



VERNA

or

THE MAN WHO
ERASED HIMSELF

by

ROBERT McNEAL



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To Mandy, where ever she may be.

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Chapter 1



I slapped the morning paper onto the desk, headlines up, and kicked back in my chair.

They found another stiff: one James Miller, .38 caliber up through his the mouth, his brains spilled behind him like thick minestrone. Connection with the others?

It was the way the chest was torn up – like kitchen knives had gone through it. With his head against the Bakelite factory's red brick, he'd shot himself with his own gun rather than deal with the horror of it. I couldn't say I blamed him. I'd have done the same myself. I pushed the paper aside, then moved to the window.

The blind was drawn. I raised it. The fog was still there, right against the glass, just like I knew it would be.

The fog had settled over Chicago from out of nowhere. At first it was hard to take. It smelled like sulfur and burned like battery acid. But you got used to it. It became natural. You took it in the way you took coffee and donuts in the morning. It was how you greeted the day. I pressed closer to the window, putting my face to the glass, hoping something might show. Mandy stepped up from behind, brushing my shoulder.

'Is it ever going to go away, Mike?'

I had no answer, and stared at the floor.

It started with a body.

Now, all up, there were seven. That included Miller, Bakelite manufacturer, and who knew he'd be the last, or where the number would end. Some things never got finished. It was something to think on. Mandy

pressed closer. But I didn't face about. I just kept looking straight out that glass.

A week ago, Friday, the 4th of July, something turned up.

It was a very dead Friedrich Hochstein. He'd been found lying in the trash alley that ran between Pike's Greasy Spoon Diner and Sam Foster, druggist. Pike called me at home, having found the body while throwing out the slops that night. I'd good reason to be in my digs.

I'd been working a case. Susan Demarchi: a doe-eyed fourteen-year-old who hadn't come home one afternoon after picking up a soda. It should have been an easy case, but it wasn't.

No-one who'd seen the girl that night was talking. Just shook their heads. Three days on the case, I'd nothing to report to the parents, then another week of solid footwork and the parents let me go. I'd fallen through their door dead drunk, no wiser about Suzie than when I'd started.

I understood why they'd handed me my hat. They were decent enough folk. Immigrants. Loved the old country, but wanted something better for the family, Susan's father chiseling enough stone to buy a home in Wicker Park. He'd jumped a class to give his daughter a start in life that he'd never had. Now she'd gone missing, and I'd been assigned to find her. Only I didn't. And I felt sorry about it. Leaving the office that Thanksgiving night, I was primed for a bender and knew it. Driving to my digs, I picked up a case of Old Sergeant's from Joe's Liquor just to be sure I'd laid in a good supply. Home was on Garfield, south of the river.

It was a six-storey red brick walk-up that was lucky not to be up for dereliction. I was on the top floor. Rain seeped down the walls from the tin roof in brown track marks that would have scared a junkie, and the

passing trains shook the windows so bad that I'd replaced them with boards. I stayed because the rent was cheap. It was hard enough making the lease on the office, let alone paying for better digs.

When Pike called, I lay passed out on the couch. I'd started on a bottle. Pike sounded nervous, telling me about a body in the trash alley. He wanted me over straight away. Checking my watch, it was two in the morning.

I was eight hours in on a drunk. A bad time to be starting a new case. But I thought about Pike. He was involved and I figured I owed him. I stepped to the closet for my best powder-gray. I usually kept the suit first up on the rack, only it wasn't there. I settled for my second – older in style, but still a good fit. My trench and hat were on the rack by the door. They were slightly damp, which I didn't figure on. I donned both and hurried out.

It was raining. That was bad luck. It'd been dry when I'd picked up the bottles from Joe's. The Buick was parked with one wheel up on the curb, and peeling out onto the road, I kept the speed at 30, still a little unsteady from the liquor.

It was an odd night. There was little traffic. The shadows between buildings made dark holes and the light from the lamp standards gave the rain a shine like tinsel. Pulling round Halstead, I thought I saw something cross the road. It passed immediately in front, and I hit the brakes. The Buick's wheels locked, and I slid to a stop, angling the car forty-five degrees to the curb.

For a moment, I sat still, my nerves jangled. I couldn't be sure what I'd seen. It was black and moved fast, seeming at first to take a shape, then lose itself. But it was nowhere now, the sidewalks as empty as the

road. The rain held steady, washing down the buildings and making puddles where it could. I started the Buick again and drove on.

Soon enough I rounded Pershing. Pike's diner was about half-way along, sitting between Syber's Secondhand Books to one side, and Sam Foster's to the other, separated by the alley. Pulling up in front, I checked my watch. It was two-thirty, making it thirty minutes from the time Pike had called.

Pike was born Perry Hannon. Aged 43, he'd never married, claiming he'd never had the time. The twenty years I'd known him – ever since I started out as a rookie with a burnt out gumshoe named McDougal – he'd spent every hour working the diner just to make ends meet. He stood a narrow-shouldered 6foot 2inches, had a pockmarked face with a receding chin, and thinning, mousy brown hair. Standing lean to the wind was how he got his moniker, and how he named his business – Pike's Greasy Spoon Diner. He was wiping a green Formica booth table as I came in, spinning around quickly on his heels on hearing the bell, and having to steady himself by clutching the table.

Something had knocked the wind out of him. He was in a sweat, and I hadn't expected it. I thought back on the call. Maybe Pike had explained? Only I hadn't been listening too well, my mind on that next drink, and liking too much the ones I'd already downed. I closed the door.

'What's the rumpus, Pike?'

He kept his grip on the table, saying nothing. Still nervous somehow. I lifted my hat and smacked the brim against my overcoat, wanting to shake off the rain.

'Came as soon as I could, Pike. Anymore on that body?'

He seemed to pull himself together, slamming the dishrag down on the table and stepping closer.

‘Sorry, Mike. I thought I explained. My nerves are shot.’

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant.

‘Mind if I sit, Pike,’ I asked. I wanted to hear him sitting down. I had a favorite seat, the third booth in by the window. I stepped into it, dropping my hat on the table. Pike followed. He took his time settling himself, sitting forward in his seat, hands laid flat on the table, spread apart.

‘Can I get you anthin’, Mike?’ A drink, maybe?’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Just one to ease in the night.’

Pike headed out back.

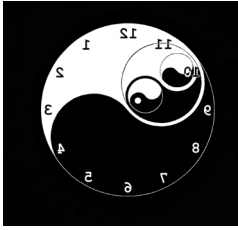
Waiting, I wasn’t sure if a drink was the correct play, but my nerves were still jangled from the drive, so I figured I owed it to myself. Pike was soon back with a fresh bottle of Old Sergeant’s and poured two tumblers. I knocked mine back and lit a Lucky, pulling the packet from my jacket pocket.

‘Okay, so you’ve got a stiff, Pike. What of it?’

He leaned forward on his elbow points.

‘Somethin’ like I’ve never seen before, Mike.’

I poured another drink. Pike was good with a story and I figured I’d let him ramble. He set to it, his Adam’s apple working his windpipe like it was new territory. The bottle stared up at me, and I kept up the drink as he kept up the words.



Chapter 2

We stood pressed against the alley wall, the rain pelted down like it was the night's opening round. I'd brought the rye with me – resting it in the outer pocket of my trench – and was glad of it. I was edgy for reasons I wasn't sure about. The body was lit by a wall light, water running over it in a steady stream, banking up between the waste cartons and the fence behind. I took a swig of the rye. Pike shrugged his right shoulder, wiping under his nose with his hand and sniffing.

'Like I said, Mike, the stiff's been gone over with a meat cleaver. Knew it as soon as I came out with the slops.'

He splashed off across the flagstones, the rain beating his hat brim flat, and brown water sloshing over his shoes. He was still shaking, but had settled some after telling me the story.

The stiff had been in earlier with a broad. But that wasn't what had made Pike nervous. It was what he'd found on the body. An agency card. Mine. It sat wedged between the stiff's second and third fingers, covered with blood, and stenciled over it was a name.

VERNA

Taking the card from his breast pocket, Pike had slid it over the booth Formica like it was something he couldn't wait to lose. He didn't call the punchinellos, and I couldn't have been more grateful. I stared at the card till the booze blurred my name and Verna together, then shoved it into my jacket pocket.

The way Pike saw things, the broad who'd come in with the stiff was

Verna. He gave me a description. Good figure. Brunette bangs. About thirty. The stiff and her were chummy, walking in like pallies, arm in arm. They sat down in the corner window booth and you couldn't separate them. As to why the broad might have killed him, he couldn't say. Perhaps she was fingering me for a frame job?

I moved towards Pike and the body.

He was right about the meat cleaver. The stiff was lying belly down, his back racked over, the fat of his flesh peeling up like burst sausage right through the overcoat and suit. But I couldn't say it was that which killed him. It needed a closer look. I circled round.

He dressed dapper. A finely cut brown gabardine overcoat, gray wool suit, Italian shoes and gray Fedora. The hat lay a yard away, turned up on its crown, filled with rain. I nudged at the stiff's coat flap with the toe of my brogue.

I hated these kinds of swells straight off. Fat cats always made me uneasy. Anyone that said there was a lot of money to go around should have looked up this guy's address. The money never got around because you'd probably find it all lining the doormat of the guy's penthouse. The closest you ever got to it was as a foot wipe. I backed up a step, moving clear of the water flowing over the body.

Pike rested in a squat by the stiff's legs, his forearms pressed to his knees, the wrists hanging loose.

'You say you haven't laid a hand on him?' I asked. I had the bottle out, but didn't drink.

Pike shook his head. 'Never was going to, Mike, 'cept takin' that card from between his fingers.' He pointed to the outstretched hand where it lay flopped at my feet, fat and bloated. 'Could be wrong, but like I said,

I figured you couldn't explain that easily to the punchinelloes.'

I had no answer.

'How long before he left the diner with the broad and you throwing out the slops?' I asked.

Pike considered.

'An hour maybe. They stepped in around eleven, if I recall right. Left just short of midnight. I threw out the slops around one-thirty, you getting the call around two.'

I thought it over, but could make nothing of it for now, only that the stiff would have been killed after midnight.

Pike was looking up at me, the rain splashing down on his face.

'We need to flip him over, Pike.' I drank from the bottle, placing it back in my trench. 'Get a look at his chest. That ought to tell us what killed him.'

Pike brushed the rain from his face. 'You sure about that, Mike. It looks bad enough from here.'

I nodded. 'I'm sure, Pike. You grab the legs. I'll take the arms.'

I had to drag the stiff's second arm up from under his body. It was thick with blood, but the rain and the stream of water down the alley quickly took care of it. I bent, and taking both arms above the elbows, heaved. Pike did likewise, hoisting and flipping the lower legs. Pike gagged and fell back. I doubled over, tripped on the back of my heels, and ended up sitting on the cobbles.

The stiff's guts were all ripped up. Pike stood against the wall of the alley, a handkerchief to his mouth, as I got to my feet.

A butcher couldn't have made a better job of things. The stiff's intestines and stomach spilled to one side, and the liver and lungs were

slashed from whatever had sheared through the rib cage. And there was something else. The heart had been ripped from his chest, pulped, and shoved into the mouth. Pike pushed away from the wall and stumbled over.

‘You make anything of that, Pike?’ I pointed to the stiff’s mouth.

It took a moment for Pike to work it out. He lowered his handkerchief. ‘It’s his heart, Mike.’

‘Sure.’ I nodded. ‘It’s his heart. And it’s been pulped.’

I stepped back. I figured the hacked up body could be explained well enough. It wasn’t anything new when you considered some killings that turned up in the lake. But to have the heart pulped and rammed in the mouth, that was something new. It had to have a meaning.

‘Pike shook his head. Odd sort of play, Mike. No reason I can see.’

I left it there, taking the moment to face down the alley toward the road.

A 1940 burgundy Ford crawled by. It halted by the end of the alley, rain striking off its long, flat hood. I was hard pressed to make out the driver. I caught a shadow, no more. I checked my watch, noting the time as 3:15.

‘Know anyone in a 1940 Ford coupe, Pike?’ I asked.

‘What you mean, Mike?’

‘At the end of the alley.’ I nodded towards the road.

Pike hooked a look over his shoulder.

‘Don’t see any car, Mike.’ He faced back towards me. ‘Anyway ... not many people I know can afford a car like that.’

I checked again.

The Ford was gone. I wasn’t sure now about what I’d seen. I was

reminded of the fact that I hadn't seen a single car all night, so it could have been a trick of the night – that tinsel in the air?

I got the bottle out and took another gulp, then turned toward the cyclone fence and walked over. The rain had eased and the clouds parted over the moon. It was full, and silhouetted the zigzag of the fire escape railing that hung off the tenement at the end of the black top play yard. I caught the frame of a basketball hoop and backboard. No lights showed in the tenement. A dog barked somewhere. All else was quiet. Pike yelled out behind me.

'Reckon it was my fault, Mike. I swear I didn't hear anythin'. I coulda stopped it, maybe.'

'No.' I turned on my heels.

Pike didn't seem to hear me. He kept on talking.

'I was in the kitchen washing the slops. All those pots and pans bangin' about. Never can hear nothin'. There must have been a hell of a fight? He cut up the way he is.'

'Leave off it, Pike.' I moved toward the alley door. 'Let's get inside. There's nothing more to be done here. We'll talk over the bottle.'

'You want the case, Mike?'

I thought about that agency card. I was in deep no matter what. Only I couldn't figure the play. I pushed open the door and looked back to the stiff. 'I'm here, aren't I? You could say I got a call.'

Back at the booth table, I had the bottle out before by Pike came back in. I drank down a tumbler, lifted my spiral notebook and pencil from my shirt pocket and thought over the killing.

It was the work of a pervert and normally I didn't touch this kind of homicide. I was washed up enough just dealing straight murders.

Pervert killings left you hard up believing in anything, and I figured I had a patent on my own brand of cynicism. It didn't need adding to. I turned to a fresh leaf in the notebook, licked at the pencil, then wrote up the details on the stiff, and that included the Buick, underlining the time I'd seen it park at the end of the alley.

Pike came up, dabbing at his mouth with his handkerchief. It seemed he'd spilled his guts on the seeing the stiff cut up the way he was. I needed a smoke and worked at lighting a Lucky. Pike drank from his own tumbler after pouring.

'Any ideas Mike?' He rested his tumbler down, trying to eyeball the notebook. 'The broad, you think?'

I lifted the agency card from my pocket. There was Verna's name stenciled over mine and both names bloodied. I flicked the corner edge back and forth with my thumb, then rested it between the pages of the notebook, closed it, and rested the pencil on top.

'It's a frame-up, Pike. Like you say. I just need to figure the angle. I'll have Mandy check the files back at the office for anything on that broad. Meanwhile, you call the punchinelloes and say you found the stiff on throwing out the slops. Let them check over the body. They'll ID him. But say nothing about the broad, and by that I mean say nothing about me either. We'll just sit with our feet dangling, see what the papers say.'

Pike sat back, happy. 'You got a shine on it now, Mike.' He thought a moment. 'I'll make out to the punchinelloes that I threw out the slops late mornin'. You weren't here. Then we'll wait for the papers.'

I drew on my Lucky, finished my glass and refilled.

Chapter 3



Being a PI I got to see the jungle up close. I got among the undergrowth, turned over rocks and saw what's underneath. Only I never liked what crawled out. It crawled over me. And it crawled inside of me. The jungle was everywhere.

I didn't want to know about it.

So I worked a form of amnesia on most crimes. I kept the details light. Erased anything that didn't advance the case. I did it with the bottle.

Only sooner or later you started reaching for them hand over fist, pulling yourself up against a world you imagined pulling you down, and that was the trap. The line of bottles became a circle. The booze merry-go-round. Every drunk knew about it. And every drunk welcomed it. You drank booze to drink more booze, erasing yourself from top to bottom. A circle you couldn't get out of.

It was dark when I came to. I lay on my side, rugged in my trench, my head pillowed by the corner of an entryway. A door light glared down. It was a poor bed for the night. I figured the landlord had a lot to answer for.

I tried to set my memory right. Pike had called. There was a very dead John Doe in the trash alley beside the diner. A broad was somehow involved? She'd been in with a moneyed suit. The suit winds up dead, slashed with more cutlery than you've got hands for.

Nothing else came to me.

I sat up. Shifted one leg. And then the other. Something rolled from the folds of my coat. There was the slow clank, clank, down steps, then a harder knock to the sidewalk, followed by a grating roll over the sidewalk, and finally a hollow clunk to the road that had my ears sitting up like a dog's.

It was a bottle.

I stood up.

To my right, a lamp standard glowed beside a telephone booth, and to my left stood a mailbox and a trash can. The Buick was beside the trash can.

Groping about for my hat, I found it lying crown up in corner of the door. I dusted it off, raked it over one eye, and moved down the steps.

Keying the Buick, I caught hold of a street sign, telling me I was north of the river. I headed south for the office. Walking, I felt queer, like my legs weren't quite on the ground. I put it down to the come down from the booze. Then my legs gave away completely.

'Morning, Mike.'

Mandy's voice came from across the room. I was flat on the couch, my head back on the cushion, one leg over the side. My tongue felt like it had been hanging out in a desert, and I was woozy enough to have the ceiling tilt off to one side, like it was ready to slide down the wall. I reached down the side of the couch. There was a bottle. I swigged from it.

'Anytime you're ready, Mike, just say. I've got the percolator on.'

It took a moment for the fog to clear from my head.

Stepping into the office, I'd headed straight for the bottle in my desk draw. On the couch, lying back, I'd done some thinking, but it didn't

last. Soon enough, I was a playing lullaby in my head. Sometime between then and now, Mandy must have shown.

She was a doll like that.

Mandy was always on time, fresh and ready to start, and stayed on whether I showed or not. She understood me well enough. It was the reason I kept her on.

I'd lost my last secretary, Louise, because of the way I drank. She told me I set a bad example for the kids. Divorced, Louise bought them into the office on weekdays after school. That gave them enough to see. I always kept a bottle on hand, and I'd lost count of the number of times I'd been out cold on the couch. In the end, I guess Louise did the right thing handing in her resignation. I wasn't only a lousy boss with the drink, but I was lousy on the pay. I put an ad in *The Chicago Globe* which spelled it out.

'Secretary wanted. Mike Deutsch, private investigator. Long hours. Pay when you get it.'

I believed in being honest.

As it was, there were plenty of service wives looking for employment. Anything to fill the hours while hubby popped Krauts and Japs on foreign soil, only no-one answered the ad but Mandy.

Soon as she walked in, I forgot about her résumé. Mandy kept brunette bangs in a China doll bob, and to that she added brown, almond-shaped eyes and a heart-shaped face that said kiss me in more ways than you had names for. And it didn't stop there.

I had it figured that a broad had only one look. Mandy had hers. A white blouse and black hobble skirt. And what's more, she took that look to places it had never been taken before. It was the way she walked,

busting the seams on that skirt with legs that made new words out of long and slender.

I asked a few questions, just to see how she answered.

She confessed that she was from Springfield, Missouri. She'd married her high school sweetheart, Tom Hendricks, on the 3rd of June 1941, both aged 22. The last she saw of Tom was when he signed with the regular army, the day after Pearl Harbor. He wrote from the South Pacific, but maybe he was shell-shocked. He referred to her as Doris. Mandy didn't quite know where that left her. She had to look after herself. She'd take any job on offer. I hired her. No further questions. She came with a good head on her shoulders, and the last thing I needed around the office was another rattle head like my own.

I took another swig from the bottle and sat up. Mandy was sitting in the desk chair with the paper. She laid it down and looked over.

'Sure,' I answered her about that coffee. 'And get Mitch to fix me up with a pastrami on rye. I need to eat.'

Mitch worked the corner delicatessen. He was good for anything on rye, and good for a bottle. He wasn't licensed, but always kept one on hand for me, any day that I might need it.

Mandy stood from the chair. 'You know I don't mind the drink, Mike. Only now you're talking sense. You want to leave off the bottle and double up on the rye.'

She walked over and dropped the paper in my lap. 'And while I'm gone, you might want to look over this.' She closed the door quietly behind her.

I stared down at the paper. It was the Chicago Globe. The headlines read,

FRIEDRICH HOCHSTEIN IN COPY CAT MURDER

It took a moment for that to clear through my head. Then it came to me.

Hochstein wasn't the first to be cut up like a whole lot of cutlery had gone through it. There was Walter Simpkins, a paper manufacturer from Cleveland, Ohio. On the night of Thursday the 3rd of July, he'd been found in his room at the Allerton Hotel. The body had been a sight for the slaughterhouse and it had taken a special cleaning unit to fix the room. Most of the details had been left out of the paper, but I'd gotten the lowdown from Pete down at the city morgue.

I took an interest because I'd often hole up in the Allerton on a drunk, and because with the war on, the murder of a paper manufacturer held some weight. Paper was in short supply, as with everything else. There was some talk that maybe the murder was part of something bigger, and if that was so, I wanted a hand in it. A big case brought big dough, and I was well short. And now it looked like the bigger picture was coming through. I went back to the paper.

There was a photo of Pike's diner. Pike wasn't in the picture, but it was clear that he must have given the punchinelloes what he knew of the story. The punchinelloes, or the paper, had filled in the rest. Hochstein was a steel plant manager from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. So it all fit, another Captain of Industry.

Mandy came back through the door. In one hand she held a plate with the rye wrapped in grease, and in the other, the coffee pot with a cup dangling from her little finger. Somehow, she'd managed to get the door open.

‘You taking it by the desk, Mike?’

‘Sure.’

It was effort to stand, but I managed, using the bottle as a crutch, pressing down with it on the couch. The desk seemed a mile off. Getting into the chair, I took another swig from the bottle and leaned back. Mandy remained on her feet, the rye and coffee on the desk.

‘You read the paper, Mike?’

I’d left it on the couch, but nodded.

‘You want to tell me more?’ She said, hitching up her skirt and sitting herself on the edge of the desk. ‘You left early yesterday. I was worried. You said you intended to work late.’

I looked up at her, not sure what she meant. It didn’t square. There was that Demarchi case. The doe-eyed fourteen-year-old. Getting let off the case, all I wanted to do was hide out in my digs with a case of bottles. I leaned my forearms on the desk, pushing the bottle aside.

‘Work? I was set on a bender. The Demarchi case. I got let off.’

‘Let off, Mike. What do you mean? You found her alright. Only you found her dead.’

I stared at the bottle to where I’d pushed it to the desk edge. ‘Wait a minute – ’

‘She was in the river, Mike. Drowned. You didn’t want to tell Mario, the father, because of how he’d take it. So you weighed the body down and sank it. Then you clammed up about it to Mario.’

I sat in the chair hoping the floor would open and I’d fall through. Mandy pushed over the coffee pot, lifted the cup and poured.

‘Drink this, Mike, and lay off the booze till you straighten out. Pike called first thing this morning to ask how you were. He told me about

Hochstein, and he told me he'd called you, only you didn't seem yourself when you turned up. I told him you were in, but that you were out cold on the couch. You're awake now, only what am I going to tell him?'

She left that open, and I wasn't sure whether I was grateful. I was getting to hope that she'd finish the story for me. It all sounded good coming from her. I took up the coffee and sat back carefully. In a white blouse and black pencil skirt, Mandy sat side on with one hand rested to the desk, her eyes on me, as if maybe I'd make a run for it. She was sweet that way.

I studied her face.

Right now, it rested creased in a frown, but that didn't take anything away from her looks. She wore blue mascara, red lip gloss, some powder, and looked ready for a night on the town. I appreciated it. I wanted to tell her something good but it was hard in coming. If I'd found the Demarchi kid, that was good news, and I had to be happy about it. Only right now, I didn't feel like arguing it out.

'Pike say anything else,' I asked.

'Everything else squares with the paper, if that's what you want to know, Mike. Pike said you weren't really yourself. He didn't give me any details. That's where I was hoping you'd fill me in.'

She lit a Lucky from my stash on the desk, snapping the Zippo closed. She drew in and blew out a thick stream. 'Finish the coffee, Mike, not the bottle. And all I want to see of that rye is an empty grease wrapper. I'll be out by reception. Not that I'll welcome any more clients. Not right now.'

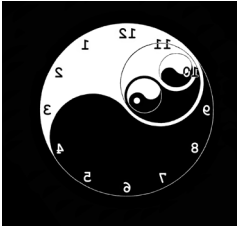
I watched her leave.

She'd left me a lot to think on.

It made no sense that I'd found the Demarchi kid. She had it wrong. That wasn't like Mandy, only I couldn't figure her play. I let it go. What mattered now was Pike. The paper still lay over by the couch and I left it there for the moment. I had to work off this drunk before I could think on it. I took another swig at the bottle and unwrapped the rye.

Mitch had piled on the rabbit food. Mandy no doubt had insisted that I needed the vitamins. I divided the sandwich and slopped the lettuce and tomato on the side of the plate, then put it back together and bit in. The rye and the pastrami were fresh and that went a long way to help get it down. The coffee finished it off, only I added to it from the bottle, emptying it. When I was done, I sat back in the chair.

It was Saturday morning, and the sounds of the street came up through the window: the yell of the paperboy, the idling engine of the delivery truck beside Mitch's delicatessen, the honk and run of motors along Dearborn. There was some comfort in the familiarity. I stood up and looked at the folded paper on the couch. I decided to read the story again. Only, before I did, I lifted another bottle of Old Sergeant's from the bottom desk draw.



Chapter 4

Booze worked like paint stripper. It stripped back the colors you put on. The colors that made up a life. And when you had erased yourself of color from top to bottom, then you started out again. You built up, only you built up on lies, on what you wanted to believe. Truth was a blank map. A road you built on. It was a form of coloring in. Only this time you had built up with grays. It was when nothing mattered anymore. And after awhile, if you'd colored yourself with grays long enough – if you endured – even the bottle stopped mattering. And that's when you had erased yourself good and proper. You'd erased yourself along with the bottle.

I blinked my eyes open. I lay over the Buick's steering column like a flour sack smacked in the middle. I wasn't thinking anything. I couldn't. My head felt like a ton of lead punched into a wall. I lay that way, taking the hot flushes across my face, staring down at a puddle of spittle on the floor, my throat raw. In the end, booze was rat poison. You could only take so much. Round about now, I guessed I'd reached that point. But I knew I wasn't going to stop.

I bought mostly from Joe.

His full name was Joseph Paul Colacello. He was a former Catholic priest. As he told it, he'd stopped believing in God. He'd found too much in the Bible that didn't square with what he saw on the street, and with those who'd come in for confession.

Aged thirty-five, he quit the priesthood for good. The next three years

he spent riding the boxcars from state to state, drifting, and working the odd job. He wanted to reason things out, only what he'd reasoned out was what he'd already understood as a priest.

He liked helping people out, listening to their life stories, and adding to their lives anyway he could. Riding the boxcars, he got to listening to all the down and outs. Most were drunks. And no-one told their life story better than a drunk.

It seemed that a drunk was always sorry. Always promised how some day things would be better. So when Joe stopped riding boxcars, he opened Joe's Liquor on Michigan Avenue with the money he'd saved while drifting. Soon enough he became every bowery bum's confessor. And he became mine.

I couldn't say that I needed a confessor, but then I found out I did.

Some cases brought out the roaches and everything ugly that ever lived under a rock, especially at night, because everything ugly liked to hide its face. So some dawns, wanting to cool my heels, meant sitting with Joe till the booze and the talk drowned the night out of me. That gave me cause to think, because I never took to Joe enough. Maybe not as much as I should have.

I made to move my head.

It came off the steering wheel like it wanted to keep hold. My eyes pulled in and out. I steadied one hand on the dash, the other on the wheel. It must have taken five minutes. When I could see, the first thing I made out was that it was night, and that a fog was up. The fog was thick, and swirled right to the windscreen. The dim glow of a lamp standard showed down the street.

The dark, at least, was something to be thankful for. I wasn't in a fit

state to be seen, and wouldn't be until I got another bottle. And maybe that was where I got to be my own kind of roach. Crawling out of one bottle, I'd just as soon crawl into the next. And right now, I was looking for as many bottles as I could find. I thought about my digs, or maybe the Allerton, then I decided on the Edgewater Beach, something telling me I had business there, that I'd laid in a supply. But I decided to begin with the Buick.

I searched the floor.

Nothing.

I searched the door side pockets.

Nothing.

I searched the rear.

Nothing.

Then I got to the glove compartment.

That had me reeling back and almost sick.

Something was growing there.

It was black and smelled like wormed meet. I couldn't think what it might be. Roots looked to have grown out of it, like from a potato, embedding right into the brown cardboard of the compartment. I put one hand to my mouth and used the other to prod it with a finger. My finger sank in. Then I got wise.

It was a pastrami on rye.

It must have been lying there some time and gone rotten. Suddenly the smell was too much. I slammed the compartment closed, gagged and shoved out of the door.

'Hello. Mike.'

The voice sounded with a purr. I heard the clack of stiletto heels and

she stood before me.

‘You like to sleep rough, don’t you. Ever tried a bed?’

She wore a black mink, black skirt, black satin blouse, black elbow length gloves, and a black veil over raven bangs. One hand held a black purse.

I figured someone died and that she was in mourning.

She threw back her veil with a casual lift of her hand and brought a cigarette to lips glossed a thick red saying, ‘Now you haven’t seen any bodies lying round have you? The city can be such a jungle.’ She blew a thick column of blue smoke.

I got to my feet and brushed myself down. I was in my second best powder-gray and trench. ‘You counting my body in the score.’ Somehow, I’d managed to get my wits back from the bottom of the bottle.

It was then that I noticed her eyes. They were blue like mine. Crazy with glitter and spelling trouble. I could only be grateful that I hadn’t drowned all the wits out of me.

She blew some more smoke.

‘Maybe,’ she smiled. ‘But, I guess, for a body you move well enough. And if you’re wondering about your car? Parking over a fire hydrant is an abuse of water.’

That rattled me.

I faced towards the front of the Buick. Sure enough, I’d run the curb and hit a hydrant. The wheel had plugged most of the hole, but it didn’t keep the water from running down the street and spraying up the wheel.

‘I guess I couldn’t have seen it.’ I faced back to her. ‘What with the fog.’

‘Then you don’t mind if I drive.’ She drew on the smoke. ‘I don’t have

that problem. My car's not far.'

I couldn't see any car. The fog was too thick. Nevertheless, I couldn't figure her play.

'Drive where?' I asked. 'You got a place in mind.'

'You could slip your frame under a door.' She gave me a look that spelt hungry. 'I'm planning on The Bluebonnet, for some food. You heard of it?'

I knew it well enough. It was a Texas steakhouse on Fairbanks. Swells ate there, expecting their meat to be served up from blueblood longhorns, meaning bums like me generally stayed outside.

'Sure,' I nodded. 'I'll be right at home.' I searched around for a smoke. Found none in my pockets.

She dug into her purse. 'You smoke Luckies, don't you?' She extended a packet together with a gold and black Bakelite Dunhill. 'So do I.'

I couldn't say how she knew about the Luckies. I took the packet, letting her keep hold of the Dunhill. She lit for me.

'By the way ... my name's Verna ... Verna Bruhn. And you can make that Miss.' She took back the Luckies, offering her hand.

I took her hand like I was treading on rice paper. There was something about that name? I'd heard it before? What's more, Bruhn sounded German. And there was a war on. I began to worry about the Buick. Maybe the Krauts wanted it for the war effort? She was just trying to get me away.

'Deutsch,' I said. 'And that's Deutsch, American. My first name's Mike.'

'Sure,' she answered, withdrawing her hand. 'I guess we're aquatinted now.' She showed perfect ivories, letting her veil drop.

I found my hat in the passenger foot well.

We walked a block.

The car was a 1940 burgundy Ford. I got in. It was a step up from my 1938 Buick. It spelled class. Black tuck and roll upholstery. Chrome trimmings. Beige and burgundy two-tone dash. Verna settled herself in the driver's seat, keeping on her veil and gloves, and dropping her purse in the glove compartment.

She had no problem driving through the fog. There was nothing to see of the road but the baleful glow of the lamp standards through a long gray tunnel, only she kept on the accelerator, pitching the car round corners like she was navigating on a rail. Fifteen minutes had us parked by The Bluebonnet. Retrieving her purse, Verna stepped out and moved around the hood to hold my door. I pulled at my necktie, feeling like a mouse. Verna took the steps.

Inside, that there was anything different from the way I imagined was quickly settled by the hatcheck girl.

It was Verna.

I did a double take. Looked to Verna. Looked back to the hatcheck girl. The difference was in the way the girl was decked out. She wore a black pin-striped pants suit and a bowler raked at an angle, her raven bangs tucked under the hat. Other than that, she was the same woman. I took Verna and her to be twins. Verna peeled off her gloves and veil, cloaking both articles with the mink. I followed with my hat and trench. The dining room was down the hall.

It was the swank joint I expected. Plush royal blue carpet, and walls hung with black and white prints of Texas oil rigs in thick gilded frames. A central chandelier gave off a soft light, illuminating tables decked with

red linen and silver service. Purple velvet curtains tied with tasseled gold braid screened the windows. There were no other diners. What I took to be the managing waitress stood by the door. And that's when I knew I was going crazy.

She was another twin.

The same as Verna. The same as the hatcheck girl. The same hat and pants suit.

She came over, seating us both by the window. Verna asked, 'How do you like it?'

'I don't. How about a drink?'

'Don't you think you've had enough?' Verna lit a fresh Lucky and fixed me with a stare.

'A bottle's a circle,' I said. 'It keeps coming back around.'

She tapped ash from the Lucky into a chromium ashtray. 'You don't like the answers you've found, do you, Mike?'

Hearing it spelled out like that, straight up, no warming up for the pitch, was hard. I knew I needed to think it through, only right now, I didn't have the stamina. I figured the best play was to string along.

'What makes you say that?' I said it quietly. And I knew I said it not really wanting to hear the answer.

'The reason you drink.'

It was a good play, but nothing fresh. I could have got the same answer from any Whistler's mother working skid row. Sure, a bottle was a pal, and I'd made it my friend, but so was the apartment you owned and the dining table and couch you put in it. Everybody had their answer to the jungle. Verna had left the Luckies and Dunhill on the table. I helped myself.

‘I guess you’ve said your piece.’ I lit and blew out. ‘Now how about you level with me. What’s this all about?’

‘About?’ Verna took her time on the smoke, pulling on it slowly. ‘Whatever do you mean, Mike.’

‘Us being chummy, eating out like we were pals.’ I indicated across the room, tipping my head.

She edged herself forward in the chair. ‘Why don’t you tell me? You’re the detective. You figure it out.’

I stared at the Lucky in my hand, watching it smoke awhile. She was some package. She had looks, and she was no rattle head. I knew I had to be careful. ‘I’m figuring you’ve got a beef with me. Maybe you’re fixing me for a frame-up.’ I slid the ashtray towards me. ‘Something I’ve done in the past. Only, I can’t say what.’

She sat quiet awhile, then said, ‘You’re a good friend of Pike’s, aren’t you?’

That had me swallow. I couldn’t figure what she knew about Pike. She answered quickly enough.

‘I’ve been asking about you, only Pike wouldn’t give anything away.’

That was Pike, alright. Rip his guts out with a 100-pound fishhook and you still couldn’t get him to talk. The managing waitress approached.

‘Are you ready to order?’

Verna sat with the menu, only I hadn’t seen it appear.

‘The ribs, Elisha ... and the house red.’ She stabbed out her smoke. ‘And you can make that for two.’

Elisha eyed me like I was dead meat, tapping her pencil on the pad. I nodded my okay. She came back quick enough, placing two glasses on the table and pouring from a bottle.

I sipped and gagged. The wine tasted like a week old sock.

‘You don’t like it?’ Verna asked.

‘It needs to be taken to the cleaners.’ I spat into the glass.

‘It’s an acquired taste.’ Verna smiled, again showing those perfect ivories.

I couldn’t be sure, figuring the sock might have been easier. I drank anyway, concluding that booze was booze. It tasted better the second time around. Then came a surprise.

‘You should put Karl Karlsson on file. You’ll find him at the Millennium Knickerbocker, carved up the same way as Hochstein and Simpkins.’

I was quick with my notebook. I’d never heard of Hochstein and Simpkins, but I wrote it all down.

‘Killing’s a nasty business, Mike. You want to be sure you get it right. No-one who’s innocent, I mean.’

She lost me there, but I knew I was hearing a confession, and I worked on that. I drank some more, filling the glass from the bottle the waitress left on the table.

‘Have you got some more. I’ll have to write a report for the punch-inelloes.’

Verna shook her head.

‘It’ll come to you. We should eat.’

Elisha stepped up, setting down two plates, and that had me sitting back.

Maybe Texan’s liked their ribs raw, and with a type of plum sauce. As for the rest of the plate. I guess the chef must have had the night off, the butcher looking to have done most of the work. Elisha left. Verna was talking.

‘And so the Lord God put man into a trance, and while he slept, he took one of his ribs and closed the flesh over the place. The Lord God then built up the rib, which he had taken out of the man, into a woman, and the man said:

‘How this, at last –
bones from my bones,
flesh from my flesh! –
this shall be called woman,
for from man was this taken.’

I closed the notebook. I hadn’t figured her for a suffragette, not with the looks she had on offer. Only maybe I wasn’t seeing too well.

There was something wrong with the room. The pictures of the oil rigs looked a mile high. I drank down the glass, working the drink to level myself out. I felt like adding to what Verna had to say, but her words sounded like the talk from a preacher, and if she meant anything by it, I wasn’t in church often enough to know. It was then that I noticed the table.

It stretched along the window about 12feet; Verna at the end, looking like a cat. She stabbed her fork into the ribs and licked at her lips. ‘Shouldn’t we eat?’

That just about had me out of the door. A suffragette was one thing, but a suffragette cat on heat was another. I went to answer, but felt my jaw go slack. Verna drank down her glass.

‘How do like your dish?’

I couldn’t say I did.

My head was in the plate. Passed out.

Chapter 5



Pike and I stood pressed against the alley wall. The rain had picked up, and was now pelting down like it was the night's opening round.

I'd brought the bottle of rye with me – resting it in the outer pocket of my trench – and was glad of it. Water was running over the body in a steady stream, it having become banked up between the waste cartons and the fence behind.

This wasn't your average killing. It was homicidal in the way where things just exceeded all bounds of reason. I'd seen plenty of it from guys who had a chip on their shoulder about the size of Mount Rushmore. They'd start beating up on a guy and just kept on going. Something else seemed to take over. Something from deep down.

McDougal had a take on it. The law of the jungle.

I took the bottle from the trench and swigged. Pike shrugged up his right shoulder, as was his habit of, wiping under his nose with his hand and sniffing.

'Like I said, Mike, the stiff's been gone over with a meat cleaver. Knew it as soon as I came out with the slops.'

Pike splashed off across the flagstones, the rain beating his hat brim flat, and brown water sloshing over his shoes. He still had a touch of the nerves, but had settled some after telling me the story.

The stiff had been in earlier, taking a meal and a coffee. But that wasn't what had made Pike nervous. It was what he'd found on the body. An agency card. Mine. It was wedged between the stiff's second and

third fingers, and covered with blood.

Pike slid the card over the booth Formica like it was something he couldn't wait to lose. He didn't call the punchinelloes, and I couldn't have been more grateful. Lifting the card, I'd stared at it till the booze blurred my name and the blood together, then I shoved it into my jacket pocket.

Filling me in some more, Pike had said that the stiff's name was Friedrich Hochstein, and that he was a steel plant manager from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When Pike asked after his hotel, he said it was the Edgewater Beach, and that he was in town for a business convention. After he finished up his meal, he needed the phone. Pike obliged, he made the call, paid, and left. Pike couldn't tell me anything about that call, but it was most probably nothing.

I joined Pike by the body.

He was right about the meat cleaver. The stiff lay belly down, his back racked with long gouges that cut right through the overcoat and suit, peeling the fat flesh up like burst sausage. But I couldn't say it was that which killed him. He needed a closer look. I circled round.

He was dressed dapper. A finely cut brown gabardine overcoat, gray wool suit, Italian shoes, and gray Fedora. The hat lay a yard away, turned up on its crown, filled with rain. All up, it spelled swell. I could have kicked him, only he was down, and lying in his own blood. I stepped closer.

The blood soaked every stitch of clothing. Thick globs of it lay congealed under the chest, which put a time on the killing. It had to be before the rain came, the blood having some time to set. Pike rested in a squat by the stiff's legs, his forearms pressed to his knees, his wrists hanging loose.

‘You say you haven’t laid a hand on him?’ I asked.

Pike shook his head. ‘Never was going to, Mike.’ He shook his head. ‘Cept taking that card from between his fingers.’ He pointed at the outstretched hand where it lay flopped at my feet. ‘Figured you couldn’t explain that to the punchinelloes.’

‘You got that part right, Pike.’ I nudged at the stiff’s coat flap with the toe of my brogue. It was heavy with blood.

‘How long you say between him leaving the diner and you throwing out the slops.’

Pike considered. ‘He came in early evenin’, Mike. Left around eight.’ Pike looked up. The rain had eased some, and he wiped what remained of it from his face. ‘I threw the slops out about one-thirty. That’s when I seen him. I called you around two, as you know.’

I mulled that over.

‘And the rain, Pike, when did it start?’

‘Around the same time, Mike. I remember lookin’ out after him, and him mentioning what bad luck he had, it rainin’.’

‘It seems it,’ I said. ‘And right about now, it looks like his luck’s stopped for good.’

‘Seems so, Mike.’ Pike nodded, holding onto the brim of his hat.

A wind was building up. I looked towards the road.

A 1940 burgundy Ford crawled up. It halted by the end of the alley, only I was hard pressed to make out the driver. I caught a shadow, no more. I checked my watch, noting the time as 3:15.

‘Know anyone in a 1940 Ford coupe, Pike?’ I asked.

‘What you mean, Mike?’

‘At the end of the alley.’ I nodded towards the road.

Pike hooked a look over his shoulder.

‘Don’t see any car, Mike.’ He faced back towards me. ‘Anyway ... not many people I know can afford a car like that.’

I checked again.

The Ford was gone. I wasn’t sure how to take it. It could have been a trick of the night. That tinsel in the air?

I got the bottle out and took another swig, then faced around, wanting to look behind the cyclone fence that screened off the black top that served as a tenement play yard. A full moon was out, silhouetting the zigzag iron railing of the fire escape down the side of the tenement. Towards the far end of the blacktop, I caught the frame of a basketball hoop and backboard. No lights showed in the tenement. A dog barked somewhere. All else was quiet. Pike yelled out behind me. ‘So when you reckon he was killed, Mike? I never heard anythin’. There must have been some kind of fight.’

I walked back to the body, taking another swig from the bottle.

‘You wouldn’t have heard anything, Pike.’ The rye was feeling good in my belly, giving me ideas. ‘There wasn’t a fight. Not in the alley at least. The stiff was dumped.’ The wind was flapping my trench. I pinched the collar. ‘We need to look into the business angle. He may have had enemies. There’s a war on.’

I faced back down the alley.

There was something odd about the roof lines over the road. A yellow fog was coming in, billowing in waves down the fronts and onto the street. I took a step back. The fog was starting down the alley. I looked back to find Pike by the door. I hurried after. Then it happened.

The stiff lifted from the ground and started to swing towards me,

head down, arms and coat flap dangling. I dropped the rye and felt myself go weak at the knees.

I had only one thing worked out. You dealt your own luck.

Where did I stand?

I held a hand full of jokers, face up, spelling Mike Deutsch, PI.

When I woke, it was dark, but a dim yellow showed under the edges of the roller blind. I lay on the couch in my shorts and open shirt, head pillowed against the armrest, one leg dangling, the other leg with the knee raised against the couch back. At the opposite end of the couch, my trousers lay draped over the arm, and by the couch foot, one of my brogues lay on its side. The coffee table had been knocked over, spilling the paper, the ashtray, a glass and an empty bottle of Old Sergeant's onto the floor. I searched my memory.

Nothing.

I thought harder.

Still nothing.

My back hurt from something pressing hard against it. Feeling around, I dug beneath the rear of the couch cushion. It was my other brogue. I prized it loose and threw it to the floor, then stood.

That had me all at sea, my legs like jello. I had to get the bathroom. I got there, using the jello as a skate, half the time finding myself on the floor. The door of the bathroom hung open. Flicking on the light, I found Mandy.

'Sorry I didn't help.'

She was sitting on the edge of the bath, her knees drawn up, and her eyes tired.

‘I just came in here to check my powder. Then I heard you move. I waited. It mattered somehow that you made it on your own.’

I had to take that as she’d said it. She must have been sitting by me for some time. It wasn’t the first time she’d shown at my digs. Mandy had her own mind when it came to my interests, and if she came, there was always a good reason. She continued talking.

‘You weren’t in the office on Sunday, Mike. Today’s Tuesday. And that’s morning. I found you on the couch. You’ll find the paper interesting.’

I guessed that spelled it out right then and there.

I had no idea what day it was.

I wanted to ask how many bottles I’d drunk, but couldn’t get it out. Mandy always seemed to know. It was a sense she had. Like she’d had experience with a drunk. I’d never got to ask her. Maybe I didn’t want to know. A drunk was bad news for everybody, and some people should never get hurt.

I remembered Tom, how Mandy had lost him to the war.

Maybe I could have saved him. Stopped Mandy from being lonely. I’d applied for the services soon as the planes flew over. But there’d been a problem. I gotten myself loaded on the day and gave the interviewing major my standard bellyache. I hated swells. The major was educated family brass fresh out of West Point, and that meant all shine and his heart taken out with the polish. Things got heated when I told him that I worked for a living. He didn’t take that kindly so I had to pop him one. That got me a classified as 4f – not psychologically fit for duty.

Mandy ran a hand through her bangs, sweeping a stray curl of hair behind her ear.

‘You were seen stumbling from Pike’s Saturday morning, Mike. That’s Saturday the 5th. Now agreed, a good lawyer could argue a good case for you there, you’ve known Pike for years. The murder of Hochstein, as it happens, occurred early the previous evening. However, going back one more day, it’s different. Late evening, you were seen slouched against the wall by Simkin’s suite at the Allerton. He was killed around then. I guess that’s rather harder to explain away.’

Mandy stood from the bath. She looked worn through. I felt I should be offering her a bath, let her freshen up some. However, my mind was mixing putty. A chair stood by the towel rail. I stumbled over and sat heavily.

‘I’m going to clean up outside, Mike. Whenever you’re ready, just come out.’

I looked up on hearing the door close.

The room took the shape of a shoe box. The bath ran the length of one long wall, the door occupied the other. The further short wall held a window with a roller shade, and to the left beside it, was a washbasin and a mirrored cabinet. Feeling out three days of stubble, I decided to clean up. I rose and checked myself in the mirror.

I was no *matinée* idol. My mug had narrowed over the years, sinking the eyes and the cheeks. There was a touch of gray in the hair, and it was thinning at the temples. I figured a diet of booze, coffee, and pastrami on rye was no health kick.

Opening the cabinet, I thumbed the razor. It couldn’t have cut hair for a month of trying, so I honed it some on the strap. Working up a good lather, I managed a shave without cuts, washed up, and slapped on some cologne. Then I noticed something else standing in the cabinet.

It was a fresh bottle of Old Sergeant's.

I looked to the door.

Hearing Mandy moving about outside, I figured she understood me well enough, only drinking now had to be all wrong. But the booze already had me, and a little more now wouldn't hurt. I took out the bottle, snapped the seal, drank, and I sat myself on the bath edge, placing the bottle at my feet.

From what Mandy was saying, I was in a real fix.

Pike had found a stiff in the trash alley beside his diner. And another stiff had been found at the Allerton. Somehow I was involved with both cases, only I had no reason to be. I was working hard on the Demarchi case.

Susan Demarchi was a doe-eyed fourteen-year-old who hadn't come home one afternoon after picking up a soda. Her father, Mario, had hired me to find her. I had a few leads. One led to the Water Tower. She was last seen there and I needed to check it out.

Her folks were immigrants. Loved the old country, but wanted something better for the family. They'd worked their way up, Susan's father chiseling stone till his hands bleed. It brought them a swell home in Wicker Park. I figured they'd earned it.

Maybe my father could have done the same, only he fell short. He worked a garage south of the river that did good trade, but the pay was light. Night's he'd be fielding clients to the dilapidated clapboard that passed as a home. I'd help out often, but made plans not to become a grease monkey. Dad never seemed to get the grease out from under his nails.

I drank some more of the bottle. Soon as I straightened out, I'd find

the Demarchi kid. I was set on it. I owed it to the father because he did right by his girl. I heard the hoot of traffic outside the window, stood and thought to take a look. The roller shade rolled up with a snap.

A heavy fog was out. But it was no ordinary fog. It pressed upon the glass like something from a swamp, yellow and thick enough to get lost in. Somehow, I did.

‘Hello, Mike ... Good to see you again.’

A black shadow came out of the fog and the night. It took form.

A woman.

I wasn’t one for the kink scene, but what I saw had to be straight from the Kit-Kat club – a skin-tight black rubber cat suit, mask, laced, knee-length stiletto boots, and in one gloved hand, a coiled bull whip.

The only cat I’d ever owned was named Jezebel. I’d figured at the time that it might be good to have someone, or something, around to care for better than I cared for myself. Only, I ended up feeding Jezebel little better than I fed myself. Cold coffee laced with booze, and pastrami on rye. In the end, she ran off. I guess she figured that she’d do better in an alley.

The cat girl uncoiled the whip. I backed a step. I had her as a cat on revenge

‘There’s a war on, Mike. You want to help out, try the Edgewater Beach.’

Somehow she knew me. I’d had the Edgewater on my mind. She kept coming. ‘You’ve got a gun, Mike.’ She purred. ‘Why don’t you use it? Kitty likes to play rough.’

I checked the street. There was no-one about. No help. She was right. I kept a Smith & Wesson. But I had something against shooting a woman. I continued backing, sidling along the wall.

‘What kind of play you got in mind?’ I asked.

She let the whip trail along the ground. ‘Oh ... A game for two. You roll over. I scratch.’

She made play sound like a rumble. I ran.

Getting across the street, I heard the crack of the whip like a rifle retort. I spun around. The cat girl was right behind me. Maybe I didn’t like shooting women, but she was half cat. I went for my gun.

‘Mike!’

I heard a knock.

‘I’m done. Do you want a hand?’

I closed up the window, drawing the roller shade down. The door opened.

‘How about something to eat? I could cook you up something?’

I wasn’t sure. I looked at the bottle I held in my hand. My head felt like it was floating off, detached somewhere, and still by the window. I checked back, but it wasn’t there. I stood the bottle to the floor, moved to the washbasin and splashed my face with cold water. It eased the floating feeling. I felt a mess. I needed a shave. I checked myself in the mirror. Red eyes, heavy and puffy, and the whites flecked with yellow.

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘I need to get off the booze. I’ll wait on the couch.’

I picked up the bottle and sat on the couch.

Mandy had straightened up the coffee table, leaving the paper on top. I didn’t look at it. Instead, I lit a Lucky from packet inside my jacket. Mandy had folded my clothes neatly onto a chair she’d pulled over.

I pulled on the Lucky, taking it slowly. Something had me bug eyed at the window. It was enough to put a man through rehab, only I knew I was never going to take that road. Last time I tried it, I lasted a day

before I popped the attending nurse in the face and broke a chair over his back.

Following that, the first liquor store I came to wasn't friendly, so the attendant spent the next ten weeks with his broken arm in a sling. Five days later, Mandy found me holed out somewhere on a beach on the north shore. I never found out exactly where. Looking now at the bottle on the table, I decided instead to come down slowly and took another swig. Mandy was back with the coffee and placed it before me. I pulled over the ashtray.

'It's bad, Mike. McBain's been around. He came last night, but I managed to hold him off at the door. I kept the chain on, telling him that you weren't in, that I was waiting. He seemed to take it well enough, only I don't think he believed me.'

'McBain!' I tapped ash from the Lucky. Plain clothes detective senior sergeant McBain was a real sorehead. We'd had a few close encounters. None of them good. He preferred me in the drunk tank. And for good.

'Did he say anything?'

'No. Only that he wanted you for questioning.'

'Anything in particular?'

'No.'

Mandy sat beside me. It felt good, her sitting beside me like that. I wanted to reach over, hold her to me. Only I didn't. I never let women get close. Mandy had a good set of pins. But I would never know about those pins in bed. How they wrapped around you. How they squeezed your midriff when you made love. That sort of feeling was for other people. I liked having Mandy around, that was all. Maybe it was just having the promise of something. Maybe that's what I lived for. The promise of

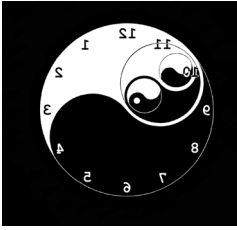
something I knew would never come.

Mandy picked up the paper and slapped it on the table before me. I stared down at the headline.

PI. KILLS COAL BARRON OF CHICAGO

If I wasn't already pale, I must have turned whiter than a ghost. Someone was feeding a line to the papers. Maybe it was that interviewing major at the enlistment office.

The heir to the Karlsson coal empire was dead. He'd been found in his luxury suite at the Millennium Knickerbocker on the night of Monday the 7th, carved up like a lamb at the butcher, his heart shoved into his mouth. The suspect was down to the same killer as that of Hochstein and Simpkins. Mike Deutsch. A gumshoe gone bad.



Chapter 6

Maybe I'd set myself up.

I sat in the Buick. In the passenger foot well lay an empty bottle of Old Sergeant's, on the dash, my hat, and all around, was a fog.

You got smart being a gumshoe. You knew when something wasn't on the level. You felt it in your gut, and right now, my gut was turning enough to mix cement. I rested back against the seat, working my way through a Lucky.

I was deep into a drunk. Every bender ran its course, but this seemed endless. I looked at my hand on the bottle. I was caught in my own bind. And I was closing the door on myself. If I wanted out now, someone else was going to have to set me free. An angel. One that knew she was getting mixed up with a lost cause. I was set on killing, and I was starting with myself.

I fired up the Buick, resting the bottle in the side pocket of the door. I figured the Demarchi Kid might be my angel. I had to save her. I owed it to her father, and every father with a daughter like her.

He'd built his way up from nothing. Chiseled stone till his hands bled and sweat dripped off his brow. And when he wasn't chiseling stone for the big builders around town, he'd chisel stone at home, servicing private clients. And he did all for Susan.

I headed for the water tower. I had a lead.

I had to pride myself on getting used to fog. I had the Buick navigating on rails, keeping my eyes on the lamp standards, following them like

a row of pearls in the air. The Michigan Avenue Bridge loomed through the fog.

Maybe I was seeing things, but crossing the bridge, looking over the railing, I'd have sworn the Chicago River had changed. There were trees, and somehow, with the fog threading its way, the river looked older than time. I kept on.

The tower was at 800 North Michigan. The road was empty, and the sidewalks couldn't have looked more deserted than Wrigley Field after the loss of the Chicago Cubs to the New York Yankees. I just had to keep heading straight. Nothing to hit. I drank from the bottle as I drove. The fog had to be just plain bad luck for Chicago. An inversion layer must have caught over the lake.

The Water Tower showed. It stood at 154 ft, a square base with corner crenellated towers and a taller tower in the middle, all made of big limestone blocks. Mr Demarchi must have had a hand in it. Placed every stone himself. Susan had to be there now. Checking on her father's work. She would have brought him his lunch. That was the kind of kid she was. A daughter that would make any father proud.

I pulled the Buick up against the curb and shoved out the door.

The fog was hard to take. It smelled like sulfur and stung the eyes. I kept my handkerchief to my mouth. There was a bench by the door of the Water Tower. I couldn't see Susan or Mr Demarchi, so it couldn't have been lunch hour yet. I sat with the bottle and waited. Susan would show soon. I'd recognize her by the lunch pail in her hand. In the lunch pail would be Mario's pastrami on rye. He loved pastrami. He ate it all the time. That's how he got to be so strong. That and chiseling stone.

I kept going on the bottle. She had to show soon. My watch read

1:00 o'clock. Maybe stonemasons ate irregular hours? That had to be it. He was too busy to break from work and told Susan not to show. I decided to wait another hour.

I was getting used to the fog. The smell was letting up and my eyes had stopped burning. My father Karl was the best mechanic in Chicago. The garage he worked was called Luxury Motors and specialized in Daimler-Mercedes and Duesenberg's.

Work was all he had. Mom never followed him over. I never found out the reason. Maybe he worked too much. We never got to talk. He'd be late home and then he'd be in the garage. I'd be playing on the street and I saw what the other kids had. Mostly they had money in their pockets. Not much. It was a poor neighborhood. But it bought them a soda when they wanted one. That's what I had to think on right there.

What did anyone want from life? Something more than a soda.

Everybody had to want the same thing. You wanted someone there with you. You couldn't go at it alone. If anyone said it any different, they were either lying, or they didn't really know themselves. They were mixed up. That's the way it went with Dad.

I didn't have enough to give him.

Something kicked up inside me early. Something that didn't square with the world.

Growing up, I never found myself in agreement with anything, and I made a point about it with any kid I came across by socking him one. As far as school went, I left at fifteen. My father had trouble with the book fees. After that, I learned what I wanted to know by thumbing the book leaves at the local library.

When Karl was found with his skull bashed in, robbed on the street

for his only dollar, and the punchinelloes with no leads other than the bloodied baseball bat found in the alley nearby, I decided that the city needed something better than what passed for law and order.

McDougal taught me everything I needed to know. Only, I watched him put in an honest day's work day in day out and all it ever bought him was a hernia and the regular alimony payments he had to make. Retiring, taking what little he could get for a pension, he handed me his client list and I renamed the business the Deutsch Detective Agency.

The bottle was empty. Susan wasn't going to show now. She'd be at school. I'd got it wrong. I left the bottle on the bench and walked back to the car. Driving back down Michigan Avenue towards the river I sat with my nose to the windshield, crawling through the fog, the streets looming like dark mouths wanting to swallow me. I parked by the bridge and walked down to the shore. There was a bank of trees that grew out into the water. Amidst the tangled branches I saw Susan. Her white cotton dress was swimming up around her face and there was blood on it. I removed my trench and hat and tossed them both on the bank, then I waded out.

I stood holding her for what must have been an hour, until everything on me was soaked and clammy. Then I dragged her back up the bank. There were some rocks nearby and I got some rope from the trunk of the car. I tied the rocks around her and carried her back in as deep as I could go. She sank down and the water bubbled up from underneath her dress. After that I sat on the grassy bank, staring out over the river, hoping that Susan would rise up out of the water, that she wasn't really dead and that she would walk up the bank and take my hand. I'd hug her and then I'd take her back to her father. He'd see me as a friend and

he'd welcome me in as part of the family. I'd be part of a home.

Only Susan wasn't going to walk up out of the water. I realized that now. It was all on account of Antonio Montinelli.

The Montinelli family ran Chicago. They started their empire with La Dolce Oil, an olive oil import company, and their operation now extended into protection and numbers rackets. Antonio Montinelli headed the whole operation and he'd kidnapped Susan to hold as ransom.

Antonio had been putting the squeeze on Mario Demarchi, offering protection for his masonry business, only Mario had refused to pay. To give him incentive, Antonio arranged for his daughter to be kidnapped, hoping to hold her for ransom. Only the plan went wrong.

I stood up from the bank and stepped into the waiting elevator.

Mandy was at her desk when I came through the door. My suit was still wet from the river – puddling the floor, but she never seemed to notice. I was glad of it. I didn't have another suit to change into. I was wearing my second best powder-gray, still not having had the time to pick up my best suit from Chen the chink. I hung my hat and trench on the rack, asked for a coffee, and continued straight on into the office. Mandy didn't mind me being short with her. She understood my moods. I'd feel better as soon as I got a bottle.

In the office, I sat myself at the desk. The noises of the street came up through the window, the yell of the paper boy, the idling engine of the delivery truck beside Mitch's delicatessen, the honk and run of motors along Dearborn. There was some comfort in the familiarity. I unfolded the paper upon the desk. The headline stared up.

TONY MONTINELLI SLAIN

The story had Antonio Montinelli attending a mob convention at the Edgewater Beach Hotel. His body had been found in the kitchen, done over with a meat cleaver, and his heart shoved in his mouth.

Mandy came through the door with the coffee. She placed the pot on the desk together with the cup and saucer.

‘Pike called. He said he’s worried about you. You haven’t shown since Friday, that’s five days now, if you include today, since the murder.’ She sat herself on the desk edge and, arms folded, talked on. ‘And Pike added that McBain’s been around asking questions. It seems you can’t account for your presence around the time of the murder of Hochstein. They made it out as between eight and midnight on Friday the forth.’

‘I was home.’ I laid the paper down. ‘I bought some bottles.’

‘Are you sure, Mike? The landlady reported that she never saw you come in.’

‘I got a call from Pike.’

‘That was at two in the morning, Mike. The landlady doesn’t know anything after midnight. That’s when she usually turns in.’

I stood from the chair and began to pace.

I didn’t keep much in the way of furnishing. There was the brown leather couch, the brown wooden coffee table, brown floor rug, brown shaded lamp, and brown desk. Color didn’t figure. I liked to strip things back, free of color. Truth lay at the core of everything. I was the last person to kid myself.

I’d been lying low since quitting the Demarchi case. I’d let Mario Demarchi down and I had a lot to answer for. After leaving Pike’s on Saturday morning, I’d gone back to my digs to hole out. I’d stocked up on booze, determined not to come out till I’d drunk my head clear. This

morning, I'd done just that, only I decided to sleep off the rest of my drunk in the Buick before coming up to the office. Now I was hearing something completely different.

Mandy spoke from behind me.

'McBain told Pike that you're to call him. He wants you to explain your movements during the night of Simpkins and Hochstein's murder. And then there is the matter of Karlsson. You were seen drinking at the Millennium bar earlier in the evening. And by seen, that means by the barkeep.'

I faced around and first looked at the desk, at where the paper lay. I knew nothing about the murder of Simpkins and Karlsson. Hochstein's death had been the result of a telephone call he'd made at Pike's. I just had to establish the identity of the recipient. As for the murder of Montinelli, I wondered if he was tied in somewhere. It didn't seem likely, only that bodies seemed to be turning up fast in Chicago.

Mandy was looking at me like she wanted me to say something to make her feel better. I wanted to take her in my arms. Everybody had to want something like that. Only it seemed wrong. I didn't keep her around for that. Everybody stood alone.

'Where've you been, Mike? I've been by your walk-up every day since Sunday. And the Allerton hasn't reported you checking in since Thursday.'

Thinking about it now, I couldn't say. I moved back to the desk and pulled open the bottom draw. There was a fresh bottle of Old Sergeant's. I sat in the chair and rested the bottle on the desk.

The noises of the street came up through the window, the yell of the paper boy, the idling engine of the delivery truck beside Mitch's

delicatessen, the honk and run of motors along Dearborn. There was some comfort in the familiarity. I unfolded the paper upon the desk. The headline stared up.

TONY MONTINELLI SLAIN. DEUTSCH MAKES IT FOUR

The bottle was welcome round about then.

Chapter 7



I sat in the Buick like it was a new car. It spelled class. Black tuck and roll upholstery. Chrome trimmings. Beige and burgundy two-tone dash.

I was going back to Joe's. I needed another bottle. Keying the ignition, I swung the Buick out into the road and rubbernecked. I was on the corner of Randolph and Wabash. I only had to follow Randolph till it intersected Michigan, then head straight. Once over the bridge, I'd be at Joe's. Pressing the accelerator, I turned the corner.

I had to pride myself on getting used to the fog. I had the Buick driving itself. There was no other traffic. Keeping my eyes on the lamp standards, I followed them like a row of pearls in the air. The bridge loomed through the fog. A mile further on was Joe's.

Maybe I was seeing things, but crossing the bridge, looking over the railing, I'd have sworn the Chicago river had changed. There were trees, and somehow, with the fog threading its way, the river looked older than time. I kept rubbernecking. And that's when the Buick hit a pothole. Correcting the wheel, I over steered and slammed the brakes, only to find myself heading straight for the North East Pylon.

I woke with my head cradling the steering wheel. Getting my head up and staring out through the windshield, there was Potatoes Guiseppi, the spud king of Chicago, lit by the Buick's headlights amidst the yellow fog, his body laid up against the Pylon.

I was done for. I'd made mash out of Potatoes, hitting him in the Buick.

Guisseppi had got his start in life aged 10. He'd sold spuds at his parent's market stall by the Old Water Tower, and it'd given him a taste for potatoes.

He'd eat potatoes fried, roasted, boiled or mashed, up to 100 pounds a day. It never helped his looks. Getting to middle age, his midline was all splayed out, resting on legs like columns of stacked tires. This gave him a rolling gait, and that gait was known all over Chicago.

If Guisseppi was walking down the street, you'd better make way or you'd be harvesting potatoes out of your ears, anybody in his way being nine pins, and Guisseppi one great big rolling spud. But nothing stopped him eating. And nothing stopped him doing business.

At the beginning of prohibition, he'd learned to distil potatoes into moonshine. And that was his big start, running potato moonshine all over Chicago, and opening a Speakeasy on Madison Avenue called Guisseppi's Potato Palace. Later, he formed a chain of Potato Palaces that extended all over Chicago.

Only potatoes weren't going to help Guisseppi now. He was dead, and I was the one that killed him. I couldn't have seen him in the fog.

I pushed out the door, wanting a closer look, only the fog had me gagging. But that wasn't all that had me sick. His chest was carved open, his heart was squashed in his mouth, and gripped in a hand flopped like a week old fish in his lap, was my agency card. Wanting to heave my guts upon the sidewalk, I sank to my knees, and that's when I heard the clack of stiletto heels.

'Found another body ... You're quite the detective, aren't you?'

I looked up.

It was a broad.

She held a coiled bullwhip, the end trailing along the sidewalk.

She was dressed from heels to neck in a rubber cat suit. And that had me afraid. I figured I was a mouse and that she had me by the tail. I jumped to the side, then scrambled along the bridge wall. She kept after, drawing the whip through her hand. I started to cough again from the fog. And that was my bad luck. I doubled over, gripping my midriff, then felt the sting of the bullwhip across my cheek. Down my cheek came blood.

She parted her lips, running her tongue over them, and sniffing the air. ‘Don’t you just love the smell of blood on the wind.’

I wasn’t given to shooting women, but that had me reaching for my Smith & Wesson. Only it did me no good. She got hold of the end of the gun with the end of the bullwhip and flicked it clattering down the road.

‘Guns are so noisy. I don’t use them myself.’

I couldn’t be sure what she meant by that. I ran.

I ran the Magnificent Mile clear through Chicago. I ran past Joe’s liquor. I ran past the Allerton. I ran past the Water Tower. And around about there, the punchinelloes nabbed me.

It was booze that put you to bed. And it was booze that made a headstone.

I could see it, the door opening for me like the opening arms of a friend. I was in the drunk tank. But I never got to wait in there long. I got hauled upstairs into an office, thrown into a brown leather and chromium coaster chair, and there, behind his desk, sat plain clothes detective Senior Sergeant McBain.

McBain fitted the way I saw a punchinello. A marionette you could dangle on strings. His shoulder bones stuck through his gray suit fabric, and easing himself into his chair, he folded up like an umbrella, bending his joints in one at a time. Crossing the fingers of his hands, he rested the tips of his elbows on the desk and leaned towards me.

‘Do you mind if I call you Mike? I’d prefer to keep this friendly.’

His voice rasped from his throat like a thousand cigarettes. As long as I’d known him, he’d had that voice. He was a jabber head. He’d talked himself raw. I didn’t answer. I figured I didn’t have to. McBain knew why he hauled me in. He could do the talking. He pursed his lips and leaned back in the chair.

‘Alright ... so you don’t want to talk. I understand. You’re a loner. That’s the word on the street anyway, and the times I’ve had you in tells me no different. Me – ’ He stabbed a bony index finger into the hollow of his chest. ‘I believe in talking as a way to confession. But let’s not cloud the issue. We’ve got someone downstairs who’ll give us the answers, only she’s – ’ He waved off, letting out a smile. ‘Well ... we’ll come to that later. I want to talk about the dead suits.’

I folded my arms and pushed back in my chair. Here it came. McBain rose from the chair and stepped round the desk.

‘Let me tell you a little more about yourself, Mike. Like I said, you’re a loner. Never married. Hell, I don’t think you’ve ever had a sweetheart. Where’d it come from, Mike? They say these things run in the family. Genetic, you know. Peas in the pod. That’s Mendel by the way. I don’t know if you’ve heard of him. He invented the whole thing. What makes people tick. It’s all in the breeding. Some people call that eugenics. And there was this other guy concerned with that. Galton. But he’s another

story. Hell, they're all mixed up in it together anyway.

'Now, somehow, these Nazis got hold of the idea. They invented special machines for the purpose. I've heard them called ovens. But that's just another word for breeding chamber. Anyway, I suspect you know about these things.

'Deutsch? That's German isn't it?

'Your father came over in 1910, according to the records.' McBain slapped his hand upon a folder on his desk. 'It's all here, Mike. I've been looking into it. You were five. Your mother stayed on in the old country. I'm sorry. It happens that way. Things between people don't always work out. There's no reason for it, you understand. No sense blaming anyone.'

It was some yarn he was pulling. I figured I should have been taking notes for the funny papers.

'Okay, so you he had it rough. That happens to a kid sometimes. Sets them up wrong for life. Some grow out of it. It's those that don't that are the problem. Your father worked as a grease monkey. Struggled for a living. And then he's put six feet under for a dollar. Sure, I'd call that a tough break. You were twenty at the time and Chicago's finest didn't turn up anything excepting a bloodied baseball bat, so you struck out on your own. Figured you could do better. McDougal, wasn't it?'

McBain was really getting wound up. I wondered how many more innings he was good for.

'Bad start if you ask me, Mike. News had him in bed with the Montinelli and Pasquini families. Never worked an honest case in his life. But he's out of it now and you took over the agency. First right move you ever made in your life. So ... let me ask. What went wrong?'

I had a feeling that I wanted to tell him, and it began with popping

him one. Only I didn't. Some part of me held back.

'Now the army has your records.' He slapped his hand upon another folder on the desk. 'I've got the report right here, and it's not good. The army's got you classified as 4f – not psychologically fit for duty. Well – ' He pulled himself erect and fell back in the chair. 'I say they got that part right.

'Now, I know what you're up to, Mike, and I can tell you it's not wanted in Chicago, and by God, it's not wanted in America. We live in a God-fearing country. You should be ashamed.'

If there was one thing I hated, it was patriotic eyewash. I'd had a gutful of it from the interviewing major at the enlistment office. That's why I popped him one.

McBain stood suddenly and moved away from the desk, claspings his hands behind him, looking something like a frail gray bird.

'Let me tell you what makes this country, Mike. It's enterprise. You might have heard of it. It's salesman in hound's tooth suits carrying leather briefcases. Now, there's a war on. The Nazis. They're set on working this eugenics program of theirs. They want us all looking like Olympians. Blonde and blue-eyed. Well, personally, I don't go for that kind of thing.

'Anyway, you can't win a war without enterprise. And that's where you come in, Mike. You've left dead suits all over town. Captains of industry each and every one of them. That's no way to win a war.'

The roller blind was drawn. He walked over and yanked at the cord, rolling it up with a snap. A heavy fog was out, looking yellow. He stood a moment, staring out.

'You're going to fry over these killings, Mike. Don't kid yourself.

You're up against this city, and you're up against America. And by God, I tell you, you're not going to win.'

Something had put the zap on McBain's head. I was ready to carry the flag for the country and knew it. The army had it wrong. And so did McBain. I just needed to get off the booze. Straighten out. He turned from the window and sat back in his chair, seeming to sink into it, his frame folding in the middle, absorbed by the fabric.

'You can talk anytime you want ... not that'll do you any good. There's the matter of your agency card. One's been found on each victim. I'd call that pretty incriminating evidence, so let me say this.

'You're a louse, Mike. If you've got a beef with this country, just say so. No ... don't worry. I already know. You think you've been hard done by. Let me tell you, some people work for a living.'

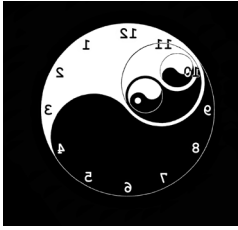
He held out his hands. They looked like they would have struggled with a paper clip.

'My father worked as a stonemason. Every night I'd help with the private clients he'd field to our home. He built the home up from nothing. Put four kids through college. He did that with his hands. Now he's got a home in Wicker Park.

'Okay, so there you have it. Now, like I said, we've got someone down stairs. We believe she's your partner. We caught her on the bridge by the north-east pylon. She didn't resist. Just gave herself up freely like she was expecting it. She's in the lockup downstairs. And we've got her name. Verna Bruhn. That's German if I ever heard it.'

McBain stepped from the chair, came around the desk and leaned his face right up to mine. 'You and this broad. I'm telling you, I've seen a lot of things in my time on the force. And hell, I suspect there's a lot of

things I haven't seen. But you ... you and her take the cake, and what's more, you've baked the cake yourselves.'



Chapter 8

I woke on the back seat of the Buick, staring up at the ceiling, the studs of the ceiling upholstery glistening like stars, making me hope I was lying on a park hillock somewhere staring up at the night sky of Chicago. But I couldn't kid myself. A voice spoke with a purr from over the driver's seat.

'You were kind of rough on McBain, weren't you? He's just a sweet old man.'

I caught the outline of a shadow, and then it was gone. I sat up straight, pushed back against door, and had something fall from the folds of my trench. It was the paper. I flicked on the roof light.

DEUTSCH CUTS POTATOES FOR FRIES

That had me in a bad fix. That had to mean Potatoes Guiseppi, the spud king of Chicago. There was a photo of him laid up against the northeast Pylon, looking no better than a peeled spud. I looked around for a bottle, finding only empties littering the floor. I'd drunk myself dry. A thick fog lay all around the Buick. It felt good somehow, like a cloud, something to get laid up in with your head back. I shut my eyes.

Pike had me by the trench collar, shaking me awake. 'Jesus, Mike. What happened? ... You okay?'

I was laid out cold. I couldn't say what had happened. I shook my

head, trying to stand. Pike shifted round and hooked his hands under my arms. Once on my feet, Pike handed me my hat. I staggered over to the body. It hadn't moved. Something clinked across the flagstones.

It was glass from the shattered bottle. I bent down. The bottom shard still held a thimble of rye within its jagged edges. I drank it down.

'You didn't see the body float, Pike?' I asked.

"What you mean, Mike?" He came over and coughed into his hand. 'Never saw nothin'. The stiff's been lyin' there all the time.' He tugged at his hat brim and jerked up his shoulder.

I threw the shard to the ground. The fog was hard to take. It smelled like sulfur and burned like battery acid. I dug out my handkerchief and held it to my mouth.

'Forget it, Pike.' I used the handkerchief to rub at the back of my neck. 'It must have been the booze. Help me lift him You grab the legs. I'll grab the arms.'

'You want the case, Mike?'

I thought it over. I couldn't figure the pay-off. But there was my agency card. I guessed I was involved no matter what.

'Sure, Pike. I'm here, aren't I? You could say I got a call.'

I moved closer.

'We need to flip over the body, Pike. Take a closer look.'

Pike nodded. 'Sure, Mike, sure. Whatever you say.'

I had to drag the stiff's second arm up from under his body. It was covered in blood, but the rain and the stream of water down the alley took care of it. Resting on my haunches, and taking both arms above the elbows, I heaved. Pike did likewise, hoisting and flipping the lower legs. Pike gagged and fell back. I doubled over, tripped on the back of

my heels, and ended up sitting on the cobbles.

The stiff's guts were all ripped up. I needed to get a closer look, but had to work myself up to it. I stood and circled around.

A butcher couldn't have made a better job of things. The stiff's intestines and stomach spilled to one side, and the liver and lungs were slashed from whatever had sheared through the rib cage. And there was something else. The heart had been ripped from his chest, pulped, and shoved into the mouth.

Pike stood against the wall of the alley, spilling his guts into his hand. He pushed away and stumbled over.

'What we gonna do, Mike?'

This was pervert stuff. I backed a step or two.

I never went near cases like this. I was washed up enough just dealing straight homicide. Pervert killings left you hard up on believing in anything, and I figured I had a patent on my own brand of cynicism. It didn't need adding to. I shook all over, needing a smoke. Working to light a Lucky, I gave up and threw the smoke down. 'We'll let the punchinelloes deal with it. There's nothing in it for me.'

'You don't want the case now, Mike?'

I lifted the agency card from my pocket. Seeing my name all bloodied over, I flicked the corner edge back and forth with my thumb, then threw it down. It swirled around for a while next to the smoke – trapped in a gurgle of brown water – then got sucked down the rusted iron slats of the drain.

'We'll talk inside, Pike. We're through here.' I coughed, feeling my lungs burning from the fog.

In the diner proper, I spun my hat across the Formica of my regular

booth, then shrugged out of trench and slung it over the back of the seat. Sitting slumped, I dug my spiral notebook and pencil from my jacket pocket.

I had a form of amnesia on most crimes. That's the way I wanted it, keeping the details light, erasing anything that didn't advance the case along. I turned to a fresh leaf, licked at the pencil, then wrote up the details on the stiff, underlining the time I'd seen the Ford coupe. Pike came through the door with a fresh bottle of Sergeant's. Hanging his hat and coat on the coat rack, he lifted two tumblers from the wash rack and sat opposite. I slid the open notebook to the table edge, the pencil on top.

'You got any ideas, Mike?' Pike leaned in, eyeballing the notes.

I couldn't say. I was looking at the bottle. I snatched it up, broke the seal, slugged down a drink, poured afresh, drank and poured again. The window caught my eye.

The fog had crept right up to the glass. It was like something from a swamp, yellow and thick enough to get lost in. I wanted to press close to the window, wanted to push through.

'I want to look into that call he made, Pike. That may give us a lead. You say he called the Edgewater Beach?'

'No, Mike. I didn't say. He just said he needed to make a call. I let him have the phone, but didn't listen in.'

I nodded and dragged over the notebook. I wrote down the Edgewater with a question mark beside it and put the notebook away. Lighting a Lucky, I sat back and smoked.

'I'll have Mandy check the files back at the office just the same Pike. I've got a hunch about the Edgewater, I just can't say why. Meanwhile,

like I said, let the punchinelloes deal with the stiff. We'll just sit with our feet dangling, see what the papers say.'

Pike sat back, happy. 'You got a shine on it now, Mike.' He thought a moment. 'I'll make out to the punchinelloes that I threw out the slops late mornin'. You weren't here. Then we'll wait for the papers.'

I drew on my Lucky, finished my glass, and refilled.

Chapter 9



I blinked my eyes open. I lay over the Buick's steering column like a flour sack smacked in the middle. I wasn't thinking anything. I couldn't. My head felt like a ton of lead punched into a wall. I lay that way, taking the hot flushes across my face, staring down at a puddle of spittle on the floor, my throat raw. I made to move my head.

It came off the steering wheel like it wanted to keep hold. My eyes pulled in and out. I steadied one hand on the dash, the other on the wheel. It must have taken five minutes. When I could see, the first thing I made out was that it was night, and that a fog was up. The fog was thick, and swirled right to the windscreen. The dim glow of a lamp standard shone down the street. I had to have a bottle around somewhere.

I found it in the back seat, a fresh bottle of Old Sergeant's, lying on top of my best powder-gray which I'd picked up from Chen the chink who did my cleaning. I lifted it, sat myself back in the seat and drank.

Somewhere around emptying half the bottle, I felt better. The fog around the Buick helped. It felt good, like a soft cloud, something to get laid up in, with your head back. I checked my coat pocket for my notebook. I was working a case for Pike. I wanted to remind myself of what I'd wrote up.

Opening the notebook, something fell from between the leaves. It was a bloodied agency card. Mine. I flicked the corner edge back and forth with my thumb, as I read over the notes.

I'd noted the time a Burgundy Ford had parked down the end of the alley at Pike's. 3:15.

There was the murder of Karl Karlsson at the Millennium Knickerbocker on the night of the 6th.

There was another note about the Edgewater Beach Hotel with a question mark beside it.

I put the notebook away, lit a Lucky and smoked. When I finished with the Lucky, I finished the bottle. Then I decided to see where I was parked. I lifted my best powder-gray from the back seat and shoved out the door.

I was south of river, on Garfield, right beside my walk-up. I might have been on a drunk, but I'd had enough sense to park myself at home, only I'd never made it out the door of the Buick before passing out.

Somehow the walk-up had changed. It looked older, the façade all cracked and overgrown with moss and vines. I gagged on the fog as I took the steps to the door. The fog smelled like sulfur and burned like battery acid.

Inside the apartment, I hung my suit in the wardrobe, then headed straight for the kitchen, where I kept the bottles in a cupboard above the stove. I got a bottle and headed for the couch, laying myself down.

When I woke, it was dark, but a dim yellow showed under the edges of the roller blind. I lay on the couch in my shorts and open shirt, head pillowed against the armrest, one leg dangling, the other leg with the knee raised against the couch back. At the opposite end of the couch, my trousers lay draped over the arm, and by the couch foot, one of my brogues lay on its side. The coffee table had been knocked over, spilling the paper, the ashtray, a glass and an empty bottle of Old Sergeant's onto

the floor.

My back hurt from something pressing hard against it. Feeling around, I dug beneath the rear of the couch cushion. It was my other brogue. I prized it loose and threw it to the floor, then stood.

That had me all at sea, my legs like jello. I had to get the bathroom. I got there, using the jello as a skate, half the time finding myself on the floor. The door of the bathroom hung open. Flicking on the light, I found Mandy.

‘Sorry I didn’t help.’

She was sitting on the edge of the bath, her knees drawn up, and her eyes tired.

‘I just came in here to check my powder. Then I heard you move. I waited. It mattered somehow that you made it on your own’

I had to take that as she’d said it. She must have been sitting by me for some time. It wasn’t the first time she’d shown at my digs. Mandy had her own mind when it came to my interests, and if she came, there was always a good reason. She continued talking, sweeping a stray curl of hair behind her ear.

‘You were seen stumbling from Pike’s Saturday morning, Mike. That’s Saturday the 5th. Now agreed, a good lawyer could argue a good case for you there. You’ve known Pike for years. The murder of Hochstein, as it happens, occurred early the previous evening. However, going back one more day, it’s different. Late evening, you were seen slouched against the wall by Simkin’s suite at the Allerton. He was killed around then. I guess that’s rather harder to explain away.’

A chair stood by the towel rail. I stumbled over and sat heavily. Mandy went on.

‘You better straighten out, Mike. McBain’s been by the office. He wants you to explain your movements during the night of Simpkins and Hochstein’s murder. And then there is the matter of Karlsson at the Millennium Knickerbocker, and Montinelli at the Edgewater Beach.’

Mandy stood from the bath. She looked worn through. I felt I should be offering her a bath, let her freshen up some. However, my mind was mixing putty.

‘I’m going to clean up outside, Mike. Whenever you’re ready, just come out. There’s more in the paper. Potatoes Guiseppi was found dead at the North East Pylon with your agency card. Today’s Thursday.’

I looked up on hearing the door close.

The room took the shape of a shoe box. The bath ran the length of one long wall, the door occupied the other. The further short wall held a window with a roller shade, and to the left beside it, was a washbasin and a mirrored cabinet. Feeling three days of stubble, I decided to clean up. Then I would sit and think things through. Someone was fingering me for a frame-up. A woman. She’d killed Hochstein, he phoning her at the Edgewater where she was in bed with Montinelli. And now Montinelli was dead, and she had a beef with me. I’d clear it all with Mandy soon enough. I rose and checked myself in the mirror.

I was no matinée idol. My mug had narrowed over the years, sinking the eyes and the cheeks. There was a touch of gray in the hair, and it was thinning at the temples. I figured a diet of booze, coffee, and pastrami on rye was no health kick.

Opening the cabinet, I thumbed the razor. It couldn’t have cut hair for a month of trying, so I honed it some on the strap. Working up a good lather, I managed a shave without cuts, washed up and slapped on

some cologne. Then I noticed something else in the cabinet.

It had me reeling back and almost sick.

Something was growing there.

It was black and smelled like wormed meat. I couldn't think what it might be. Something white showed through it and I saw that it had sent out shoots like a potato that had grown right into the wood of the cabinet. I put one hand to my mouth and used the other to prod it with a finger. My finger sank in. Then I got wise.

It was a pastrami on rye.

It must have been lying there some time and gone rotten. Suddenly the smell was too much. Gagging, I slammed the cabinet closed, wanting to open the window. Only I didn't.

Rolling up the shade, a heavy fog was out. Only it was no ordinary fog. It pressed upon the glass like something from a swamp, yellow and thick enough to get lost in. I pressed closer to the window, putting my face to the glass, like I wanted to push through. Somehow I did.

I stood on the shore of the Lake. It looked like it might have done before the Pilgrims arrived. Reeds stuck up out of the water, branches hung over, a fog threaded its way. I lit a Lucky and smoked, feeling the wind cool through my coat.

There was something about looking over the Lake, the long distance over the water. I felt old, as old as the Lake, like I'd been born right there. Maybe I'd crawled up out of the water, something living from a long time ago. The Lucky smoked through, I flicked the stub across the water, feeling my brogues suddenly sinking into the shore.

I heard the rustle of grass. She stood on the shore.

'Hello, Mike. It's quite a sight, isn't it?'

‘Sure,’ I answered. ‘The pride of Chicago.’

She was in blank mink, the coat belted at the waist, her gloved hands deep in the pockets. She removed her hands, slipping off the gloves.

She had claws, long ones like a cats. She flexed them, pawing the air. ‘Six bodies by my count.’ She reached into the mink pocket and tossed something that fluttered down into the mud. It was the paper. I saw the header.

SANDALS PASQUINI MURDERED. DEUTSCH PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE

‘The evening edition, Mike. The tenth of July. It’s hard to know what you do on a drunk.’

I lifted the paper and read through.

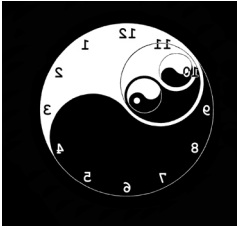
Gabriel ‘Sandals’ Pasquini had been murdered in his room at the Palmolive building. He headed the Pasquini family, the second largest crime family in Chicago. The family had made its fortune in the soap business, Gabriel himself motivated by finding a cure for his own foot rot. He never found it, so he kept to wearing sandals to keep his feet aired. And now I was the chief suspect in his murder, wanted by McBain. I was thought to be a Nazi sympathizer, killing captains of industry.

I threw the paper down and watched it sink into the mud and ooze of the Lake shore.

‘Yin is the hunter, Mike.’

She took a step closer and drew back the fold of her milk. She was wearing a black rubber cat suit, a thong at her waist holding a coiled bull

whip. Standing legs astride, she unhooked the whip and snapped it in the wind. I drew my Smith & Wesson and fired.



Chapter 10

Mandy pulled away and stepped across the room, leaving me and the fog.

One James Miller. Stockbroker. Better known as the king of Wall Street, was dead. I'd woken this morning with my head on the desk, my mug rubbed in the paper. Miller kept a woman in nearly every state, but that wasn't enough. Guess where else he had to try his luck?

I moved from the window and snatched up a bottle from the bottom of my desk draw. In reception, Mandy handed me my hat and trench. I had nothing to say. She neither. I brushed down my best powder-gray, donned the trench and hat and closed the door behind me.

The corridor was covered with dust and cobwebs hung from the corners. I noticed my footprints by the door, deep enough in the dust to be embedded. The elevator light blinked on and off as I pushed the button. I waited, and hearing nothing from the motor, I took the stairs.

Outside, the fog was gone, and rising over the buildings, was the sun, a bright orange-red against a sulfur sky. The buildings stood cracked with fissures, so that it was a wonder that they still stood. Vines and moss hung off them, and conifers stood between, some nearly half as tall as the buildings. I sat myself on a bench by a phone, and dragged the bottle from my trench.

The rising sun threw a beautiful light over the city. I'd never seen it like this, so green, fresh born. I drank and took in the color. It gave me a lot to think on. Maybe I'd colored my life in all wrong? I'd stripped

back too much? But I couldn't be sure. The air before me took the form of tinsel. I drank, and it glimmered some more. Somewhere, there'd be an angel? I was sure of it.

I heard the clack of stiletto heels. A woman came to stand before me. She purred and licked at her lips.

'You're quite the detective, Mike. You should be proud.'

I lifted my head, somehow feeling very tired. I remembered one other thing McDougal had told me. He had it figured that crime brought out the base instincts. Sooner or later something inside you broke, and something slipped through, something primal. 'You seen a kid around?' I asked, barely getting it out. 'The name's Demarchi.'

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VERNA or The Man Who Erased Himself
by Robert McNeal

