

CRIME

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A PETER CHAMBERS MYSTERY

HENRY KANE

*Armchair
in
Hell*

*"The fastest, toughest
job in years"
—New Republic*



ARMCHAIR IN HELL

Henry Kane

PROLOGUE

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For

Mr. and Mrs. J. A. B.

because I love them

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Chapter One

THE DEVIL WAS a dentist with a drill.

I was in an armchair in hell.

So I woke up: but the buzzing persisted.

The buzzing crystallized into sound with meaning.

Someone had dug his finger into the hole around my doorbell, and it was endless, like music out of a juke box in the rear end of a gin mill.

I worked my eyes open and I groped for the light switch and I found it. It was five minutes after midnight by my wrist watch, which wasn't on my wrist or on the night table, but askew amongst other trinkets on top of an untidy hill of miscellaneous clothes by the side of the bed.

I got up and I clucked at my awful reflection in the mirror.

I went to the door.

"Well," I croaked. "Viggy O'Shea. A pleasure. Go home."

Dimly I knew that that was no way to talk to Viggy O'Shea, and no way to act. Viggy O'Shea was natural for a private richard, and a private richard could be a very wealthy individual with only Viggy O'Shea as his entire clientele.

"What's with you?" I remarked.

"Just as I thought." He extended five fingers and he pushed, unlovingly, and I folded into a love seat.

He closed the door and he snapped the peg, which gave us bracket lights, and he stuffed his hat and coat into a closet. He took off his jacket, carefully, and he draped it across the back of a fan chair. He took off his tie and he sighed once, but gustily, and then he did an akimbo with his hands on his broad yaller belt and he glared at me.

I tried to glare back. I couldn't quite make it.

"All right. You're here. Nice of you to drop in. So curl up on the sofa and drop dead."

"Plastered," he said. "Just as I thought. Stiff as a bugle."

He yanked me out of the chair and he took me out of my pajamas and he walked me to the bathroom and he pushed me into the stall shower.

Coffee and more coffee. Black and Bitter.

"We've got work," he said, "chum-boy."

"Yes, Viggy. I lost a girl," I said. "I suffer."

He tintured a snort with a sniff and a gurgle; then he eased out of the chair and I trailed him to the living room.

“You lost a girl,” he said. “That’s bad.”

“Bad. The love of my life. The gracious Lolita.”

“The love of his life. Get dressed. We’ve wasted a lot of time.”

I went to the bedroom. I picked some underclothes from a drawer. “The love of my life,” I grumbled.

“What?”

“The real damn love of my life. The gracious whatever her name is. Gave me the air.”

“That’s enough. I’ve heard that real damn love lament of yours before. You’re glad to get rid of the lollipop. But it’s another excuse for tying on a jag.”

I sighed, one leg in my trousers and one leg out.

I twitched a little.

He slapped me across the face. I lost my pants.

“Unnecessary,” I said in a surprisingly accurate tone of disdain. Then I wiped my nose and found my pants and clambered into them and went looking for a shirt; but he came after me and he turned me around and he squeezed big hands on my shoulders and he left them there.

“Pull yourself together, for Chrissake. Please.”

“Believe me,” I said. “I’m together.”

He went back to the living room.

I got into my socks and my shoes and I buttoned my shirt and put on my tie and knocked off a Duke of Windsor knot first crack, and then Viggy showed up again.

“How we doing?”

“Not bad.”

“You ready?”

“What cooks?”

“I’ve got a dame at home.”

“Good.”

“In bed.”

“Very good.”

“A brunette.”

“A brunette!” I yapped at him, nose to nose, and I waited a second and then I went away and started pulling off my tie. “For that I’m taken out of a warm bed and pushed around. Because the guy is a nut on blondes.”

“A dead brunette.”

Viggy put his hat on, neat and slanty over his eye.

He spread out and he sprawled in his corner of the cab, silent as the dummy minus Bergen.

Me too. In my corner.

The cab pulled up and we got out and Viggy paid off and we went up the four steps of a four-step stoop. Viggy lived on East Seventy-sixth Street, squash amongst the swanky-panks, in a narrow two-story house set back from the building line, fronted by a tiny grass lawn split in the middle by a sidewalk-path leading to the steps.

He got his keys out and he opened the door quickly and we hung our hats and coats on an old-fashioned coat rack in the foyer. Light streamed through an arched doorway on the right. Farther back to the right, a steep stairway rose, gray-carpeted. Light streamed also, from behind the stairs.

I knew the house: a cellar, a ground floor, a first floor, and a second floor (and what a cellar). The arch-way on the right was the drawing room, and the kitchen was behind the stairs.

I edged over and peeked into the spacious drawing room.

An intricate chandelier spread light over heavy grouped furniture and a thick Chinese rug, and light jumped back in reflected bunches from a massive rectangular thick-wood shining table in the middle of the room, topped with a long strip of white lace doily and three silver vases with artificial flowers. Ten carved-back chairs with red velvet seats surrounded the table, a chair at either end.

Solidly, a man sat with his back to us in the chair at the foot of the table. Quietly. A man with a high proud plume of wavy iron-gray hair. I couldn't see his face. He didn't turn around. It wasn't that he was impolite: it was more that a knife was in his back, high in a corner, the snub hilt pointing back at me like a stiff tongue pushed out in derision.

Chapter Two

IT SHAKES you up when you've got a dead brunette in bed on your mind and then you get hit with a guy in a red velvet seat with a knife in him.

I waded through a lush rug and I touched him and I came back to Viggy in the doorway.

Viggy didn't see me.

"Charlie," he whispered. "Charlie Batesem."

I looked at him.

"What's the matter with you? Charlie's bald."

Viggy didn't see me.

He turned and he ran down the hall and he ducked in under the stairs. I went after him. I collided with his hard flat back at the threshold to the kitchen.

I looked past his shoulder.

There was blood on the yellow linoleum.

There was a lot of blood. There was so much blood I felt faint, and I'm in the business. Charlie's bald head gleamed in the midst of it like bright snow on a garbage heap, Charlie with a wide-slit gaping neck and a secret smile on his tilted face, his teeth milk-white against tight blue lips.

My stomach ridged and I jerked when Viggy slid a cold finger along my balled-up fist.

Spongily he said, "All right. Let's go upstairs." His face was the color of the linoleum and his black eyebrows were pulled together hard and his lips were dry and puckered.

I followed him up the carpeted steps.

He opened the first door on the left and he clicked the light on. On top of the bed, over a coral silk coverlet, a woman lay with her arms out and her palms up, supplicatingly, her legs straight and slightly parted: a small, dark-haired, nude woman, with popping eyes and a wax skin and an open throat.

No blood. No blood at all.

2

I went shot for shot with Viggy, three times, from good-sized glasses on a tray with a decanter on an antique piece in the drawing room. He pulled back one of the heavy carved-back chairs and he sat down. I stayed with the decanter.

"Nice, huh?" he said. His color was better.

"Nice," I said.

The phone rang. I started for it. Viggy stopped me.

It rang some more. Then it stopped ringing.

Viggy rapped the middle knuckle of his right hand against his teeth. "I don't get it. I feel like a refugee out of a bughouse. I don't know what the hell this is all about. First there's that dead bitch up there in my bedroom. I never saw her before in my life. That's trouble, so I call you on the phone, and when it doesn't answer I shoot right out to look for you like I always do when there's real trouble. I cannot afford to wait. Charlie and this other mug are right here in this room talking when I leave. I wouldn't send Charlie. I go myself. I always go myself. I know you. You're hard to find or you're hard to persuade or maybe you're home, cockeyed. And *now* look what we got. Charlie and this other lous. What the hell is going on here?"

"Who's he?" I said, and I took another little snifter and I pointed with my thumb. My stomach was warm and I was beating a hang-over and I was ashamed of having felt faint and I was all ready to play detective.

Viggy hardly glanced at him. "A dealer. From Los Angeles."

"One of your boys?" I said.

"Not that kind of dealer. A business guy. A dealer in art stuff."

"Legit?"

"Mostly."

"And the woman upstairs?"

"You dumb? Or drunk? Or trying to be a smart detective? I told you I never saw that tomato before in my life."

Suddenly he punished the edge of the table with a handful of slapping fingers.

"The valise," he said, and he looked at me as if I knew what he was talking about. "The goddamn valise. It wasn't up there."

He shoved back the chair and I heard him pound up the stairs and I heard the banging of doors.

"The hell with this," I said, and I knocked over another embracer, and another one, and I choked up and coughed and put the glass down and looked at the man way down at the foot of the table.

He was a grave-looking chap, about fifty-five, with a smooth-salesman's expression frozen on his dark face. If he were alive, he'd be rubbing his hands together, chummily; his thoughts had been pleasant, he had been making money right up to when he stopped thinking.

I went over and touched his hand. It was smooth as goose grease; warm, unset.

Viggy came back.

"How the hell do you like that?" he said. "No valise."

"No valise?" I said. Witheringly.

Ungracefully I took his lapels in my hands and I brought him over and I hoped my breath stank of whisky. "Three stiffs in the house. Assorted. And this guy is worrying me about a satchel. Let's get normal, big shot."

“Let’s go in there.” He pointed across the hall.

The room was a small edition of the drawing room, antiques and all, but no decanter.

Viggy heaved into a corner of a flowered-rust couch.

He whisked at his curly black hair and he rubbed at the bristles of his beard and he wedged his wrist between his teeth, meditatively. He got it out. He pushed his feet out all the way and he shoved his hands into stiff-legged trouser pockets.

Viggy was tall and dark and handsome and broad-shouldered, with a high forehead and a pointed nose and a wide mouth and excellent teeth. Right now he was ugly. The skin of his face was baggy as an old ladies’ home. Strained spread-lines from nose to mouth-edge were nail deep and brown as iodine streaks. He sucked in his upper lip and he stuck out his lower lip, fretfully and angrily, and he twitched, occasionally, underneath one eye. He said nothing for a few minutes, and then he said. “I’ll tell you a story,” and his gambler’s voice was level and conversational.

“Not now, you won’t daddy.”

He cocked his head. It sidled on his shoulders, sloped as a sailor’s hat. “You all right?”

“I’m all right. *You’re* the problem. You’re tired. You’ve had a deal pulled on you. So I let you rest for a few minutes, but, daddy, you just ain’t thinking right.”

“Okay, brains. Okay and okay. That’s what I’ve got you for.”

“Swell. There’s a lot of time been wasted around here. Dead people in the house are dangerous. Especially for you. So first you go looking for valises and then you sit and stare and now you want to tell stories. See what I mean?”

Wearily he said, “I suppose so.”

“You’re not an ordinary customer. An ordinary customer picks up the phone and he calls the cops and he says, ‘I’ve got dead people in the house,’ and he’s through. Then the dead people in the house are someone else’s headache. Not you. You’re a special kind of customer. With you we’ve got to do it arsewise.”

“Arsewise,” he said, and he dished up a sick copy of a wan grin. “Very fancy.”

He pulled in his feet and he got up and he ran a wet tongue across dry lips and he made a point of his chin and he started putting heel prints on the rug. “All right. Lecture period is over. Where do we go from here?”

“Now you’re Viggy O’Shea,” I approved. “First, we get them out of here. Later, I listen to the story. After that, we measure angles.”

Splashingly, thick streams of rain gusted against the windows. I went over and looked out.

Rain danced on an empty street.

“It’s marbling,” I said. “It’s a fine night for sneaking around with corpses.”

“I wish Ma were here,” Viggy said.

Absently I said, "Yeah," and I looked at dripping window-panes — then I looked at him, fast.

"What?"

Simply, he said, "Ma."

"That's what I thought. Take it easy, pal. Tighten up, for the love of Christ. We've got a tough night in front of us."

Morosely he advised me not to worry about Viggy.

"Then what is this with Ma? You're a big boy now."

He produced his sick stand-in for a grin. For a moment. Then he forgot it. "Ma is Marmaduke. Marmaduke is my butler. My butler would be a help."

Perplexedly I said, "You've got a butler?" And then blood got busy in my head like noon in the Automat. "Where is your butler?"

"I don't know."

"Since when you got a butler?"

"The last three months."

"Well ...," I said.

"Well, nothing. Ma is an old Englishman who is strictly all right. Used to work for Roachie Turner for fifteen years. When Roachie got married, Ma quit and I took him over. He's a bachelor's butler, exclusively. He won't get mixed up with women."

"Like me."

"Yeah."

"Why isn't he here?"

"He's had a vacation for a month."

"Why?"

"I've been out of town. I've been in L.A."

"When'd you get back?"

"Today. Couple of hours ago. I came in with Charlie and the dealer. Direct from L. A. We called up a guy on business and he came over and we had a little conference and the guy left and then I brought the valise upstairs to my bedroom and I saw that naked package someone had left for me. So I scooted out for you."

"Did this Ma know you were due back?"

"Yes. I wired him. He should have been here. It would bother me, if I had the time, but I don't have the time, not with corpses around here like confetti."

"It bothers *me*. Is this a resident butler?"

"No. Eight o'clock to eight o'clock, unless I need him earlier or later."

"Where does he live? Do you know?"

"Of course I know."

“I mean offhand.”

“Lives at Eighty-three Lexington Avenue.”

“Any more?”

“Second floor, front apartment.”

I went out of the room. I went across the hall into the drawing room. I didn't look at the dealer from Los Angeles who was mostly legit. I went over and got the decanter and injected a little direct, and I brought the decanter and a glass back to Viggy. I poured a real dose for him.

“Have a drink,” I said. “On me.”

He drank it. He said, “I don't get it.”

“I'm going to Eighty-three Lexington Avenue. I'm going right away. You claim you know nothing from nothing. Maybe our Marmaduke knows the same nothing from nothing. But maybe he doesn't. And if he doesn't, we sort of ought to know that. And right away. So you and I split assignments.”

“You're boss.”

“Do you know how to steal a car?”

He picked up his eyebrows. He put them down. “I've learned a lot of things in my day. I know how to steal a car.”

I took him by the hand and I sat down with him on the couch. Very explicitly I said, “These are instructions. You clean up here. You clean up that kitchen. You keep the bottle handy. You'll need it. You clean up, all over. You get that woman down from upstairs and you get Charlie out of the kitchen and you get Mr. Dealer out of the parlor. You leave the knife in him. You don't touch it. You assemble them in the foyer. Then you go out in the rain and you pick up a car. You're very careful about fingerprints. You wear gloves. You think you can manage it?”

Viggy didn't answer.

“You're Viggy O'Shea,” I said. “You're big stuff. You've got brains and talent and imagination and daring. You couldn't have reached to where you've gotten without all of that. So I'm not worried about you. But keep the bottle handy. It's a nasty job.”

He looked at the bottle, lifted it, and snatched one.

“Why me?”

“Which means what, exactly?”

“Which means, exactly, what the hell do I have you for if *I've* got to steal automobiles and garnish them up like wagons out of the morgue?”

I pulled breath into my chest, indignant. “Listen very carefully. Remember me? Pete Chambers. I make a living by virtue of a fragile license issuing from a sensitive Secretary of State. But fragile. And sensitive. Here we've got a clambake that's strictly your party, *your* trouble. If *I* get caught transporting around with dead ones — I'm out of the box, out of the running, out of work. For life. If *you* get caught, it's the same trouble, and how much worse can it get? But then you'd still have me

around, license and all, doing a job for you.” I heaved for more breath and let it out, whistlingly.

“What’s the sense in sticking my neck out, when yours is already out, all the way?”

Viggy considered that.

“Plus,” I said, “we’ve got a missing butler. That’s *my* department. Believe me, it says it in all the instruction books.”

“I buy it.” He shook his head, tight-mouthed. “I don’t like it. At all. But I buy it.”

“Smart. A few extra details. You’re going to have to strip them down. Clean. You’ll see if that woman’s clothes are around. My hunch is they aren’t. You’ll peel the boys in the car. How’m I doin’?”

“I don’t know. Why the stripless strip tease?”

“Because I don’t want them tied in with you. I want them unidentified as long as possible.”

“But they know Charlie.”

“So what?”

“They know Charlie’s my gun-boy.”

“So what? They’ll have Charlie dead and naked with a strange couple, also dead and naked. They can’t bring that home to you. Not quick. So they ask you about Charlie. So you still know nothing from nothing. Charlie has his private affairs. This was one of them.”

Viggy leaned back and half closed his dark eyes.

“Very very risky,” he understated dreamily.

“I am aware of that. You and I know how to volley with light words about dead bodies that we don’t give a spit in all hell about. You and I can be precious about cadavers. We can be pleasant and flippant. Like interns. You’re a hard-used young man and I’m in a bastard business — we’ve seen them come and we’ve seen them go, enough of them, in our time. So we talk about them like people talk about soft-shelled crabs.”

“All I said was that it’s risky, professor.”

“I’m coming to that. There are two sets of risks, so to speak, and we’ve got to balance them. Your visitors can’t stay here. If the law got something like that on you — *three* of them — they’d pin one of them on you. You’d fry, sure as crêpes Suzettes. *One* of them they’d pin on you. They’d play ticktacktoe till one of them fit, but pin they would; they’ve been waiting for a long time to catch you with your fly open. This would be it. So the risk of dumping them is less than the risk of leaving them hang around and visit until somebody sees one of them and starts screaming. See what I mean?”

Viggy got up and put the bottle and the glass on an end table. “Okay, philosopher. Get going.”

“One more thing. Two, that is. You burn the clothes and the gloves in your furnace downstairs. Then you clean out the ashes and stuff and get rid of them.”

“Bye-bye, boy friend.”

“Bye-bye, chum. I’ll meet you in Lindy’s. Later. We both ought to be through in a couple of hours. You can tell me stories there.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Viggv said, and he sighed — but smorzando.

Chapter Three

RAIN slammed at the brim of my hat and I looked around for a cab and, of course, there was no cab. I buttoned my topcoat high and pulled my hat down low, but it made no difference. I was wet to the shirrtails by the time I sloshed up to the Lexington Avenue I.R.T. at Seventy-seventh Street, and being wet to the shirrtails is not the most agreeable sort of wetness when you sit on a slow, dank, jolting local all the way to Twenty-third Street.

Eighty-three was an old house, dirt-colored, five stories high with beige shirred curtains on double doors, and a protruding lock. You didn't have to be a sopping-wet, tonic-inspired detective to know enough to put the edge of a dime into the keyhole and open the door.

The lobby smelled of German-cooked cabbage soup and it hissed of steam and it was close as newsprint on a scratch sheet, which was fine by me. It was small and square; in back, a stairway with stone steps and a brass banister cut through. In front, an oblong alloy plaque was part of the wall, with slit-topped, bell-bottomed letter boxes and names.

I looked at names. It came to me that Marmaduke was a first name. I didn't care. I looked for Marmaduke anyway. I was warming up in this unventilated hothouse of a lobby and my vibrating kneecaps were slowing down. There was no Marmaduke. None of the ten names were familiar to me.

I went up two flights of dim stairs and I knocked at the door of the front apartment. Nothing. I turned the knob, softly, and the door swung in, and I helped with my foot, lightly, and it swung all the way and the inside knob tapped against a wall. The small light bulb in the hall behind me provided a faint yellow sifting shaft of illumination.

I waited.

Silence.

I moved into the room, slowly, and I reached out with my right hand for the knob and I closed the door and I leaned an ominously itching shoulder blade against it and I stood there in the darkness and I waited, listening to the sound of my breathing; and then I knew why I was waiting.

The sound of the breathing I was listening to — wasn't mine.

2

My right hand slid inside my topcoat and inside my jacket and under my left armpit and stopped like a suddenly frustrated lover.

No gun, no holster. Just shirt, and wet shirt.

I left it there for effect, just in case, and I scraped the other hand along the wall exploring for a light switch.

I found it and I clicked it.

A room sprang at me: a clean, spare, fastidious room. A man's room with a black and red linoleum and a leather couch and a drop-leaf table and chairs and a radio and a midget refrigerator and closets and a dark-wood kneehole desk *with knees*.

The knees wore tan flannel pants ending at bare ankles embroidered with clothesline, firmly attached to the legs of the desk chair. Going up, there was a brown belt and a neat white open-collared shirt, and going down again, there were hands, separately tied to the back of the chair. On top was a narrow white-haired head and a high forehead and stuck-out bunches of veins like knots in an old telephone cord.

The rest of the face was buried in the open shirt collar, chin down.

I got to the guy and I pried his chin out.

His face was gray like the ash off a good cigar and I slapped it quietly and I rubbed it and he complained, bubblingly, from somewhere inside his chest. I let the chin go and it got tucked in again inside the open shirt collar.

I shed my hat and topcoat and I went to work on the clothesline. Someone had done a tightly competent job. It took me five minutes to get the guy unhooked.

I rubbed his wrists and I rubbed his ankles. Then I set him up on reluctant legs and he leaned on me and he began to shake like he was a daiquiri and I was the bartender. I held him, carefully, and he danced in my arms for a couple of minutes; then he sagged. I carried him over to the leather couch.

I sat him up, but he keeled.

I tried again, but he keeled again.

I let him lie.

There was another door which was a bedroom when I put the light on, and another door which was a toilet, so I went back and started with the refrigerator and gave the room a double-quick canvass. In a closet over the radio I found a bottle with a scratched-off label. It smelled like gin. I tasted it. It was gin. I tasted it again. It was *still* gin. I tasted it some more while I made the trip over to Marmaduke on the sofa.

I *pulled his jaw* down and now he *tasted* it, but he didn't know it was gin. Yet. It ran out of the side of his mouth and he made sounds like a baby burping formula. I shifted and poured some into the other side of his mouth.

He began to know it was gin.

He groaned and he rumbled and he opened his eyes and he batted them like the girl in the varsity show resisting rape with repartee. Then he closed his eyes and he closed his mouth and he blew gin bubbles from a little whistle hole he'd left in his lips; stiffly.

I slapped his face, unquietly and impatiently, each side, forehand and backhand, and fast. He drew up his lids and he showed me reproachful eyes.

“Marmaduke,” I said.

“Yes, sir.”

“How are you, Marmaduke?”

“I am all right, sir. Thank you.”

“Feel better?”

“Oh, yes, sir.”

Then his eyes rolled up.

I did some more face tennis on him and then I took hold of thin bones in his shoulders and I rattled and his eyes rolled down.

“Have a slug of gin.” I showed him how.

“No, sir,” he said with admirable firmness. “I do not partake of intoxicants. I keep it for my maiden sister. She visits sometimes in the mornings....”

His eyes began to go. I shook them down. “Marmaduke,” I said. “You don’t look so good. I insist.”

“If you insist, sir....”

He grabbed one from the bottle, sitting up halfway, leaning on his elbow. He grabbed a good, gurgling shot.

He ramrodded.

He sat up, spine-straight, on the backless leather sofa, teeteringly. He belched — deeply, apologetically, pathetically, palpitatingly.

One expressive belch.

Then he gave me hurt and startled eyes.

“Good boy,” I said. “It’ll help.”

One eye began a slow ascent.

I slapped him on the back. “Sit up against the wall. Like this.” I propped him up. “Can you sit like that while I make some coffee?”

“Coffee?” he piped. “Oh, yes, sir. I would like that.”

Marmaduke, I hoped, was coming around the bend.

I patted his face. I looked around. “Where?”

He pointed to what appeared to be a cupboard but which opened up into a kitchen, a built-in kitchen a good and built-in kitchen — if you spread your elbows, you were lapped over back again in the living room. I hurriedly compounded coffee which was more poison than coffee and I administered it to Marmaduke hot and floating with grounds.

It smartened him up. Fast. “Who are you? What are you doing here, sir?”

“I’m a friend of Mr. O’Shea’s. He was worried.”

“I haven’t eaten since yesterday,” he said.

I went back to the kitchen-on-a-shelf and I found an egg beater and I whipped up a couple of eggs

and a glass of milk and I covered up while I seasoned it, liberally, with gin instead of nutmeg. I took his empty cup away from him and gave him the stepped-up nog. "It's good. Drink it and we'll talk. I've really got to get the hell out of here."

"Oh, thank you, sir."

I sat down alongside of him. He smiled at me. The knots in his forehead had flattened out and his face had brightened from ash gray to apple green and his eyes had stopped lingering at the top fringe of the sockets; now they stayed in the middle with all the verve and sparkle of a couple of dry blue blots of ink.

"What goes here, Marmaduke?" I said in the best tone of insouciance I could muster. "How come I find you fastened to a chair?"

"Oh, that, sir."

"Yes, sir."

He sipped nog. "Well, sir. This morning, I was taking my usual morning shower. At about seven thirty, sir, I had been expecting my sister. She usually visits the first part of the week. To clean up a bit for me. She is a cook, sir. Not due at her place of employment until ten o'clock...."

He gave me the rest of it. He had rattled back the curtain on his early-morning ablutions, and he was dried and almost dressed when the tap came on the door. He had called, "Come in" — he had snapped the catch because he was expecting his sister. He had poked his head out of the bathroom door, and he had been smitten behind the ear, and he had closed his eyes as happens when you are smitten behind the ear, and when he had opened them again, he was a fixed appurtenance by the desk in the apartment.

"See anybody?" I said.

"No, sir."

"Hear anybody?"

"No, sir. Only the tap on the door."

I got up. "Where are your keys?"

"In my jacket, sir."

"Where is your jacket, God damn it?"

"In the closet, sir."

"Closet? You're going to have to be more specific."

"Over there." He pointed.

I opened a closet door. "What jacket?"

"The blue one."

I brought the one blue jacket to him. He put his hand in one pocket, then he put his hand in the other pocket, then he put his hand back in the first pocket. Then he shook the jacket. No chimes. No jingle. No tinkle. No nothing. He looked at me and he smiled and he gave me the jacket and he put both hands

back around the glass and he finished his comforter. “An excellent eggnog, sir. Tangy.”

“Keys,” I said.

“In my blue jacket.”

“I am holding your blue jacket.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keys, God damn it!”

“Please, sir.”

“Keys.”

Marmaduke handed up the empty glass and he sighed, flutteringly. “There are no keys, it appears.”

“Where else could they be?”

“Nowhere, sir. Whatever intruder smote me, probably that person — it is possible that person made away with them.”

“Astute,” I said. “A really astute bastard I’ve got me here. Do you have a phone?”

“No, sir.”

“Your sister have a phone?”

“No, sir.”

“Where does she live?”

“Ninety-one First Avenue. Near Sixth Street. One-A.”

I tossed his jacket on a chair. I put the glass on the desk. I got my hat and topcoat. “I’ll drop in on her. I’ll have her come over and take care of you tonight. A little oatmeal and a little sleep and tomorrow you report to work as usual.”

“Without keys, sir?”

“That’s your problem. And Viggy O’Shea’s.”

3

It was pouring out. A miraculous broken-down cab floated by and I folded my tongue and I whistled and it stopped and shifted gears like an earthquake and it floated back and I floated in. I said, “Ninety-one First Avenue,” and I sat on my tippetty-tip and opened my arms and took hold of the abrasive catches of both unclosed rattling doors, protectively, and I sat there like a man who is losing his oars in a bouncing rowboat, all the way to Sixth Street.

“Wait here,” I said to the cabby. “And your doors don’t close.”

“You said it, friend. They stink.”

“A guy could fall out.”

“You said it, friend. You want me to wait?”

“Wait right here. Friend.”

The downstairs door wasn’t locked. One-? was a ground-floor apartment. I pushed the bell. I lit up and took a few drags and stepped on it. I pushed again. Someone said, “Who’s that?”

“Marmaduke sent me.”

The door opened. A long woolen blue-striped nightgown topped by a blur of face was dim in the doorway. “What? What’s that?”

I closed my eyes. Marmaduke’s gin was unfriendly in my stomach. “Your brother wants you.”

“How would *you* know?”

I opened my eyes. The blur of a face hadn’t improved. My stomach and Marmaduke’s gin continued at odds. I closed my eyes. “He wants you right away. He doesn’t feel well. He wants to know why you weren’t there this morning.”

“I slept. I’ve got a right to sleep. That Marmaduke. He should have been a woman. What business is it of yours?”

“No business. I’m only delivering a message for Marmaduke. Checking, sort of. Good night, ma’am.”

She slammed the door. I opened my eyes.

My relic of a taxicab received me.

“Fifty-ninth and Sixth Avenue,” I said.

I took hold of the door catches. We spurted home, joltingly.

Outside my apartment house, I said, “Now you wait again, Jackson.” His name on the orange card was Jackson Tomashefski and his picture didn’t agree with Marmaduke’s finicky gin either.

“How do I know you’re coming out,” he said, “this time?”

“A just question, Jackson, but if I pay you, how do I know you’ll wait?”

“That’s a just question, too, friend.”

“Come on up with me, Jackson. That’ll settle it. You need a drink with all this rain.”

“You talked me into it, friend.”

He held the door for me, and he bowed.

Upstairs, I poured him a half tumbler of rye and he said, “Thanks. It’s a beautiful joint you got here,” and I said, “Yeah,” and I poured myself a full tumbler of water with a heaping teaspoonful of Alka-Zane. I get rid of my wet things and I got into woolen slacks and a heavy sport shirt and dry socks and shoes and a thick jacket and my raincoat and rain hat.

“We’re on our way, Jackson. Lindy’s next stop. Forgive me, won’t you, but this time I really can’t invite you. I’ve got a date with a guy.”

“Thanks just the same. You ain’t a bad egg.” He squinted at me. “Even though you got dates with *guys* for four o’clock in the morning.”

Chapter Four

I sat in a booth in Lindy's and I polished off a plump marinated herring, filleted and swimming in sour-cream sauce. Then, of course, I ordered cheesecake.

Cheesecake melted in my mouth and I washed it down with coffee and more cheesecake melted and more coffee washed it down, but I couldn't get my mind off three dead bodies in a stolen car.

Viggy was an honest gambler. A rich, influential, powerful, honest gambler; which made him as popular as ear muffs in Bermuda. Nobody loves an honest gambler. Except the customers. The mayor and the police commissioner called Viggy everything from tinhorn to national menace, depending upon the state of their ulcers, and, oh, how they'd have loved to pin a rap on him, which is why the great O'Shea came scampering to me, like a pregnant woman to the doctor, at the first hint of trouble, ever. An honest gambler makes gambling respectable, which doesn't sit well with the keeper of the peace, because what are you going to use for speeches over the radio come election time?

Viggy had a joint in New York and a joint in Chicago and a joint in Reno and a joint in Miami (seasonal) and a joint in Los Angeles. Nobody touched his joints. Nobody even went near them, except for pastime. There are bigger people than mayors and police commissioners. There are governors and senators and congressmen and there are guys with slim cigars and sun-tanned faces and frosted hairdos that gather in caucuses once every four years, and Viggy sugared and salted and buttered-dov and ponied-up, and he spread it in all of the right places; and for icing, the accumulated bounced checks he had from biggies (uncollected and unpublicized) would make an autograph hound's tongue hang and tail twitter.

So nobody touched his joints.

He had a partner once, a guy I'd never met but a guy I'd heard a lot about, the Little Guy, by name — but that's for another time. Right now I was thinking about Viggy O'Shea, exclusively, in order not to think about three cold bodies in a kidnaped car....

More cheesecake melted in my mouth and I was beginning to get sick, cloyingly, when I saw Viggy mixed up with Lindy's revolving door. I waved at him and an actor waved back at me and I made a face and another actor waved at me — and Viggy saw me.

He bent his knees and he slid in opposite me.

"Glad to see you," I said.

Jake Teitel, the waiter, came between us. "Yes, gents?"

"Rye," Viggy ordered. "Two ryes. Soda."

"No liquor," the waiter said. "It's after hours, Mr. O'Shea."

It was ten minutes after four.

“Coffee and cheesecake,” Viggy said. “Cheesecake for him too.”

“No cheesecake,” I said. “Coffee.”

The waiter said, “Fine, gents,” and he went away, and I said, “Well?”

“Okay.”

“Smooth?”

“Perfect.”

“Everything?”

“Yes.”

“Where’d you park it?”

“Over by the pier. On Fifty-seventh Street.”

The waiter brought cheesecake and coffee in a pot and clean, fresh cups. Viggy poured and drank it black, no sugar, and poured again.

“I hope you earn your fee,” he said.

“What fee?”

“The fee I’m paying you.”

“How much fee you paying me?”

“I’m paying you seventy-five hundred dollars’ worth of fee.”

I looked the gift horse in the mouth (not a good habit): “Why seventy-five hundred dollars? Why not forty-five hundred dollars? Why not ninety-five hundred dollars?”

Through cheesecake, he said, “My brother Denny has seventy-five hundred of mine. I’m supposed to pick it up in the morning at his office. I’ll give you a note. You pick it up, and it’s a fee. That’s why seventy-five hundred.”

“I’ll have to remember that. It’s a very logical way of arriving at a fee for services rendered.”

“To be rendered.”

He scribbled on the back of an envelope and he gave it to me. It said, “Denny, give Pete the seventy-five hundred. Vig.”

I put the envelope away. “What services to be rendered?”

“I want to know what the hell is going on. I want to know fast. I want to know before I get rung in on it. Those services to be rendered.”

“If you’re still in the mood,” I said, “for telling stories — this is when.”

The twitch under his eye had worsened. He looked tight and scratchy like the wire string on a fiddle. “I’m in the mood. It’s a story about a Frenchman. Pierre Vy — Pierre something. Vyseuseau. He’s at the Waldorf. Suite 1212.”

“Yes?”

“That’s the other guy that was in the house today.”

“A real Frenchman, or a home-grown Frenchman?”

“A French Frenchman. Fresh over. Well, fresh over, roundabout.”

“So?”

“This guy contacts me a couple of months ago. No. He contacts the Little Guy. Then he contacts me.”

“The Little Guy?” I said. Appreciatively.

A glimmer woke up in his eyes; a dull shine like the flat glint of nailheads in a saddle-leather chair. “My partner, years back, till we split on policy. I don’t believe in loan-sharking around the tables. He runs a juicy *bistro* uptown with a back room and an upstairs. Everything phony, from the roulette wheel to the stick-men.”

“I know all about him,” I said. “I’m barred from up there. I suppose it’s because I’m a friend of yours. I’ve never seen the guy. I’ve tried a few times. On business. The hell with that. Is it kosher? I mean, is it kosher that first he sees him and then he contacts you?”

“He got a lead on the Little Guy in Argentina. He also got a lead on me. He talked to the Little Guy. Then he talked to me.”

“All right. What about?”

“A deal. A big deal. A deal for two million smackeros, with an extra half million thrown in for me. That’s cabbage. So I don’t care much about the kosher. I like a deal like that.”

“Now wait a minute. If you please.”

I took out cigarettes. I offered him one. He shook his head. I lit up. I pushed the dishes away and I put my elbows on the table. I said, “Give it to me now, once and for all, slow and clear. And coherent. Start from scratch.”

“Shut up and I will.”

I shut up.

He said, “I’m in the office at the Club an evening a few months ago and Fat the Butcher comes in and he tells me there’s a well-dressed Frog with an accent wants to talk to me. I said why not, and Fat shows him in.”

“The Frenchman Pierre.”

“He talks around for a couple of minutes, sizing me, and I let him, and then right away he’s in the middle of it. He tells me he’s talking for a syndicate backed up by the French government, and he’s working to recover some stuff that was promoted out of his country, and that he thinks I could help. He shows me credentials. For what they’re worth.”

“What kind of stuff?” I said.

“Tapestry.”

“How’s that?”

“Tapestry.”

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