the street. He sat down on the pavement just before reaching the gutter. Tall Skinny then decided to join, but before he even got his shoe off the running board, I swung my elbow back into the side of his neck. He crumpled, and I used both hands to shove him into the front seat. I slammed the door, bearing down on it with my full weight when his shins kept it from closing properly. He cried out, but not loud enough to mask the sharp click which drew my attention to the backseat. The guy still seated there had produced an old Fitz Special, cocked and pointed in my direction.

“Play nice.”

I stopped trying to close the front door and stepped back. The door swung wide, and Tall Skinny slid out, cussing and groaning

about his legs. The other guy, let's call him Shorty, got up and moved toward me. Both were scowling, but all my attention was taken up by the man with the gun.

"You want me to think you'll use that?"

He shook his head, not in answer to my query, but in judgment of it. "Like I'm worried some spook might get my license number. Get in!"

I did so. Shorty followed me. That made the backseat snug if not exactly cozy. Tall Skinny crawled back into the front, all the doors were closed properly and we proceeded down the alley to Sutter.

The man with the Fitz Special slipped it over so that the barrel was tickling me just below the ribs. "What sort of armament you packing?"

"Five minutes ago, I would have said my cheerful demeanor. Now, I'm afraid all I have left is my unrivaled wit."

He brought his other hand across to pat my chest, both sides, doubtless expecting a shoulder holster and accessories. But my own Colt—and the two Lugers—were all locked up safely at the office. He slipped his fingers into my jacket pockets and apparently decided that was enough for now. He sat back, the barrel of his gun still aimed at my kidney.

"How about you spare us your wit and we enjoy the scenery?"

I made a face, just so he'd know I'd taken his recommendation into account. "I don't suppose it would get me anything to ask where we're headed." We'd made a right, reached Scott and turned left, then west on Geary, possibly going to the beach to enjoy the sunset.

Fitz Special sighed, offering me another disparaging shake of his head.

I sat quiet and so did they, for a mile or so. Rush hour traffic necessitated repeated starts, stops, and other variations of momentum. A speeding roadster cut us off as we were heading south on Masonic, eliciting a grumbled stream of invective from the driver, which in turn loosened other tongues.

"That bum did a number on my shins." That was from Tall Skinny up front, the one I'd slammed the door on. He had his pant leg up, inspecting his shanks. "I'm bleeding."

Shorty, on my right, snickered, which struck me as crass considering I'd actually managed to knock him down. Fitz Special, on my left, snarled at Tall Skinny, "Quit your bellyaching."

The driver, who was the only one whose face I had yet to see, put in, "It's pretty bad, Halley. There's blood on the carpet."

Tall Skinny appealed to him. "It is bad, ain't it?"

Fitz Special, or Halley, according to the driver, wasn't buying. "Maybe next time you'll be more careful." That brought another snicker from Shorty, and Halley told him, "And you, Ned."

I leaned toward Ned, tsking with ample derision. "Ned."

He was a young guy, probably the only one in the car younger than me, which made his suit that much more ridiculous. His face was full and round, with a pug nose, the mouth of a malevolent cherub, and no real chin to speak of. But he was excitable, like all kids. His face, pale except for where my knuckles had landed, went full red when I sneered his name like that. He jerked his left elbow hard into my right shoulder.

"You want to try again, old man?" Like I said, an excitable kid. I'm only thirty-one for Christ's sake.

"Can it, Ned," Halley told him.

I smiled. "Yeah, Ned, another kiss like that one I gave you, and your chin won't be nothing but a bump on the back of your head."

"And you," Halley told me.

But the fact is, their being so free with names had me worried. They either expected me to be so overjoyed with where they brought me to forgive them any rudeness in their invitation, or they knew it was going to be a one way trip. For me. And it made no sense. I hadn't found anything tying the dead kid to organized crime, and the only other open case I had even a remote connection to was a tail job for a midtown architectural firm, one of whose executives might have been selling design ideas to competitors. And that had been nothing but two days of subcontracting work for Walter Cobb's agency. These guys didn't look like architects.

Ned was hunkered down, boiling but keeping the lid on, and I was considering some more remarks that might trigger another

explosion, when Tall Skinny said from up front, “You got a handkerchief, Jeb?”

Jeb, the driver, didn’t look over. “Hell, yes, I got a handkerchief. And you ain’t about to bleed on it.”

Halley cursed. “It ain’t stopped bleeding yet?”

“No!” Tall Skinny was clearly a fretter; it didn’t strike me as very likely I’d broken any bones. “It’s cut deep, Halley. I ought to see the doc.”

Halley cursed some more. “Just keep pressing on it. We’ll be there in a minute, and then Jeb can take you wherever you want.”

“I dunno,” I told them. “That door might have had some rust on it. That gets into the wound and the next thing you know—”

And then so much for my targeting the excitable kid. It was Tall Skinny, forty-five if he was a day, who came over the back of the front seat to get at me. I didn’t try to stop him, just raised my arms to protect my face, letting him wail away at my forearms until Halley and Ned sat forward to shove him back.

My right hand went for the Fitz, snagging the barrel and twisting it with a sharp jerk that would have snapped Halley’s finger if he’d tried too hard to keep it. Meanwhile, I got my left hand on his lower back and propelled him even farther forward as well as up, allowing me to slip beneath and behind him toward the door. It happened fast, and worked well, but if I sound like I’m making myself seem slick, just consider who I was working against.

Before Halley really knew what happened, I had him in my lap, with the Fitz Special lodged up tight under his chin. His left arm was trapped in a half-Nelson, and his right was tangled with mine wielding the gun. I wedged myself securely into the corner, using him as a shield against the other guys, craning my neck to see up over his shoulder.

Tall Skinny had retreated to the front seat, but perched backward, gaping at me. Ned, bless his young heart, had produced and loaded a switchblade, looking for all the world convinced he could bat aside any annoying bullets with its shiny blade. Halley squirmed like he was trying to get comfortable with the new seating arrangements.

“What the hell?” he said.

I pushed the tip of the barrel a bit further into his fleshy neck. “Tell Jeb to pull over.”

“Balls.”

“Do it, or there won’t just be blood on the carpet, there’ll be brains on the ceiling. If you got brains. Tell him.”

During that exchange, Tall Skinny had reconnoitered enough wit to pull a second Fitz Special out of the glove box. He aimed it at us, but Halley told him, “Put that away.” And then he growled at Ned, “And you.” They were skeptical, but eventually complied. Halley told Jeb, “Pull over.”

We were cruising alongside the park, north of it, and Jeb pulled to the curb. That provided me with the opportunity for another task. “Not here. Turn at the corner.” That happened to be a small shady avenue, which suited me fine. Once we were stopped again, we all took a moment to reflect on the situation.

Finally, Halley said, “Now what?”

I had been wondering that myself. “Now, you open the door.”

“How? You got my arm tied up.”

“Try it.”

It wasn’t a strain at all. He not only reached the handle, but managed to push the door open wide. I twisted my neck for a quick look out, didn’t see a soul, then jerked my head at Tall Skinny. “You there, Bloody Shanks, toss—by the way, what is your name?”

He didn’t reply, just continued to gape, and, I suppose, bleed. Halley told me, “That’s Daws.”

“Well, now that we’re all acquainted. Toss that piece out the window onto the lawn, Daws.”

“What?”

“Just do it!” Halley was losing patience. Maybe my lap is not so comfortable. Having never sat in it, I can’t say. Having had it sat upon, more than once, I will state that I have yet to log any complaints.

Daws lowered his window and tossed his gun out onto the front lawn of a quaint little bungalow that looked like it housed someone’s grandmother. I asked Jeb if he was packing and he told



me in no uncertain terms that he was the driver. I nodded to show I admired his professionalism. Turning to Ned, I offered a smile and explained he could hang on to his pig-sticker, and best of luck. Then I instructed Halley that we were climbing out.

That was slightly more tricky than opening the door, but we were both grown men, professionals, with a job to do and did it. I kicked the door shut and told Halley to tell Jeb to drive on.

“And, what, I’m supposed to walk?”

“Walk, take a cab, skip. Stop making me repeat myself and tell him to drive on.”

“Just go,” he told Jeb.

The Ford rolled slowly back out into the street as Halley and I made our way toward the sidewalk. I gave him a shove once we were up on the curb and ordered him to stay there while I retrieved the other gun. That went into my left hip pocket, at which point I also pocketed its twin, though I kept my hand on it.

I rejoined Halley on the sidewalk, two yards separating us. Having him upright, in daylight, I found that he wasn’t much taller than Ned—which no doubt had factored into the ease of my car trick. He was older even than Daws—nee Bloody Shanks—in need of a shave, but dapper, if old school, like the rest of them. His nose was huge, however, and drew your focus whenever you tried to look him in the face.

I said, “So where were we headed?”

His eyes widened. “Now you want to talk?”

“I’m interested, but not desperate. I objected on principle, but maybe if you asked me nicely and explained the purpose of the trip.” I dug a pack of Camels from my breast pocket. “You smoke? I figure we have a minute while Jeb goes around the block.”

I nudged the butts of a few cigarettes out of the box and offered them across to him. He took one and I lifted another to my lips. Doing all that with my left hand required some extra attention to look smooth. As I put the pack back in my pocket, I decided to ask him if he had a light. He produced a pack of matches, struck one, and fired up both of us.

“So?” I exhaled a calming cloud of smoke.

He had been studying me nonstop, his sharp eyes glaring around the slopes of that huge honk. His expression told me he wasn't delighted by the view, and he hoped some day to repay me, with interest, for the indignity of taking his gun and making him sit on my lap.

"Balls," he said again.

"S'at a place?"

He grumbled some more and looked down at the sidewalk. He enjoyed a healthy draw on his cigarette, producing a good half inch of ash, before telling me, "A man was interested to see you."

"Ah. A man. Maybe if I gave you my card this man would like to call for an appointment. I have office hours. And a service if he calls late."

"You know that ain't the way."

I nodded. "Your way wasn't the way either."

He got indignant. "My way was fine! Until you had to get slick. No one was gonna get hurt. Damn Daws and his bleeding shanks." He lifted his cigarette, trying, it looked like, to hide a smile. "You know you got him a new handle. Bleeding Shanks."

"Bloody Shanks," I said. "Sounds more menacing." I took a drag myself, not to hide a smile. "He needs all the help he can get."

"Ain't that the truth."

"So, this man..."

He zeroed in on me with his eyes again. Besides being quick and sharp, they struck me as beady and dishonest—but I admit the beadiness could just have been an optical illusion caused by their proximity to his nose. And the dishonesty may simply have been prejudice at the fact that he'd poked a gun in my side. "Why not come and see? My word of honor, no one gets hurt."

"Too late for your word of honor, my friend. For many reasons. One, Bloody Shanks is already hurt. And two, you tried to kidnap me."

"Kidnap. That's a word."

"Yes it is. As are hijack, Shanghai and *abscond with*. Okay, that last might be two words."

"You like to talk."

“It’s my voice—clear, calm, and manly. Though, right now, I’d prefer you talk. A name. It doesn’t even have to be *the* name. Any name so I can make a decision.”

He tilted his head back, rendering his beak even more prominent as he squinted at me. “You ever hear of Max Harrold?”

I gave him back his look, curious. “Sure. Some. What would a man like Max Harrold want with calm and manly me?”

“I should know?”

“I’m a respectable citizen. Upright.”

“And he’s—what?” He paused. Smartly, not long enough to allow me to answer. “He’s a businessman, that’s what.”

I drew a deep breath, filling my lungs to the brim, all through the nose, while I looked the situation over. Exhaling, I told him, “I like you, Halley. I’m tempted to give you back your antique firearm. I’m nearly tempted to accept your word of honor if it wasn’t for those many pesky reasons I mentioned.”

He didn’t appear overly appreciative of my affection. “So you’ll come?”

“I will.”

That nearly pushed him over the edge but not with elation. He cussed and spat an ugly wad of something gooey onto the sidewalk. “Waste of time. We’d be there already if you’d just sat still.”

I could only smirk. “Don’t try to talk me out of it. We’d be there already if you’d invited me properly.” Of course, that wasn’t logical. Almost certainly if they’d pulled over and offered me a ride to see Max Harrold back at the beginning, I would have been far too busy to accept. But Halley didn’t belabor the point.

He enjoyed a bit more of his cigarette, probably trying to think of ways to make up for lost time, and then told me, “You only gave me two.”

I admit I did not follow. “Two what?”

“Two reasons. For not accepting my word of honor. You said *many reasons*.”

I finished my cig and flicked it into the gutter. “Ned. What are you doing with a babe like that in the car?”

He laughed. “He’s somebody’s sister’s kid. But he’s—” He shrugged, turning philosophical. “Sometimes I suspect he’s more trouble than he’s worth.”

I wondered then why they kept him around, but figured it was none of my business. Looking both ways up and down the street, I said, “How many blocks do you think they went around?”

He joined me in surveying the roadway. “Maybe Jeb took Daws to the doc.”

“They’d do that?”

“The day I’ve had? Why the hell not?”

## CHAPTER TWO

Of course, we'd no sooner agreed to walk back down to Fulton than the Model B slowed to cruise alongside us. The occupants were staring, dumbstruck, as if the sight of both of us still erect and ambling was not to be believed. Though, whose body they expected to discover, I can't say.

I let Halley explain how things stood. My only stipulation was that Ned move to the front with Daws and Jeb. The kid actually thought he'd object, but between my dour countenance and Halley's bark, he soon did as he was told. They looked snug, judging by their shoulders, but as I was allowed to ride in comfort, I didn't let it trouble me. I kept right up against the door, half turned, allowing a survey of the car's interior without too much turning of my head or even my eyes. The three up front, once we were underway, never moved at all. Bloody Shanks didn't even whine about his legs. Halley likewise tried to ignore me, pulling out his own pack of cigarettes before long, lighting up, and puffing away without so much as offering me one.

We took Fulton to the coast, then headed south down nearly to the lake before another left turn brought us into what looked like a warehouse district. Typical. The sun was setting, but we didn't stop to enjoy it. Jeb made a series of sharp turns, navigating between buildings which all looked remarkably abandoned. Finally we stopped and Halley announced, "We're here."

He was awaiting instructions, it seemed, so I said, "Well?"

That appeared to remind him of who was escorting whom. He cursed again, but didn't spit because, clearly, the car had suffered enough. "You and me will go in. Jeb take Daws to Arnie and get him cleaned up. Be back before—"

"How come I have to go?" That was Ned.

"What have I told you about talking back? Have the car back within the hour." Halley turned to me. "Get out?"

That question mark is iffy. I supposed it might have been a pleasant suggestion. It struck me as likely he wasn't used to making pleasant suggestions and therefore his tone came out wrong. Either way, I climbed out my side and he, his. He struck the roof of the car with a fist telling them to move and they did. With the Ford no longer between us, we stood separated by, perhaps, eight feet of gravel. Halley was studying me again, chewing on his lip.

"You mentioned something about returning my gun."

I nodded. "You're worried about how it might look."

"I know how it will look. I'm worried about keeping my job."

That nearly made me chuckle, but I restricted myself to a sympathetic smile. I pulled one of the Fitz Specials from my right pocket and offered it to him.

He was dubious. He eyed the gun, then my face, then the gun again, before stepping over to claim it.

"I emptied it," I told him, shaking my jacket pocket so that the bullets in it jingled. And then I got to relish an extraordinary third task of the day. "A Fitz."

He actually examined it to see if I was lying. "I don't doubt you could tie me into a knot and ship me through the mail," he said. "But I'd certainly enjoy introducing your face to my fist one time."

"Maybe later."

"Maybe." He dropped the gun into his own pocket, walked up to the door behind me and knocked. As near as I could tell, it was a straight knock—no secret code. A few moments later, we heard the lock turn and then the door was pulled open. "Come on."

I followed him into a dimly lit office about twice the size of mine with maybe half as much furniture. In addition to the fellow who'd opened the door, the only other occupant was seated on an

old wooden chair against the far wall, beside another door. He was smoking, and didn't get up to greet us. Both of these new guys were about what you'd expect in that situation, medium height but large girth. Guards. Neither was particularly young or old or handsome or ugly, nor did they appear to be either too smart or stupid.

As we approached the far door, the seated one said, "Took you long enough." As Halley ignored him, so did I.

The second door let us into a second office, slightly more well-appointed than the first, slightly better lit, and slightly more occupied. A pair of guys sat on old wooden chairs, a third perched at a small writing table, scribbling something, and a man sat behind the large desk, reading a magazine.

This last guy, perhaps fifty, with graying hair and sagging skin, looked over at us and nearly quoted the guy in the first room. "What took you so long?"

Halley had stopped just about a yard into the room. I stood, respectfully, a half step back of him and to the side. He said, "He had objections."

"Can you blame him?"

"Daws's leg got cut up pretty bad. Jeb took him to see the doc."

"You searched him?"

"Clean as a whistle. Not even a Swiss Army knife. Well, at first. Now he's got Daws's piece in his pocket."

The man at the desk, who I was guessing probably would turn out to be Max Harrold, had gone back to perusing his magazine. Halley's statement brought his gaze up again. He flicked his head at one of the guards who rose, came over, and let me know he wanted my arms out to the sides without actually having to get physical or even vocalize any command. He claimed the second Fitz.

Probably-Max-Harrold wanted to know, "How'd that happen?"

"He had objections. I told you. Daws got the worst of it. But I handled it." He wisely decided against providing details of exactly how he'd handled it. He scratched his chin, considering. "He thinks he's slick, though. And tough. I say he might just be lucky."

"We'll find out soon enough. Lon's waiting." He turned his attention back to his magazine. "Nico, you better go with them."

That apparently ended the audience. They led me back through the first room and outside again. Along the way, Halley told the guard at the front door to alert Lon. That guy took off as Halley, the bodyguard called Nico, and I made our way around the side of the building to where stairs led down into the earth and yet another door.

As we were descending—Halley first, then me, then the guard—I took the opportunity to remark, “So much for your word of honor.”

“You said you wouldn’t accept it anyway,” he growled.

The basement room was empty and dark, and only slightly less so once we’d entered and Halley had switched on the light. It was nearly as big as the two upstairs chambers combined, with one other door leading off somewhere else. Pretty much the only furniture was a long wooden table against the far wall, with chairs at either end. Some sort of accoutrements were splayed across the top of the table, but the lighting was too poor to identify them properly. A third chair was positioned in what I estimated to be the center of the room, under the single bulb hanging from the ceiling. It had all the trappings of an ideal spot to work someone over, and I obligingly removed my jacket.

I offered the garment to Halley, but he snubbed his nose at me, pulled the chair out of the middle of the room, and repositioned it against the wall. I then tried the guard, Nico, but he flat out ignored me. Maybe he figured his hands were full with the Fitz Special he’d already taken from me. I neglected to mention it earlier, but all the guards wore shoulder holsters and carried real guns of their own.

I finally just hung my jacket on my arm and sauntered over to examine the table. I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary: a couple of blackjacks, some brass knuckles, and a few things that resembled knives, but only in so much as they were sharp and pointy. “You better clear that stuff out,” Halley told Nico. “No telling what this clown might try.”

The guard came over and started gathering up the tools, carting them out through the other door in two trips. Between that and



Halley pulling the chair aside, I had to wonder what exactly we were preparing for.

Lon's arrival answered my questions. He was not tall, but otherwise he was big, with the sort of mug that could clearly take a pounding—as it clearly had, several times over the years. He had on trousers but no shirt or jacket, just an undershirt that clung tightly to his barrel chest. His blond hair, flecked with gray, was cut in a flat top. A Naval insignia adorned his left arm, some birds, and an anchor, and the name of a ship.

He wasn't alone. The guard who had been sent to retrieve him followed close behind, as well as the guy I thought was most likely Max Harrold and the second guard from the inner sanctum. The help, including Lon, stayed near the door, but Harrold—at that point I decided that's who he was—strode over next to Halley.

I said, "So, is it just me and Lon?"

Harrold, making something of a production out of settling himself in the chair, told the rest of them to clear out.

Some had objections. Halley in particular offered some pointed remarks, but Harrold wasn't interested. He had dusted the seat of the chair before lowering himself into it, unbuttoned his jacket, and then carefully straightened his shoulders after perching. He crossed his legs at the knees, taking care to realign the creases in his trousers. He bobbed his right foot in the air a foot from the floor, sporting a loafer on it that had probably set him back an amount equal to my monthly earnings. He cast a sidelong glance at Nico, the bodyguard. "You stay. Everybody else, out."

No one bothered with further discussion. They filed out through the door to the stairs and Nico closed it and leaned his back against it. Max Harrold folded his hands together and settled them atop his knee. He turned his gaze up toward Lon as if only then noting his presence. He nodded, and Lon started forward, neither quickly nor menacingly, but merely as if he had business on my side of the room and thought he may as well get to it.

I didn't run. In fact, my contrary nature had me grinning as I deliberately went about folding my jacket and laying it at the end of the table behind me. I had on a nice yellow shirt with blue pinstripes,

which would have been a shame to bleed all over, especially if I happened to be the one doing the bleeding, so I set about loosening my tie. Obliging, like a true professional, Lon stopped at about the center of the room to allow me time to prepare. I folded my shirt and tie and lay them atop my jacket.

My undershirt—a T—didn't fit me quite as snugly as Lon's fit him, and as I stepped forward, I flapped my arms and rolled my shoulders much as I might before attacking a heavy bag at the gym. Lon watched me, but again, not like he was particularly impressed or even interested, but like I was a task that needed doing.

I kept looking him in the eye intently, trying to keep his attention. He stared back with the sort of dull gaze that said his thoughts were elsewhere, probably on what he might enjoy when next he sat down to eat or maybe on that routine he'd thought was so hilarious when he'd caught the recent Three Stooges short.

His ruse worked far better than mine. With about a yard and half of floor still between us, I charged in with a hook aimed at his belly. He pivoted, allowing my knuckles to glance harmlessly off the peak of his mound while his left arm swung up under my armpit, trapping my right arm and nearly dislocating my shoulder. Simultaneously, he landed his right fist squarely over my left eye.

On one hand, I can honestly claim I didn't feel it, but I did wonder how it was that a moment later, he had hold of my T-shirt and was hauling me up off the floor. Still dazed when I felt the floor back under my feet where it should be, I was thankful to him for not letting go of my T-shirt as balancing wasn't something I was quite up to. He didn't help any by landing a left jab atop my right cheek. That just made me look off over my shoulder like I was trying to find a new place to fall.

He jabbed again, and that's probably what saved me. As previously mentioned, my nature is somewhat contrary, and that second jab had just made me mad. I managed to duck under his third, and, since he had hold of me to keep me from getting away, I tricked him by closing the gap between us and ramming the crown of my head into his nose. He made a sort of half-moan, half-bull-roar, let me go and stepped back, his beady eyes clenched shut and

both hands rising up toward his nose. I landed a left hook on the side of his head, but, let's face it, it didn't do my hand any good and had almost no effect on him.

Quickly calculating the damage he'd done with three punches versus the impotence of my own, I decided I wasn't ever going to take this guy in a stand up fight. The problem was tackling him. He not only outweighed me, but he was half a head shorter, and it would take Archimedes to figure out a way of upsetting him. I confess to entertaining a brief notion of kicking him in the nuts. They were there, not two feet from me, with a near perfect approach. But I figured if Harrold wanted me dead, he wouldn't have come to watch, so something else was going on. Until I sussed out what, it behooved me to at least play-act being a man of honor and integrity.

I swung high at the side of his head again, feinting mostly, expecting him to duck, which he did. Then when he charged me, I grabbed hold of his T-shirt, pivoted, and judo tossed his bulk over onto the floor. It wasn't nearly as satisfying as kicking him in the nuts would have been, but it had to have looked impressive for the spectators.

He landed hard on his back, grunting, but didn't turtle like I'd hoped. He rolled and rose back to his feet like a man half his size. Like a pro wrestler or an acrobat. I knew then I was going to hate him.

So, getting him on the ground, check. Keeping him there was going to be something else.

He came at me exactly like before, purposefully but in no hurry, only with the second approach he brought along the first swing. It was slow, wide, a foolish attempt at an early haymaker. I remember thinking, that's nothing, and was pivoting to dodge it when his other fist slammed me in the soft spot between my right hip and my ribs. I made a sound and bent sideways, working my eyes open just in time to see his fat bullet head swinging in to return the favor of my earlier headbutt. Then it was my turn to get up and I admit I wasn't quite as smooth and quick about it as he'd been.

I wondered why he didn't help me up that second time, until I got my feet under me and saw that he'd drawn back. He stood there

cracking his big knuckles, watching me like I'd finally aroused his interest. I shot a glance at Harrold who was watching me too, only more bored and slightly impatient.

I took a step toward Lon, and he a reciprocal step toward me. Sorry, that's where the blow-by-blow must end. You've probably heard stories, doubtless rousing, heroic yarns spun by he-men who give minute descriptions of their victories over monumental foes. They're bunk. And if you don't believe me, try it. Go get hit in the head a few times, and then see how much you recollect of what comes after.

Basically it seems to me what followed was more of the same. Some hits, some misses, lots of sweat and heavy breathing. He ripped the collar of my T-shirt. I have a vague notion of several times trying to grab hold of him and him shrugging me off. I know I went down two more times, once to a knee and then onto my ass. And the second time, as he was hauling me up, was when my shirt rent.

Finally, he landed the Dolores blow we'd both been expecting, burying a meat hook so deep in my belly I figure Harrold, behind me, could count the knuckles on the fist pressing against my spine. I gasped a wet spray of blood and spit, doubling over the big man's arm and hanging there. He brought his other hand up and patted the back of my head, then stroked it almost tenderly. He heaved me up, stepped over, and slammed me down onto the table against the wall.

It's a testament to American craftsmanship that the table didn't splinter into kindling as I weigh a good two hundred pounds plus, and Lon did not set me down easy. What he planned to do next, I can't say. Inspired by the resilient table, I spun a quarter turn and wrapped my legs around his waist. I sat up, grabbing hold of his head and pulling it down. I didn't bother trying any fancy sort of choke, however, as I still retained enough sense to remember the man had no neck. Instead, I brought my arms up under his, hooking his elbows and locking my hands together behind his back. Simultaneously, I hooked my feet. Then I squeezed hard, straining every last ounce of fight I had in me, determined to break this lug's arms.

He made a sound too, lower and more bovine than mine, and stepped back, almost as if he thought he might simply retreat out of my hold. He'd clearly decided I was done—hence the approving pat on the head—which is probably the only reason I'd managed to trap him at all. He swayed drunkenly, by no means fresh himself, his short stubby legs unable to balance our combined weight.

"All right, enough."

Those words seemed to seep through the delirious cacophony of wet breaths and bestial grunts, but in such a way I couldn't be sure what the language was. It wasn't until Max Harrold shouted, "Enough, I said!" that I blinked my eyes open and saw that the bodyguard who'd had his back to the door now stood over us, looking down and trying to figure out where he and Archimedes might start with their wedge to pry us apart.

Lon and I had fallen back to the floor. His great bulk lay atop me, but I hadn't even noticed somehow. He was working with his legs as if trying to roll us over onto his back, though how that might have improved his situation, I can't even guess. I pried my fingers slowly apart, and then with an explosion of air, my legs and arms shot out wide and he rolled off of me over onto the floor.

"What a display," Harrold said.

I lay there, gasping and spitting thin trails of sticky red spit into the air. I stared at the ceiling. I could feel the big man beside me doing the same, but I didn't look over. I still hated him. I hated him so hard I hated his mother for not hugging him more and his father or brother or uncle or cousin who had nurtured his ignorant belligerence. If I looked at him, I knew—if I saw him laying there next to me, exhausted and struggling for air, with his barrel chest and big hard belly rising and falling like ocean waves—I knew I wouldn't be able to contain my hatred. I'd need to either shoot him or buy him a drink.

I rolled away from him onto my side, sort of exploratory as to what my options might be. The form seemed amenable to righting itself, so I rolled farther, onto my belly and began to work my way up to my hands and knees. When I finally looked over, Lon had sat up, his legs splayed out childlike in front of him. He rubbed a

fat hand over his mouth, and then he studied the goo coating his palm. Wiping his hand on his trouser leg, he shot a glance my way, frowned then got up.

The best I could manage was rising up onto my knees and then sitting heavily atop the backs of my ankles. I stayed that way, breathing and doing little else as Harrold addressed his fighter.

“Did I ask you to toy with him?”

“No, sir.” These, the first actual words I’d heard Lon utter, didn’t sound so different from his bullish lowing.

Harrold considered a moment, showed me a quick, disgruntled grimace, then glared at Lon’s belly. “So, can you take him?”

“Sure. Only I’d have to murder him.”

Harrold shook his head, transferring his glare to his cigar. He told the guard, who was back at the door. “Get him cleaned up.”

### CHAPTER THREE

Nico, the bodyguard, directed me to follow Lon, and the three of us went through the other door into a room with four large sinks in the center and cabinets and shelves lining all four walls. It, like the larger room, was illuminated by nothing but bare bulbs. A giant, mossy drain was centered in the concrete floor under the cluster of sinks, and a hose coiled on a hook near the door, which meant the room required occasional thorough cleaning. If that drain could talk, I thought.

So, it wasn't the Ritz nor even a flea bag in the tenderloin, but Nico tossed me a towel he took from a cabinet and told me to wash up. Lon had proceeded to the farthest sink, turned the water on full and leaned over to hold his head under the spray. I stepped up to the nearest sink, diagonally opposite Lon's, started the water and peeled off my T-shirt. Mostly my own blood was on it, but not too much even of that.

I splashed my face and wiped off, then used the towel on my chest and arms. Performing that last bit, I looked up and over at Lon, who stood exactly as he'd started, bent over the sink with the water battering the back of his head. He gripped the edge of the sink with swollen hands.

"He all right?" I asked Nico.

"You need a look in a mirror," he told me. But he didn't seem too concerned so, I didn't press him. He instructed me to toss the towel into a receptacle, and I sent my torn T-shirt after it. Then we

went back into the larger room and he watched me dress. We didn't chat.

Back up the stairs, in the big room with the two desks, I was seated on a comfortable chair facing Max Harrold as he told Nico even he wasn't needed this time.

"You want a drink?" Harrold got up and stepped toward a wetbar in the corner despite my telling him no. He laughed. "Nuts. You're so tough. Don't overplay it." He poured two glasses, carried both over and handed one to me. The hand I took my glass with shook slightly, the knuckles discolored and beginning to swell.

Harrold didn't return to the oversized chair behind his desk. He simply stepped back and hoisted a portion of his rump onto the desk's near edge. The look he gave me, while not friendly, was probably supposed to be disarming. He said, "Looks like I got some bunk intel. One fellow even hinted you might be a fruit."

I took a sip. Brandy, which is not my favorite. I took a larger sip.

When I didn't reply, he drew some air in through his nose. He took a drink. "Still, I don't take chances. I needed to know you were the right man for the job."

I settled my half empty glass atop my knee, steadying it, if the act can thus be described, with my trembling hand. I tilted my head, back slightly, and I aimed my gaze up at him from beneath a lowered brow.

Interpreting my query, he shrugged. "I can't hire a PI?"

I slowly lifted the glass to my lips and sipped a bit more brandy.

Harrold laughed again, slipped off the desk and circled slowly back around behind it. "You got more guts than sense, boy. You think you know me." He sat in his giant chair. "I'm a Jew wop, right? I come up through the Italians in New York."

"And then—" Those words, my first since inquiring after Lon, came out as a sort of garbled croak. I swallowed. "Chicago."

"So you know me." He looked down at something on his desk. I didn't see what he was seeing; the desktop was mostly bare, but he lowered a hand and danced his fingers lightly across the smooth wood. "We got that in common."



Another sip washed away the last of the detritus in my throat. “You mean I used to chase around after the Highland Boys.”

He smiled with his eyes. His mouth did something else. If it was supposed to have been a smile, he’d been studying how to do it by watching sharks. “After my time, I suppose.”

“No sir,” I said. “But I was about twelve or thirteen. When I say I used to chase around after them, that’s what I meant. They never let me think for a minute I was one of them.”

He continued to explore a small patch of desktop with his fingertips, and he split his time between watching them and me. “And now you switched sides.”

The glass he’d given me was empty and settled once again atop my knee. Luckily he’d neglected to include ice, or the cubes would have been raising hell. Though both the bouncing of my leg and the trembling of my hand had lessened somewhat thanks to the glass’s contents, my body was still hyped from the fight. And the adrenaline wasn’t mixing well with having to sit there wondering what the hell might happen next. We might have been alone, but I was keenly aware of the armed men on the other side of the door. Not that I’m a coward, or at least not too much of a coward. I just like to maintain a realistic assessment of my predicament.

I said, my voice nearly back to normal, “I was never on any side. I’m not a cop and I’m not—I never was anything else.”

“I read about you in the paper the other day. What was it?”

“I helped that matron cross the street.”

He laughed and shook his head. “You probably understood that Lon was giving you quite a compliment down there.” Settling back in his chair, finished with all the caressing of his desk, he gripped the arms of his chair lightly and squinted at me. “So relax. It wasn’t helping any old lady cross a street. You tagged that guy who murdered that girl.”

“Actually I snagged the old bird who tagged the guy who murdered that girl.” I shrugged.

He shrugged too, only his way of doing it was to toss his head slightly, as if not so much surrendering to what came before as discarding it. “It was a long story and mostly I was interested in

you. You keep an office on Pierce. That's near the Negroes." He rocked in his chair, comfortable, reflective. "Me, I like the Negroes. They work hard and they play hard, but they get the job done. You like the Negroes?"

"Some of them. There's a lot I haven't met yet."

He looked at me like I was making a crack—which I was—only like he also knew I couldn't actually be making a crack because what sort of joker would make a crack to Max Harrold with several armed men right outside the door. He said, "I also like the Japs, recent world events notwithstanding. But mostly I like when things play smooth. I'm a businessman, and I prefer my business to operate without a lot of headaches. Help yourself to another drink."

Having spent the last several minutes building up the facade of a man relaxed and unflustered seated in a chair and paying polite attention, it occurred to me that getting up and shambling across the floor might spoil it. In addition to being keyed up, I was experiencing that fatal blend, not uncommon after prolonged exertion, of being simultaneously exhausted. My knees had nearly given out twice coming back up the stairs. I wanted nothing so much as a long hot shower. I wanted to stand there with my head bowed and let the jets bombard the back of my head while the steam built up around me. I wanted to melt into my pain and fatigue and thumping heart and go swirling down the drain. So I told him no, thanks, on the drink, looked around for someplace to deposit my empty glass, and ended up transferring it to the floor.

"You like it when business runs smooth," I reminded him. I leaned back in my chair, sliding my hips slightly forward and rubbing my palms down my thighs.

He watched me do all that with an expression that bespoke a certain uncertainty. He made an off-hand gesture with a gentle swing of his left arm. "Now we got this kid's body turning up."

"What kid?" I asked.

My rather blundering attempt at obfuscation didn't appear to register. He seemed more interested in my body language. "The kid at the morgue. The Negro boy you been looking for."

“Oh, yeah, that kid.” I raised my head so he could see how befuddled I was. “Now we have that kid?”

“Sure. It was the Japs, wasn’t it? You saw the body. Nearly cut his head clean off. That’s what they do.”

He didn’t need to sell me on the savagery of Nips. I’d never heard of them cutting people’s heads off around town, but I was by no means an expert. “Why would they kill the kid?”

“On account of he’s a Negro, of course.” He sat forward as he said that, and for the first time, I deciphered some annoyance in his tone. I’d nearly convinced him I was simple, and he didn’t like it. “You maybe heard about what happened to the Japs?”

“We licked ’em.”

He shook his head. “I mean 9066. Most of the Japs hereabouts were packed off. Japantown shut up shop.” He paused, letting my simple mind absorb all that as he settled back again. “And while the Japs were gone, the Negroes spread out. Into their neighborhoods. Not just residential either. I’m talking business.”

“Ah, business.” I let my face light up, which was rather painful after the licks it had taken.

“And now the Japs are coming back, and they want what was theirs. Which means headaches for me because—”

“Because you like when business runs smooth.”

“You begin to see.”

I began to see like hell. If anything, I was beginning to suspect *he* was simple. I took a blind stab. “And you want me to lay off.”

He was shocked. “Lay off what? You didn’t even know the kid was dead til a few hours ago. And if I could give you the Jap responsible, I would. Unfortunately, it’s gone beyond any of that. The niggers—” He actually stumbled over that slip and nearly risked a look at me to see if I’d caught it. “They’ve taken matters into their own hands. They’ve retaliated already. Before I could stop them.”

“Good,” I said, playing along. I looked up like it only then hit me. “But...Business.”

“They over-reacted. They took a girl. A Jap girl. Her father is a banker. Rich, with ties to the community. But worse, with ties to the *Dantai*. His brother is a lieutenant with the *Nihonmachi*.”

I admit I wasn't quite sure what those gibberish words meant, but I had a notion. "This lieutenant killed my kid?"

"What the hell?" Harrauld was outraged. "Who knows? It don't matter. Things are about to fucking explode." In agitation, he got up and carted his empty glass back to the wetbar for a refill. He poured a second helping for me too, in a new glass. As he was handing it over, he barked, "So are you going to help me or what?"

I looked up at him, trying to appear appreciative of the drink while also skeptical of his intent. "Help you?"

He leaned against his desk again. "As I said, I like the Negroes fine, but you, you've worked with them, no? I want you to help me head off an explosion."

"I don't have ties to any Negro gangs, if that's what you mean. And I don't have any real ties to the local community." All of that was mostly true. Mostly.

"Listen, son, it's getting late and you look like hell. You heard of a Negro called Andrew Smoke?"

For the first time, my belly tightened. I fought to keep the reaction off my face, but could feel my lips thinning. I took a slow, meditative drink. He hadn't posed that last part as a question, and he seemed to know enough about me, so I said, "Sure."

"Well, he's with the boys that took the girl."

So that's how it is, I thought, looking away from him as I fought to swallow the brandy souring on my tongue. I sat there reflecting on everything that had happened since that old Ford had pulled alongside me. "Where?"

"A little village up the coast. Jenner. You ever heard of it?" He moved back behind his desk again, sat.

"I've heard of it." I'm a keen one for coastal drives. "North of Bodega Bay."

"There's a cabin a few miles inland from there. I had one of my boys draw a map. Smoke and some boys from the Fall Sparker gang are holed up there. I think—"

"For what?" I had to cut him off because even he had to know how thin that sounded. If I hadn't pressed him, he might've begun to suspect I was on to him.

“What?” He played it broad, like my question baffled him.

“Why are they holed up with the girl? Is it a ransom job?”

He licked his lips, considering. “Don’t be naïve. Why do you think they’re holed up with her? She’s fifteen. That’s why we got to move fast. Tonight.”

And right after he’d told me it was late and I looked like hell. My respect for him was circling the drain. Not to mention, Andy Smoke was fat, fifty if he was a day, and far more interested in cigars than any fifteen year old Jap girl. “What did you have in mind?”

He suddenly grew serious, intense, hunching his shoulders and making emphatic gestures with his hands. Clearly, this part had been rehearsed. “I want you to head up there. Talk to this Andrew Smoke. Convince him that the girl needs to be returned. Unharméd.”

“If Andy’s switched sides...If he’s in with the Fall Sparkers...” I tried to sound logical.

He acted like that hadn’t occurred to him. “Then that will change things, sure. But at least we’ll know what we’re up against. What can’t happen is the Japs finding them first.”

I appeared to consider the terrifying ramifications. “No, that would be bad.”

“The city would go to hell.” He suddenly shouted: “Thomas!”

Sitting forward in my chair, I made a gesture as if to forestall him. “Hang on. What’s in all this for me? I’m a booster now?”

The door opened, and the one incongruous guy, the little bifocaled gent who had been seated at the secretary when I’d arrived, poked his head in. Harrold glowered at him. “Not yet.” The little guy withdrew, closing the door. Harrold returned his gaze to me, softening his expression. “How much do you want?”

I sat back. “I haven’t even decided if I’m interested. For one thing, there was that whole song and dance downstairs. I may need a doctor.”

His lip curled. “Doctor, hell. I seen two old women in line at the grocery go at it harder than you boys.” But he paused, scrutinizing me some more. “I told you, I got a bum steer. Will you hold that against me? I’m trying to stop a war.”

“No, you’re right, this is bigger than my wounded pride. Or my bruised ribs.” I said all that with a pensive tone, but then looked him straight in the eyes. “Five grand.”

He took it well, restoring some of my faith in him. But then he overplayed it. “You’re selling yourself cheap. But that isn’t my lookout. Twenty-five hundred now and another twenty-five when the girl is safe and sound. I’ll even loan you transport.”

“Not needed. I have my own set of wheels and prefer them. Plus I—”

“But you need to get up there now. Anything you require, I’m sure I can supply. Thomas!”

For me, his whole plot seemed to unravel, but apparently he figured his best bet was to barrel through. When the little guy came in, Harrold told him, “Get Mr. Colette twenty-five hundred from the safe. Tell Halley to bring the car around. Instruct—”

I reached down and picked up my first glass, got up and carted it and it’s brother to the bar. From there I headed out the opened door into the first room. That was when Harrold noticed and stopped issuing commands. “Where are you going?”

The answer to his question was apparently two steps into the other room because that was as far as I got before my old friend Nico stepped into my path with his fists on his hips and a smug look on his face that read like he hadn’t had the pleasure of watching me with Lon. I stopped a pace from him, reached out and gently peeled back his left lapel to expose a holstered Luger. “I want two of these,” I said, “and plenty of ammo.”

Harrold had come after me, stopping another two paces behind my back. “The idea is to resolve this without violence.”

That struck me as equally as asinine as Halley earlier asking if I’d accept his word of honor. I could only respond in an identical fashion. “Too late for that. Which reminds me, I want a shower.”