



# ROUGH ON RATS

by  
**WILLIAM  
FRANCIS**



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# **ROUGH ON RATS**

**BY WILLIAM FRANCIS**

Joe Stone disappeared leaving his partner, Arthur Smith, with an I O U for \$38,000 and a fit of temper. Smith hired Anthony Martin to find Stone, and, with difficulty, Anthony found him. And there, instead of ending, the case begins:

Some of the characters:

**ANTHONY MARTIN**—a private investigator with a file of unpaid bills, a vulnerable but well-cushioned conscience, and a profitable proposition.

**JERRY JONES**—a girl who really belongs with the cows and chickens but can usually be found in slacks, or less, at various bars around town.

**ARTHUR SMITH**—a rotund, pig-eyed little man, who wants help and plenty of it, but not from the police.

**PAT TEMPLE**—a beautiful girl with beautiful clothes in a beautiful apartment—but where did she get all that beautiful money?

**VINCENT KOALER**—a helpful hotel clerk with a bald head and a penchant for gambling of all sorts.

**JOE STONE**—an elusive gentleman in a business that caters to some of the less happy characteristics of mankind.

**PHIL ARKIN**—an intelligent cop, with an education and personality, whose imminent retirement will be a great loss to the Vice Squad.

**MICK**—amiable and loyal, owner and bartender of "The Lucky Spot"—hangout of B-girls, butter-and-egg men, and an assortment of questionable characters.





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# **ROUGH ON RATS**

**WILLIAM  
FRANCIS**

**WILLIAM MORROW  
AND COMPANY**



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# ROUGH ON RATS

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

THIS BOOK IS FOR  
MAXINE JAMES



# **ROUGH ON RATS**



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# I

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THE GLASS PANEL OF THE DOOR was blank except for the number 222. I went in without knocking. It was a square room, plain, with dirty gray walls. The floor was bare, painted a dull red. The ceiling was dirty white plaster and from the center hung a light fixture that looked like an inverted chamber pot. The wall opposite the door was broken by two windows. In front of the windows was a desk and in front of the desk a straight-backed chair. To the right of the desk, shoved against the corner of the walls, was an old-fashioned wooden filing cabinet. The surface of the desk was clear, not even a phone, and as I walked toward it I could see a low-backed swivel chair behind it. There was a frayed cushion on the chair. No one was in the room.

I sat on the straight-backed chair and lit a cigarette. It was five minutes before the little fat man waddled in. He was about five feet tall and about the same around. He had a hawk nose, a lot of chins, and

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black, pig eyes. He wore a blue double-breasted suit and a gray tie, and looked as well dressed as a fat man can. Except for a quick glance he didn't pay any attention to me until he was seated behind the desk. The buttons on his coat made three taps, scraping the desk edge as he lowered himself into the chair.

"You want to see me?" His pig eyes watched me without blinking.

"I don't know," I said. "What's your name?"

He looked at me for about five seconds, a searching look that didn't meet my eyes. "Smith," he said. "Arthur Smith."

"You want to see me," I said. "I'm Martin, Anthony Martin."

"You got here quick."

"Yeah."

"You ain't very busy?" It was a question.

"Slack season," I said; "nobody's in town."

He took a long time to make up his mind about me. He sat with his hands gripping the desk edge, his fingers receiving most of his attention. The nails were very well kept. I figured he liked to have someone hold his hands and probably didn't get much of that sort of thing outside a barber shop.



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"I want you to find a guy," he said. He didn't look up at me. I didn't say anything.

We sat like that for a while and I thought what a damn-fool job being a private dick could be. Mystery stories were filled with beautiful dames that laid at the drop of a hat, and I had to sit on my fanny while a little fat character played hard to get. And I mean had to. As the boys say, I was down to the soft stuff.

Fatty looked up at me and said, "Well," in a hurt tone of voice. I guess he'd expected an answer.

"You want me to find a guy," I repeated. "Who—and why?"

He skipped the "who." "I got my reasons," he said.

"Look," I told him. I was trying to be reasonable. I didn't need the job any more than I needed my right arm. "I got to poke around to find a guy—any guy. People want to know why I'm poking around. I got to have reasons."

He took that in slowly. I could almost hear his brain turning it around to find the soft spots. He went back to looking at his fingers; to me they were just fingers, to him they were maybe Lana Turner. Anyway, he found a lot to interest him in them.

"The guy owes me dough," he said.

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“A lot?” I asked, thinking what a hell of a time it took to get that much out of him.

“Thirty-eight grand.” I glanced around the dingy office. He got it. “You wanted a reason,” he said.

“Okay—now who?” We went through the whole routine again; him with his fingers and me watching him. Finally he looked up.

“This”—he waved a short arm in a gesture to include the whole room—“this is the Smith Company. The guy I want you to find use to be my partner. His name is Stone. Joe Stone. He owes me thirty-eight grand.” He said the last in a very positive tone. I could take it or leave it. I took it.

I got a notebook out of my pocket and wrote “Joe Stone” on a clean page. I didn’t need it, and I didn’t need the notebook—but what the hell—he had his fingers.

“How long’s he been gone?”

“Monday morning he don’t show up.” This was Friday.

“When did you see him last?” I asked.

“Saturday,” he said. “He left here at noon. Monday he should’ve been here; he don’t show.”

“You been to his house?”

“He lives at the Maryland Hotel; I been there, they

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ain't seen him since Sunday. Sunday about ten he goes out and that's all."

"Luggage?"

"No."

"When were you there? I mean the hotel."

"Wednesday," he said. "I phoned three or four times before. Monday and Tuesday."

"You go up to his room?"

"Yeah, but the door's locked. The manager won't let me in; says the rent's paid for two weeks in advance. Says who the hell am I?"

I'm *too* honest, I guess. I needed the job, but even though I didn't like Fatty, I had to tell him the truth. I could've bled him—but don't ask me why I didn't.

"Look," I told him, "this guy's had six days; a guy can go a hell of a long way in six days, especially with thirty-eight grand. I'm a one-man agency; I can pick up three, four guys for trails and stuff, but I haven't got any tie-ups with out-of-state agencies. We got exchange systems, but most of them are little outfits like me. The Missing Persons Bureau or the cops are your best bet. Cops can cover the whole country, and will, if you report a robbery. The Missing Persons Bureau will do a good job without any

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cost to you. If you offer a reward they will do a fine job, and you don't have to mention any robbery. If you don't want cops, one of the big agencies with branches all over the world can find the guy. Me, I can't." Honest Anthony they call me—the wolf at my door and I discourage business; discourage, hell, I kiss it off.

The little fat man sat very quiet, absorbed in his fingers again. I took a look at them myself; the way he was watching them, I thought one might be missing. I was counting them when he decided to talk.

"How much you charge to find this guy?" he asked.

Gawd! After turning noble and self-sacrificing, Fatty didn't get it. "I told you," I explained. "I can't find him. I haven't got the organization. Take it to the cops or Pinkerton's."

"You don't want the job." He seemed very sad.

"I want it," I said, "but I can't handle it."

We sat in our cozy silence again, while Fatty took inventory on his fingers, figuring. Me, I was through, and ready to go. His hands didn't interest me.

"This guy is around town," Fatty said. That was something that did interest me. Southern California I could cover.

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"How do you know?" I asked him.

"I know," he said. He was coy again.

"How?" I insisted. We had the finger play again and then Fatty looked up with a secretive expression.

"No dough," he said, and for the first time he smiled. At least I guess it was a smile. Whatever it was, it wasn't pretty. I liked him much better without it.

"Thirty-eight grand," I said, quick on the repartee. He shook his head.

"Not yet." It was a pleased tone.

"Look," I said. "I'll take the job. Fifty bucks a day and expenses." I waited for him to blow off, but he took it without a sound. "I can't promise anything. If I can find him, I will, if not—" I shrugged my shoulders. "Either way it's still fifty bucks a day and expenses. And I'd like an advance. About two hundred dollars. I'll report when I've got something to tell you. You want me on that basis?"

"Yeah." I didn't expect it. I was watching his fingers. He had me doing it, and then he crossed me and said, "Yeah," without even noticing whether the digits were still there.

"Okay," I recovered. "Now tell me about Joe Stone; who he knows, his women, what he looks like, where

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he comes from—anything you know about him,” I settled back.

“This guy, this Stone, is a tall guy, gray hair and a mustache, black. He’s got big ears, very big.” He looked at his fingers for inspiration. “That’s how he looks. I know him about a year. We start this Smith Co. He has a girl, a blonde, young; says she’s his wife, but she lives at the Tower Arms, alone.”

I grinned. Beautiful blondes, just like in a book.

“I don’t know anybody else he knows. I don’t know where he comes from.” He looked at the fingers again. “That’s all.”

“How do you know he’s still around?”

“The girl,” he said. “I found out she’s still here.”

“You said no dough,” I reminded him.

“That, too, like I said; no dough—not yet.”

“Why?” I asked.

“He hasn’t got it yet.”

“Why?”

He shut up and looked at me.

“Look,” I explained, “you want me to find this guy, don’t you?”

He nodded.

“All right, then you’ve got to trust me. I’ve got to know these things. I’m not trying to find out things

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that don't concern me. I only want to know what I have to. Anybody you get will want the same information. I can get it other ways, but why the hell should I spend your money to investigate you? It saves time and dough if you tell me. I want to know why he hasn't left town, why he hasn't any dough if he owes you thirty-eight grand. That's all."

Fatty counted his fingers and then sighed. It was like air rushing out of a balloon.

"This guy don't have any dough, because I won't give him none. He owes me thirty-eight grand, and I cut him off. He works a big deal, but it ain't through yet; it will mean about ten, twelve grand. He won't leave town until then."

"Can he complete this deal without you?" I asked. Fatty sighed again.

"Yeah," he said. "I ain't here much." He gestured at the office again. "This guy is the big shot, I'm the money. You know, silent. I don't know who he does business with. He ain't even got a phone." His short arm swung across the desk. "Everything is outside. For a year he says he's making money, but I don't get none. I got to put it back in the business again, he says—but I keep track. In a year we make fifty

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grand; I should get three-fourths, like we agreed. Saturday I told him I wanted it. He said he'd have it Monday. Monday he don't show."

It sounded damn thin, but I let it go. "It's a case for the cops," I told him.

"You find him," Fatty said, pointing his stubby finger at my belly; "you find him. I don't want cops."

"He can still close that deal without coming here?" I sounded skeptical.

"What's here?" Fatty snorted. "Like I said, everything's outside." He looked around the office with disgust. That's what I thought, too. What the hell was there? What the hell was the set-up?

"He played you for a sap," I said.

"Yeah." Fatty looked sad again. "I trusted him, he come well recommended."

"By who?" I winced a little at the grammar.

"That don't matter," he said. "I checked that. They don't know anything." He reached into his breast pocket and brought out a wallet. He handed me four fifty-dollar bills. "You find him," he said; "you find him, I'll collect." And all of a sudden the little fat man looked and sounded very mean.

"Where can I reach you?" I asked.



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“I’ll phone you and make an appointment, tomorrow or the next day.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll do what I can.”

I heard him say, “Yeah,” as I closed the door.

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## 2

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THE SMITH COMPANY WAS LOCATED in the Felman Building, the two-hundred block on South Main Street. I walked past the Follies, pawnshops and gin mills that make up the front of L. A's. Main Street. Little dingy shops, with the stock spread all over the sidewalk, separated the beer joints and hock shops. In the block between Fifth and Sixth, I went into the Lucky Spot. The bar was occupied by the usual collection of "winies" and hard-liquor boys. A few old hags coyly flirted for drinks, in vain. It was too early for the B-girls and hustlers. It was eleven-thirty.

Mick, the bartender, brought me a bottle of Budweiser.

"Hi, Anthony." He looked around for possible eavesdroppers, and then whispered, "You on a case?" Mick is my only fan. To him, I'm a hero. He's stuffed full of notions about detectives from reading the pulps. All in all, he's a big help to me. He knows a

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lot of people, most of them a bit shady, and he hears a lot of things that a priest wouldn't get to know. Also, he boosts my ego.

"I'm looking for a guy," I said.

Mick went back to serving ten-cent whisky and wine. He knew he'd be there if I wanted to talk. Right then, I didn't. I was trying to figure the Smith Company's business. No cops, Fatty had said. That meant that the set-up couldn't stand investigation, and that meant that it was illegal. But just what the business was, stumped me. I ruled out dope—the set-up was wrong. A call house doesn't need an office, and does need a phone, and I couldn't see the joint as a book. Something shady, but just what it was had me beat. I felt like talking. Mick brought me another bottle of Bud.

"I'm looking for a guy named Joe Stone," I said. Mick mulled it over a while, and then shook his head. "A tall mug with gray hair and a black mustache and big ears. Got an office in the Felman Building."

Mick wiped the bar, and then poured a jigger of rotgut for a guy with the jitters and red eyes.

"I think I seen him," he said, "very big ears. Didn't know his name."

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"In here?" I asked.

"Yeah, maybe two, three times. He wears a ring on his tie."

I looked the way Mick expected me to.

"You know," he explained, "instead of tying the tie, he has a ring to hold it together. Plain gold, like a wedding ring."

"Who was he with?"

"He wasn't with no one."

"Who'd he talk to?"

"He don't talk. He just drinks a glass of beer."

"How come you noticed him?" I asked.

Mick looked kind of hurt. "Hell, Anthony," he answered, "the guy's got ears like a loving cup. And then, the ring."

I was satisfied, but persisted. "He doesn't talk to anyone?"

"Naw, he drinks one glass of beer, that's all. Billie tries to hustle him for a drink once, but he don't go for it."

I said thanks and finished my beer. "You see him again, let me know," I told him. He said he would.

I walked back to Fifth, and turned down past Los Angeles Street. In the middle of the block, I went in under a sign that read, "Rooms for Rent." I

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went up the stairs and down the hall to the last door on the right. I knocked on the door. A preoccupied voice asked, "Who's there?"

I said, "Me," and went in.

It was a small square room with one window overlooking a light well. The place was crowded with a double bed, two chairs, one rocker, a dresser with a mirror, and a chest of drawers. The walls were decorated with a lot of junk—paper favors, movie stars' pictures, calling cards with pencil and pen scribblings on them, and a few publicity stills of semi-nude girls.

There was a girl lying on the bed on her belly, a magazine propped on the pillow. Her robe was tight against and outlining her slim hips and rump. The cloth was pulled up on one side, revealing a long stretch of white, well-shaped leg and thigh. She turned her head toward the sound of the door opening.

"Who the hell told you—" She stopped, seeing me. "Oh— Hi, Anthony."

"Hi, Billie," I said.

She was tall for a girl, her mussed hair pitch-black, her face a faint olive shade. Her eyes were slightly oriental and she was young enough to miss

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the lines of late hours and liquor. She had a nicely curved figure, but I knew that without her brassiere her breasts drooped. Yet she was a hell of a way above average. She rolled over onto her back and sat up, so that her legs swung over the edge of the bed. I went over and sat beside her, offering her a cigarette and light.

She looked me over. "The great detective." She had a nice voice—husky, but nice.

I reached for the magazine she'd been reading. It was *True Love Stories*. "You like this stuff?" I asked her. It was illustrated with posed pictures.

"The great detective," she said again. She looked at me, as if I were a piece of meat—bad meat. Her eyes were very black.

"You want something, or are you just checking up on my reading?"

"I want something."

"If it was anyone but you," she said, "I'd know what that meant."

"Just information, this time."

"This time and every time. You're a sap."

"Why?" I asked.

"Oh, hell, skip it."

"I'm looking for a guy," I said, "a guy named Joe

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Stone." I waited. She thought for a while and then shook her head.

"A tall guy with gray hair and a black mustache and big ears. He was in the Lucky Spot; you buzzed him for a drink."

"I don't know every guy I ask for a drink," she said. "Hell, I ask about fifty guys a night."

"Okay," I said, "just a chance." I flipped my cigarette butt out of the window. Billie's forehead was screwed into a frown.

"Wait a minute," she said. "A tall mug, big ears. Wait a minute—he wears a ring on his tie."

"That's him," I said, "Joe Stone."

"That ain't his name."

I lit a cigarette. "You know him." It wasn't a question.

She shook her head. "No. I've seen him some place, I mean before the Lucky Spot. That's why I asked him to buy me a drink, even though he looked too smart."

"Did you talk to him?"

"Yeah, I ask him where I saw him before."

"He tell you?"

"Naw. He tells me to scram."

"You sure you've seen him before?"

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“What do you mean, ‘sure’? I think I saw him some place before. He says, ‘No, scram.’ Hell, I ain’t sure.”

“Okay,” I grinned. “Where did you think you saw him?”

“I don’t know,” and the frown came back. “East, I think. Maybe four, five years ago. One thing I am sure about.”

“What?”

“If he’s the guy I remember, and I’m not sure he is, his name ain’t Joe Stone. His name is Morton. Bat Morton.”

“Bat Morton” didn’t mean a thing to me. It sounded big, but didn’t register. Billie walked over to the dresser and started combing the snarls out of her hair. She was well set up. I like wide shoulders on a girl.

“I got to get dressed,” she said. I didn’t move.

“What did this ‘Bat’ do when you knew him?”

“I didn’t know him,” she said, and went on pulling the comb through her hair. I waited.

“I didn’t know him, Anthony,” and her voice was insistent. “I just knew his name. I saw him a couple of times; somebody told me his name.”

It stank.



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“When did you see him?” I asked.

“I told you, four or five years ago.”

“I mean lately.”

“At the Lucky Spot, I told you.”

“When?”

“The time I asked him to buy me a drink was about two weeks ago. He’s been in twice since then that I know of.”

“You talked to him again.”

“You can go to hell,” and she turned from the mirror, her eyes narrowed. “You don’t believe me. Go to hell. I got to get dressed.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?” I asked.

She sighed. “Oh, God, last Saturday, at the Lucky Spot. He came in for a glass of beer about four-thirty. I noticed him, because the guy next to him knocked his beer over, and it spilled on Bat. He just wiped his pants and walked out without finishing his drink. I ain’t seen him since.”

I thought it over. From where I was sitting I couldn’t see any reason for her to cover up for this mug, but something was wrong. She remembered his name, but not who he was, or what he did, or where she knew him. That didn’t hold water. She’d given me enough to go on—not without a hell of

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a lot of work, but at least a lead. I felt that she knew something more, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to get it short of batting her around, and batting her around was a job that didn't appeal to me. I liked her. But she was holding out on me.

"Honey, I got to get dressed. Scram, will you?" Her husky voice brought me back to the shabby little room.

"Yeah; so long, Babe." I patted her fanny on my way out, but I kept calling her unpleasant names to myself—very unpleasant names.

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# 3

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I WALKED BACK TO THE LUCKY Spot. The customers were about the same, and in about the same condition. Mick came over to talk to me. I didn't want anything to drink.

"Ever see a little fat man, really fat, a lot of chins, waddles when he walks? He ever come in here?"

Mick shook his head. "Most bums ain't fat," he said.

"He's not a bum. Neat and well fed. In fact, over fed."

Mick shook his head again. I left.

I went back down Main Street to the Felman Building. The door of 222 was shut, but not locked, so I went in. Fatty was gone. I went through the desk. There were a few circulars; ads for cars and patent medicines and sales, all addressed to the Smith Company. There was some yellow copy paper, all of it blank; two new pencils, one of them unsharpened, and that was all. The wooden filing

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cabinet was locked. I took the manufacturer's name and the serial number from a metal plate on the top drawer. The office hadn't helped me at all.

I walked up to Broadway and down to the Crail Building. My office is on the fifth floor. There was no one in the reception room. I went into the cubby hole I call the office, sat down behind my desk, got a bottle out of the drawer and had myself a shot of Scotch.

So far, I had one lead, a lead that I couldn't do anything about, because I didn't have the organization. I'd told Fatty how it would be. I had a great chance of combing the East for a guy named Bat Morton. East, to me, meant anything beyond the state line.

I called the switchboard and asked for messages, if any. The girl said, "Nothing, so far, Mr. Martin." I hung up and thought about her for a while. She was a nice piece. I wondered what my chances were. The clock on my desk read one-thirty. I went down to the bank and deposited two of the fifties Fatty had given me. It almost covered my overdraft. I got my car from the parking lot and drove out Third Street to Rossmore. The Tower Arms was on Rossmore, overlooking the Wilshire Country

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Club's golf course. It was an eight-storied building, with a lot of windows and glass bricks, the whole thing a cool shade of light blue. I parked about thirty yards from the entrance. The uniformed door-man gave me a dirty look as I walked into the lobby. A clean-shaven, chinless youth in a neat blue suit was at the desk. He managed to look down at me, even though I was a half foot taller.

"Mrs. Stone," I said.

"I'm sorry." He wasn't, and didn't sound it. "We have no Mrs. Stone."

"You got a young blonde girl? A tall guy with gray hair and a black mustache calls on her. Very big ears, the guy has, I mean."

He turned his back on me, ignoring me. I tapped him on the shoulder and showed him a deputy sheriff's badge. It didn't mean a thing and it still doesn't but most people go for a badge—those that don't go for dough.

I said, "Huh?" He was undecided, so I made up his mind for him. "Play ball," I said, "and we'll keep this quiet. We just want to question her, nothing serious." I smiled. We were buddies in law enforcement.

"I don't know whether Miss Temple is the young

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lady you mean. I wouldn't want to cause her embarrassment through a mistake."

"There's no mistake if the guy with the big ears calls on her."

"Well," he said, "there is a gentleman with rather large ears that calls on her. I've only seen him a few times myself, but the night clerk sees him quite often."

"Then she's the one we want to see. Miss Temple, eh? What apartment?"

"Six A. You'll be very careful to be tactful?"

"Yeah," I said, "and you keep this under your hat until I make sure. Just you and me. See?"

I took the elevator to the sixth floor. It opened into a square foyer, a door on each side. The one to my left had a gold numeral "6A" on it. I pushed the bell and from behind the door I could hear the soft tones of a chime ring four notes. A colored maid in a crisp black and white uniform opened the door.

"Yes?" she said, and I'm damned if the accent wasn't English. I guess my eyes popped. "Yes?" she repeated.

"Miss Temple in?" I asked.

The jig led me into a white living room. "Who is calling?" she asked me.

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"Anthony Martin," I said.

"A moment, please." She shook her hips as she walked out.

I looked around. The place was expensive. It was mostly white, in different shades. Even the rug was a thick, creamy layer. What color there was came from flowers and a few prints on the walls. I didn't know whether to smoke or not. I sat down in a deep leather chair, opposite a large davenport which matched it.

The room didn't look lived in; the white was too much, too clean.

It wasn't long until the jig came back. "Miss Temple will be out in a moment." She liked the word "moment."

I sat. Ten minutes passed before the blonde showed. She wasn't what I'd expected. She was about twenty, her hair was honey, her eyes were green satin, her mouth was blood, warm and bright. Her body was a dream. She wore a soft-looking, yellow turtle-necked sweater and a rough suit skirt. Her shoes were brown and white saddles with low heels. A lot of things went on inside of me as I looked at her—a lot of things.

"Mr. Martin?" Her voice was sweet and low, and

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smooth like cream, thick cream. She's like the room, I thought, too much, too clean.

I nodded. She crossed in front of me, close, and sat down on the davenport. It was no leg show. I sat down again.

"You wished to see me?"

"I wanted to ask you a few questions about Mr. Stone," I said. She gave no sign, either of surprise or fear.

"Yes?" It was encouragement.

"You know him?" I asked.

"Of course." A simple statement of fact.

"When did you see him last?"

She considered that for a while. "May I ask why you are asking these questions?" It was nicely said.

"I want to find him," I said. "On a matter of business."

"But surely, his office—"

"He's not there," I interrupted, "or at his hotel."

She considered again. "I saw him on Sunday last, in the afternoon."

I had a hell of a lot to ask her. I wanted to know who paid for her, what Joe Stone was to her, what his business was, who he was and who she was, but



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somehow I couldn't say a damn thing. She turned out to be the opposite of what I'd figured and it had me tongue-tied.

"Have you known him very long?" I asked.

Her eyes hardened from satin to emerald. "I hardly see what that has to do with you. Her voice was no longer sweet, but it was still low.

"I'll be quite frank with you," I lied. "I have reason to believe that he has either disappeared or is in hiding." She started to say something but changed her mind. I went on. "It is important that I get a message to him or contact him personally."

She was sometime making up her mind on that one, and when she had, I could tell before she opened her mouth that I wouldn't like it.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," she said. "I'm not in his confidence." She smiled very sweetly.

Another clam, I thought, holding out. A much nicer one, but—hell! I decided to shake her. "I'm sorry you won't help me, Mrs. Stone." It shook her. She was nicely confused.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake. I'm not Mrs. Stone."

"It was Mr. Stone who made the mistake," I said.

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"He referred to you as his wife. I think you'd better tell me what you know about Mr. Stone. Either me," I added, "or the police."

I could tell she didn't like the idea of the police. She wouldn't meet my eyes. She took a cigarette from the end table beside the davenport and fumbled with a lighter that wouldn't work. I didn't offer her a light. Finally she threw the cigarette into the ash tray, unlighted.

"Who are you?" she asked, and her voice was skimmed milk now. I didn't like the job. She was too soft.

"I'm a guy looking for Joe Stone." It was a silly answer; me trying to play tough, but it didn't help her any, and that's what I wanted.

"What do you want to know?"

"Whatever you do, about Joe Stone," I answered.

She sat without saying anything, her hands pleating a small yellow handkerchief. I hoped she wouldn't cry; it held things up.

"How long have you known him?" I asked.

There was plenty of fear but no tears in her voice when she answered.

"Five years," she said.

"Are you married to him?"

## ROUGH ON RATS

She stuttered over her answer. "No . . . he's, he's my father." Her eyes met mine, and I wanted to go and put my arms around her.

"Do you know what his business is?"

"No. He's never told me. He didn't bother me with any of his affairs. That's why I live here alone. He didn't want me to meet his business associates." She was gaining confidence as she talked.

"Didn't that seem strange to you?" I asked.

"At first, but I've gotten used to it." She lit a cigarette without any trouble.

"You said you've known him for only five years," I reminded her. "Before that . . . ?"

"I lived with my mother until she died. Father came for me as soon as he heard about her death. I'd never seen him before, only a picture. Mother left him when I was two."

"Why?" I asked.

"She never told me. She didn't talk about him much."

"And he's taken care of you ever since?"

"As a friend, but not financially. I have Mother's money."

"He took care of it for you?"

"No. He would never touch any of my money."

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The City Trust Company takes charge of everything like that." I was beginning to have a bit of respect for "big ears."

"What's your real name?" I asked.

"Patricia Temple. I haven't changed it."

"Then Joe is . . . ?"

"George Temple."

"Did he ever call himself Morton?" I asked.

"Yes, while we were in Chicago. He said that he often used different names in his business. He said it was necessary."

"Why?" I asked.

"He didn't say why. It seemed strange to me, but I don't know much about business and he didn't let me talk about it with him very often."

"You know where he is?"

"No."

I believed her. Maybe I'm a sucker for a dream, but I believed her. But baby, I thought, there's more to it than this—a hell of a lot more. "You know a little fat man named Smith—Arthur Smith?"

She looked blank. "No, I'm afraid not." The eyes were emerald again, and the voice was cream. She was through. Hell or high water wouldn't get any-

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thing else. There was a lot left unexplained, but I'd have to have more to get it out.

I stood up. "Thanks for the information. I guess there's nothing else you can tell me that'll help." I walked to the door. "You plan to stay here for long?"

"For some time."

It was too pat. I called her a "tramp," to myself, while I rode down to the main floor, but I knew it wasn't the truth. The chinless punk was waiting for me, all ears.

"Wrong party," I said, "but very good stuff, nonetheless." I leered at him. He looked shocked and then ignored me again.

I drove over to Sunset and turned right toward town. I stopped at a drive-in and ordered a hamburger. I kept thinking about Joe Stone. I was stuck and I knew it. Something had to break to give me a line. The past stuff was interesting but I couldn't see anything in it that would tell me where Joe was hiding. By the time the girl brought the food, I'd remembered it was Friday.

"Take that back," and I pointed at the hamburger, "and bring me a melted cheese."

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"Is there something wrong with it?" she asked.

"No," I said, "it looks very nice, but today's Friday."

"Oh," she grinned at me, "a fish eater. Me, too. I'll give this to someone else and not charge you with it. I forget sometimes myself."

It got her a big tip. It would have been cheaper to pay for the hamburger. I drove down to Figueroa Street, and turned right. I parked in a lot between Sixth and Seventh, and walked to the lobby of the Maryland Hotel. There was a sharp-looking, bald man behind the desk. I took in the lobby. It was shabby, but substantial. The typical two-dollar-a-room lobby.

"Mr. Stone?" I asked Baldy.

"Four-twenty," he said. I started for the elevator. "He's not in," Baldy called after me. I went back to the desk and waited. Baldy looked up. I waited.

"His key's still here." He pointed to the numbered pigeonholes behind him. From the one marked "420" the key tag hung out.

"I want to see his room," I said. I showed him the deputy sheriff's badge.

"Scram!" He showed me a badge just like it. I

## ROUGH ON RATS

grinned at him and brought out a ten-dollar bill. He took it.

“You can’t take nothing,” he said, and handed me the key. I rode the elevator up to the fourth floor and walked down the hall to 420. The door was locked, but I opened it. It was dark in the room with the shades down. I switched on the light.

A guy with gray hair and a black mustache—and very large ears—lay on his back in the middle of the floor. His face was contorted and almost purple.

He was dead.

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# 4

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I WRAPPED MY HANDKERCHIEF around my hand and pulled the door shut. There were five pieces of furniture in the room, the bed, a night table covered with a white face towel, on which a phone was set, two chairs, and a dresser with a mirror and three drawers. A suit coat was draped over the back of one chair.

I opened the drawer of the night table with my covered hand. In it were a few sheets of Maryland Hotel stationery and some envelopes. The dresser drawers held shirts, socks and underclothes, but no papers. There was a brush and a comb on the top of the dresser. Under the bed was a suitcase, fairly new, with silver initials, "J.S." It was empty. The bathroom gave me nothing.

I went through the suit coat on the chair. The side pockets yielded three books of matches. Two advertised Tums. The third was from the 31 Club. There was a wallet in the breast pocket. It was too



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large to manage with my covered hand, so I held it carefully in my other hand, and touched the papers only with my cloth-protected fingers. There were three hundred and forty-two dollars in bills, a few cards printed with the legend "The Smith Company" in the center and in one corner the name "Joe Stone." On the back of one of the cards, written in pencil, was a telephone number. I put that one in my pocket. An identification card with Joe's name and the Maryland as the address typed in, completed the contents. I wiped the wallet and pressed the dead man's fingers on its surface several times before I put it back.

His pants pockets held some loose change, a key case with three keys (I took the one marked Saf-Tee), and two handkerchiefs, one unused. It had taken me about ten minutes since I'd turned the light on. It was too long. I checked on possible fingerprints I might have left, felt satisfied, picked up the phone with my bare hand and called the desk.

I was standing in the hall, smoking, when Baldy came up. I motioned him to the door of 420.

He came back after one look. "Dead?" he asked. His voice was a whisper.

I nodded. "I called you as soon as I saw him," I said. "You sent me up here to see if everything was

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okay. I'm a licensed dick; you use me when you need me, because I'm a personal friend of yours. My name is Anthony Martin. I just dropped in to see you, coincidental. You asked me to check on this guy's room because a little fat man has been inquiring about him. Got it?" He looked at me. "That way," I explained, "nobody knows that you can buy your way into a guy's room here. See?" He nodded. He'd decided to trust me. "I called you as soon as I saw him. About two, three minutes after I left the desk." He nodded again. We were pals.

"You better call the cops," I told him. He started for the room and I grabbed his arm. "Downstairs," I said, "no use broadcasting it. The guy you left at the switchboard may be curious."

He started for the elevator and I stopped him again. "What's your name?"

He looked blank for a second. "Oh, Vincent. Vincent Koaler."

As soon as the elevator was out of sight I ducked back into 420. I'd forgotten the closet. It was next to the dresser. I covered my hand again and opened the door. There were three suits and a topcoat hanging on hangers. The pockets were all empty. A hat on the shelf had the initials "J. S." stamped on the sweat-

## ROUGH ON RATS

band. Two pairs of shoes on the floor drew blank. I went back to the hall.

Baldy joined me and we waited without saying anything until the cops showed. There were four of them, two plain clothes, two uniformed. I knew one of the plain clothes. He was a short, thin guy with an Irish face and black, curly hair. His name was Terrence Flannagan. He stayed in the hall with me and Baldy and listened to our story. Baldy did all the talking, but he told it my way. Inside 420 I could hear someone using the phone.

Flannagan asked a few questions about the stiff. Baldy said he'd lived in the hotel for about a year, was out a lot of the time, sometimes for a week or longer. He always kept the rent paid two weeks in advance. Outside of the fat man, he didn't have any callers, at least none that asked for him at the desk. His room was one of six that had phones, and he'd used it quite a bit. He was quiet and had never caused them any trouble before. His name was Joe Stone.

Three more cops in plain clothes came up in the elevator and hauled a lot of junk into the room with them. Flannagan's partner came out in the hall and one of the uniforms with him.

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He talked to Flannagan. "The guy was knocked off. I got the coroner's doc coming over. "

Flannagan didn't seem surprised. I wondered what Baldy had said when he called the cops. We waited in the hall while Flannagan gave the other cops our story. Plain clothes nodded several times but didn't say anything. Pretty soon the elevator brought up a big gray-headed guy, lugging a doctor's black bag. Flannagan and the other plain clothes went into the room with him, and left the uniforms to watch me and Baldy. We waited about ten minutes, nobody saying anything, and then the doc and Flannagan came out.

"Figure about twenty-four hours," the doc said. "Five or six hours either way, maybe more."

"You're a hell of a help." Flannagan sounded disgusted.

"I may be able to cut it down when I get to his stomach, but don't count on it." The doc got into the elevator and went down. Flannagan came back to where Baldy and I were waiting.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Somebody knocked him on the head, and then turned his tie around and choked him."

"His tie?"

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"Yeah," Flannagan explained, "he had a ring on the tie and somebody just pulled the ends in opposite directions, tight. The ends were through the ring, so that it made a noose. Pretty neat job."

"Yeah," I said. "Pretty neat." Baldy didn't say anything.

"I've got to get back on the job, Flannagan. Any reason for me to stick around?"

"Naw," he said, "I can find you when I want you." He turned to Baldy. "Did you know this fat guy that asked about the stiff?"

Baldy said he didn't. We walked to the elevator together, while Flannagan went back into 420. Baldy and I didn't talk going down. The clock in the lobby read four-thirty. I said, "So long," and walked out. He didn't say anything.

I got my car from the parking lot and drove down to Main Street. I parked and went into the Felman Building. The door of 222 was still unlocked. I went in, there was no one there. The key marked Saf-Tee unlocked the wooden filing cabinet. I grinned to myself and switched on the light.

The top drawer of the cabinet held a sheaf of manila file separators lettered from A to Z. The other three drawers were empty. I lifted the sheaf of files

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from the drawer and carried it over to the desk. Neatly filed in alphabetic order was a collection of direct mail advertisements. The subjects ranged from Ants (how to get rid of), to Zoo (Lincoln Park). I quit grinning and started through the file. It took an hour and at the end I had one business card that I thought might tell me something.

I read: Art Home Movies Company, Ltd. The address was on Vista Street, Hollywood. It didn't mean a thing to me, but it was the only thing that anybody couldn't have received in the mail. I put the card in my pocket and the rest of the junk into the file, locked it, took the key, switched out the light, and left.

I walked back to my office. It was still empty and the switchboard girl still said no messages. I poured a shot of Scotch and looked at my watch. It was a quarter to six. I laid the day's loot on my desk; two business cards and a key. The number on the back of the Smith card burned in my head. I called it and heard the ring twice.

"Hello?" It was Fatty's voice. I grinned.

"Martin," I said. "I've found Stone." I could almost see Fatty turning that over and over, or maybe counting his fingers.

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Where?"

"He was at the Maryland Hotel at four-thirty this afternoon."

"The hotel?" He doubted it.

"Yeah, he was in his room."

"Did you talk to him?"

"No," I said, "he was dead." I could hear Fatty's breath coming out like a blowout. I hung on until he recovered.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"My office."

"You wait there, I'll come down."

"Okay," I said. I hung up, lit a cigarette, poured another shot of Scotch, and then called the Tower Arms.

A voice I didn't know said, "Tower Arms, good evening."

"Miss Temple, apartment 6A," I said.

The phone rang about four times and then an English accent said, "Miss Temple's residence." It was the jig.

"This is Mr. Martin. I'd like to speak to Miss Temple; I have information about Mr. Stone." The jig asked me to wait a "moment." I grinned.

I heard the click of the extension phone and the



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voice like cream said, "Yes, Mr. Martin." I wondered whether the eyes were satin or emerald.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

"Yes?" The voice didn't change.

"Mr. Stone was found dead in his room at the Maryland Hotel." She didn't say anything. "He was murdered," I added.

There was a long moment of silence and then she said, "Thank you," and I heard the click as she hung up. I'll be damned, I thought.

I poured another shot of Scotch. It was warm and tasted like smoke. Nuts, I thought, people are nuts! Billie is a B-girl and a rat. There was rhythm in that, that could make music. Billie was a B-girl, because she said, "Buy me a drink, honey," and then drank tea. She was a rat, because she held out on me. That rhymed, too. She knew old Joe Stone, and she knew him well. She lied to me. She could go to hell. I was getting good. And maybe she hit him over the head and pulled his tie and left him dead. I didn't like that one very well. In fact, I didn't like it at all. I didn't like it, because it could be true. I had some more Scotch.

And the beautiful Patricia. There was a dish! I drank to the beautiful dish. She looks about twenty



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and she could be twenty-five or six or seven. Looks, Mr. Martin, are very deceiving. I counsel you, Mr. Martin, looks are very, very deceiving. I drank to that sage advice. Patricia with the big, green eyes. I thought about several things I'd like to share with Patricia, and things I'd like to do with her. Oh, Baby, what I couldn't do with plenty of money and you-oo. . . . A good idea for a song. . . .

"I think I'll write that song. I think I'll write that song and several plays, with Patricia as the girl, and me as the boy, and in them, I'll win her heart in several different ways, all very pleasant." I drank on that. "Patricia; a green-eyed liar, because I don't believe that good old Joe is your father—I mean was. Did you sleep with Joe, old lucky Joe? And did you tap him on the head and choke him and leave him in old 420? And, if you did, why did you?"

"Good old Joe, old Joe Stone, old Bat Morton, old George Temple—but you never were George Temple, were you, Joe? I love you, Joe. When we were a couple of kids. I drink to you, Joe, I drink to your ears. I drink to your women, both of them, and I drink to your tie that killed you, Joe. Hell, I can't! You're dead, and so's the bottle. Good old Joe. And good old Fatty. Fatty, you're a slob. You told me to

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find him and I found him. And maybe you killed him. I wouldn't put it past you. Maybe you found him first. You can be mean, Fatty, because I saw you. And you don't say much. And you're a damned liar. Oh, yes, you are, and if I had a drink, I'd drink to that."

My head hit the desk. I blinked and shook myself gently—things were a bit fuzzy. I noticed the empty bottle and put it into the wastebasket. I was still a little drunk. My watch read seven-thirty. I lit a cigarette; it tasted like dried manure. I felt hungry. Someone knocked on the inner office door. I said, "Come in." Fatty waddled in and sat down with a sigh.

"Traffic," he explained; "terrible."

I said, "Huh?"

He was dressed in the same blue suit. He crossed his hands over his belly and studied his fingers.

"Took me a long time to get here," he expanded, "traffic." I nodded.

"Can they connect you with Stone?" I asked.

"They?" He looked startled. "Oh, cops. No."

"Okay," I said, "you wanted him found. He's found. I worked a day, that's fifty bucks. My expenses were about the same. I'll give you a written report on them." I took his two fifties out of my

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pocket and laid them on the desk. "That makes us even."

He sat looking at the bills. He didn't touch them.

"My phone number," he said, "where did you get it?"

I shoved the Smith card at him. He picked it up and looked at it.

"Where?" he asked.

"I took it out of Joe's pocket."

He nodded. He brought out his wallet, counted out twenty fifty-dollar bills, laid them on the two on the desk, and shoved the pile toward me.

"Find out who did it," he said.

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# 5

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I SAT AND LOOKED AT THE MONEY—eleven hundred bucks. It made my mouth water. It broke my heart. I shook my head. Fatty forgot his fingers.

“I’ll pay expenses,” he paused, “up to five hundred.”

I shook my head again.

“Why not?” he asked.

“The cops will get the guy, they usually do.”

Fatty snorted.

I shrugged my shoulders. “If they can’t, how the hell do you expect me to?”

“Just look for the guy,” he said. “If you find him, you tell me, see? No cops. If you find him I pay another grand, if you don’t you ain’t lost nothing. You make a grand clear, just looking.”

“Do you want the guy that did it, or do you want what the guy knows?” I asked.

He shut up on that one. I was developing a hell of

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a headache, and I wanted food or drink, or both. I'm no angel. I told Fatty I couldn't do the job, so if he wanted to throw his eleven hundred out the window, okay with me. He knew what he was getting. Conscience only squawks so much with me, and then I choke it. I reached over and picked up the dough.

"I promise nothing," I said.

Fatty got up with an effort. "That phone number; you can call me there. Just ask for Arthur." He waddled out.

I waited until he had time to get out of the building. I put two of the fifties in my pocket, locked the rest in the desk, switched out the lights, and locked the doors after me. I walked down to the Lucky Spot. Mick was in the back, fighting a steak.

"Hi, Anthony, you find the guy?"

"Yeah." I signaled the waiter. "A steak like that"—I pointed to Mick's—"and a double jigger of Johnnie Walker, Red."

Mick kept his mouth full of meat. The Scotch came and I drank it and ordered another. After the second I felt alive again. The steak was big, thick and blood rare. Mick sat and watched me while I ate. He gave me a smoke and a light when I'd finished.

"Was it tough?" he asked.

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"No, very tender. Oh, the job?"

He nodded.

"No," I said, "the guy was in his hotel room. Somebody had knocked him off."

Mick looked impressed. "Who?" he asked.

"I wish I knew, Mick."

The bar was beginning to fill up. Sailors, drifters, hustlers, punks, B-girls—the nightly collection of barflies milled through the crowded room. The smoke from constant cigarettes hung in milky blue swirls, disturbed only slightly by the moving bodies. Snatches of conversation mingled together into a high-pitched murmur that now and then dropped to a comparative quiet, so that patches of words became audible. "Buy me a drink, honey?" "So I says nuts to you." "Gimme the same again."

The bartenders worked at high speed, drawing beer, pouring shots of whisky, or splashing together mixed drinks. There was a steady hum of the mixing machine. The atmosphere was shoddy and cheap. Leather jackets, open shirts, sweaters, with a sprinkling of coats and ties; low-cut evening dresses, slacks stretched across buttocks, sweaters with no brassieres under them. Sex, cheap and obvious, displayed in every way short of actual nudity. Main Street.

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A blonde, her slacks and sweater outlining every curve of her body, walked back to our booth. Her face was neatly but heavily painted, the eyebrows plucked to a line, the lips a deep scarlet. Her body was firm and full, her belly a neat little roundness that pulled the slacks closely about her thighs and crotch. It intrigued me.

“What do you say, Anthony, still keeping your pearl?” Her voice was crisp and hard. She looked about eighteen and wore toughness like a mask. She sat down beside me. Mick reached over and slapped her across the face.

“Keep your lip buttoned.” His voice was mean.

The blonde didn’t even blink. “For Gawd’s sake,” she said to me, “what’s eating that fink?”

“He don’t like your language,” I said. Mick was ready to crack her again. I shook my head.

“How’s things?” I asked.

“Lousy.” She sounded tired.

“Well, times are tough all over.”

“Yeah,” she was serious, “I guess that’s right.”

“Don’t worry,” I told her, “there’s always a few suckers around. You want a drink?”

She nodded.

I got up and pushed my way to the bar. I caught a

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quick one, and took two back to the booth. The girl gulped the shot.

“You looking for a guy, Anthony?”

Mick started to shut her up.

“Wait a minute, Mick,” I said. “Where did you hear that?” I asked her.

“Oh, I don’t know.” She tried to be casual. “Just around.”

“Where?”

“I don’t remember, Tony.”

“Dammit,” I said, “don’t call me Tony, ever.”

“Sorry, I forgot.”

“Stick around,” I told her. “I got to go to the can.” I gave Mick the sign to follow me. I led him inside the door to the kitchen. I kept the door propped open, watching the booth, but she didn’t move.

“Did you tell her, Mick?”

“Hell, no! I tell her nothing.”

“Okay. Who does she pal around with?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was she in here when that Stone was?”

He thought. “She could have been; she might have come early that day.”

“You wouldn’t notice her?”

“I got no time for her.”



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“I mean, you wouldn’t notice if she was around or not?”

“Naw.”

“How the hell did she find out.” I wasn’t asking. I was wondering.

“She talks to lot of guys. She might have picked it up.”

“I didn’t tell anyone,” I said, “except Billie and the Temple dame. Does she know Billie?”

“Talks to her,” Mick said, “but they ain’t good friends. B-girls ain’t fond of each other, usually.”

“Yeah, like you and the wine mill across the street.” Mick grinned. “Leave me alone with her,” I said.

She smiled when I came back alone. Her teeth were good.

“Let’s get out of this dump,” I said. She didn’t offer any objections.

We shoved our way out the door. I remembered that my car was in a parking lot by the Felman Building. I walked her down Main to Third, and stopped in a drugstore on that corner and bought a fifth of Johnnie Walker. We picked up the car and drove down Main to Sunset and turned left. We rode out to Vermont, turned left and after a short block, left again into DeLongpre Avenue. I stopped in front

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of a two-storied four-family apartment building. A sign read, "No Parking." I switched out the lights, leaned over and opened the door on her side. She got out, I slid from under the wheel, picked up the wrapped bottle and piloted her to the door of the right downstairs flat.

"You live here?" she asked.

I nodded, unlocking the door. We walked into darkness. I felt my way to a floor lamp and turned it on. She stood in the middle of the room looking around.

"Not bad," she said. But it was. I rented it furnished, hired a woman to come in and clean once a week, and stayed out of it as much as I could. It was a place to sleep and sometimes eat, and gave me more privacy than a hotel could. I pulled the blinds down.

"Sit down." I indicated the davenport. She sat. I went into the kitchen and opened the fifth, poured two drinks, half a water glass each, and brought them back to the living room. I brought the bottle, too. We each took a long drink, then I sat down beside her.

"You said I was looking for a guy," I reminded her. She looked surprised. It wasn't what she'd expected.

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"Yeah, that's what I heard."

"Where?" I asked.

"I told you, Anthony, I don't remember."

"Did Billie tell you?"

"No. . . ." She changed her mind. "Yeah, Billie told me."

"You're a liar."

"She told me," she insisted.

"When?"

"Yesterday."

I grinned and then took a drink. I didn't say anything for a while and she took several quick sips from the glass.

"What did you bring me here for?" she asked.

"I love you," I said. She drained the glass.

"You're nuts."

"I love you," I said, "but I'm going to kick hell out of you." I grinned.

She looked at me with her mouth open. "You're nuts, Anthony." She was serious.

I filled her glass. "Who told you?" I asked.

The Scotch was beginning to get her. She giggled. "Nobody told me. I know you're nuts."

"Who told you I was looking for a guy?"

"Billie."

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I slapped her across the mouth. Scotch splashed onto her slacks.

“God damn you!”

“Who told you?”

“I don’t know.”

I slapped her again. The glass fell to the floor, a puddle soaked into the rug.

“Who told you?”

“You dirty son-of-a-bitch,” she said. She buried her head in her arms and cried. I picked up her glass and poured it half full, shook her and handed her the drink. She took it. Her eyes were red and tears streaked through the paint on her cheeks. She snuffled; I handed her my handkerchief and she wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Her lip rouge was smeared from my slaps.

“Where’s the can?” she asked.

I pointed through the kitchen. She went out, carrying her glass with her. I finished my drink and felt like a heel, but I had to know who knew my business. I had to know, even if I had to slap her face off. I poured another drink. I needed it.

When she came back into the room, her face was repainted, and her glass was empty.

“What do you want?” she asked me. “I got to get

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back." I filled her glass again, and she sat down beside me. We drank.

"You can go as soon as you tell me who told you that I was looking for a guy. You can tell me, or I can slap it out of you. Either way," I said, "you call it."

"Please, Anthony, give me a break. I ain't a stool."

"Either way," I reminded her.

"Either way," she sneered, "either way, I get kicked around."

She drank the half glassful of Scotch without a breath, four swallows. She shuddered.

"Eddie told me. Eddie Donley." She leaned against me, her eyes closed.

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# 6

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I THOUGHT IT OVER WHILE SHE lay against me, not moving. I slipped my arm around her; it kept her shoulder from digging into my side. I was disappointed. I didn't know Eddie Donley. But I could find out who he was, if Mick hadn't gone yet. I looked at my watch; it was five minutes past midnight. I shook the girl, but there was no response; she'd passed out. I swore. Untangling myself, I went into the bedroom and jerked a blanket from my bed. I laid the blonde out on the davenport and threw the covering over her. I drained the Scotch in my glass.

At the door, I remembered how tight the girl's clothes were. I went back and took off her shoes and stockings, pulled the sweater up over her head and off. She gave me no help. The slacks zipped down one side. I pulled them off and she was naked. I covered her up and tucked the blanket around her, folded the sweater and slacks and put them on a chair. I left my last two tens on top of them.

## ROUGH ON RATS

The Lucky Spot was going strong when I got back, the high-pitched murmur was a steady roar; the smoke, thick as a fog, made my eyes burn. I walked back to the kitchen. The door was blocked by a sailor and a girl, pressed against it. You couldn't have slid a calling card between their bellies. I tapped him on the shoulder, but he didn't pay any attention to me. The pressure against the door made the knob hard to turn; I forced it, and the door snapped open. The girl fell backward to the floor, the sailor on top her. I could hear them swearing as I stepped over them and walked back to the alley. The back door was open, and cigarette smoke drifted in. Mick and the cook were sitting on lug boxes, leaning against the wall of the building.

"Hi," I said, and sat down. Mick passed me a pint bottle.

I shook my head no.

"You know Eddie Donley?" I asked.

Mick said, "Sure."

I waited.

"He's a cheap punk," Mick explained. "Packs a rod."

"What's that blonde's name?" I asked.

Mick flicked his cigarette across the alley; it hit the

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wall with a shower of sparks. "Jerry," he said. "That's all I know."

"Smith," the cook said. "Dames in these bars are always named Smith, or Jones."

"Yeah. What's this Eddie to her?" I asked.

They both considered it.

"Boy friend," the cook's voice.

"Naw," Mick said. "It ain't that." The cook shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know, Anthony," Mick went on, "I never seen them together." He sounded sorry.

"Where does he live?"

"Sixth Street, below Wall. She lives there, too."

"Me, too," the cook contributed.

"You see them together?" I asked him.

"He's probably getting a little, but I never seen them. I'm in this hole every God damn day and night. I don't see nothing but stew bums running out here to the can." He tipped the bottle up, it gurgled.

"Billie out front?" I asked Nick.

He shook his head. "She ain't been here tonight."

I walked up the alley to Sixth, and went down toward Wall. The bus depot at Los Angeles Street was still brightly lit. Half a block below Wall Street a faded sign, announcing "Rooms," hung beneath an



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unshaded light bulb. I went in the doorway and climbed the stairs. At the landing there was a small alcove, barred by a counter. Behind the alcove, on the wall, hung a board with a few keys hanging from it. Below the board, a black-headed youth slept, propped on a straight chair. I reached over and took a dog-eared notebook from a small shelf under the counter. The rentals were listed by the week. I turned to the last Monday entered. Eddie Donley was in room 305. I looked for Jerry's name, and then grinned. She was listed as Jerry Jones, 409.

I put the notebook back and went up the stairs. The first room to the left at the top of the stairs was 305. There was no light showing beneath the door. I knocked softly and waited, but there was no sound from the room. I went back down to the alcove. The key to 305 wasn't hanging on the board, but on the shelf below the counter there was a master key. I took it. The black-headed punk was snoring quietly.

The door of 305 creaked softly as I opened it. The window, though the shade was drawn, was faintly outlined across the room. I could hear faint sounds of even breathing from where I figured the bed would be. I switched on the light.

The room was small and square. A bed, a tall

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dresser and an undersized table and chair made up the furnishings. There was a wash bowl in one corner with a mirror above it. A blond-headed, pug-nosed kid was asleep in the bed. He looked about twenty-five. I tiptoed to the chair. There was a plaid suit coat draped over its back. I lifted the coat; under it was an empty shoulder holster. I moved over to the bed; the kid's head was almost off the pillow, so I reached under and took the gun, a thirty-two Colt automatic. I pulled a chair over to the side of the bed and sat down. I clicked the safety catch on, reached over and shook the kid. He raised his head, blinked, and reached under the pillow for the gun.

"I've got it," I said, and pointed it at him. "We're going to talk." I grinned.

The kid had a bewildered look on his face. I don't know what he'd been dreaming, but I was damn sure it wasn't supposed to end with me poking a gun at him. He didn't look very tough to me. I figured him for a punk.

"Who are you working for, Eddie?"

He clamped his mouth tight, so that the jaw muscles stood out. I shrugged.

"You're going to talk," I told him, "now or later. You been seeing too many gangster pictures." I

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walked over to the door and locked it. "Who you working for?"

"Go to hell!"

I hit him across the nose with the gun. Blood dripped onto the white pillow cover. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, smearing blood across his cheek.

"Who you working for?"

"Go to hell!"

I hit him again. The gun caught him on the mouth, splitting his lower lip against his teeth. Blood dripped again. He held the corner of the sheet against his battered mouth. The cloth slowly turned red.

"Who you working for?"

He mumbled something through the sheet. I hit him again.

He groaned softly. "Joe Stone," he said. He had a hard time forming words with his torn lip.

"How do you know I was looking for him?" I asked.

"I seen you go into Smith's office. I heard what you said."

"Did you tell Stone?"

"Naw. I ain't seen him since Wednesday night. He's out of town."

## ROUGH ON RATS

I lit a cigarette and thought it over. It could hold together. If he was working for Stone and hadn't seen him since Wednesday night, he wouldn't know that Stone was dead.

"How long you been working for him?" I asked.

"He come to see me last Saturday. Said he'd heard about me, and offered me a C note to keep my eye on a guy."

"The little fat guy?"

"Yeah."

"Where does Fatty live?" I asked.

"Stone didn't tell me. I hung around the Felman Building until he showed up."

"When?"

"Wednesday. I trailed him to the Maryland Hotel; he was looking for Stone."

"And Stone wasn't there?"

"He was there, but the fat guy don't get to him."

"You know he was there?" I asked.

"Yeah. I phoned Stone, and he told me to let the fat guy go and watch the office. I phoned him right after the fat guy led me back to the building. Stone was there all right, but the guy at the desk covers him."

So far the punk's story fitted, but he didn't know

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enough. It wasn't his fault; Stone had used him for an errand boy. I'd wasted my time and mussed his face for nothing.

"You saw Stone Wednesday night?" I asked him. "Where?"

"The hotel. He gave me the C note and promised me another. I collect tomorrow."

I shook my head.

"Stay away from the Maryland," I told him. "The place is crawling with cops. Somebody knocked Stone off."

His mouth hung open.

"Did you rub him out?" I asked.

"Christ, no!" he whined.

"Okay," I said. I put the gun on the floor by the door, switched off the light, stepped out and locked the door. On my way down, I stopped at the alcove and put the key back under the counter. The punk in the chair slept on. It was one-thirty.

A drunk stumbled against me as I made my way up Sixth; his breath stunk. The bars were still going strong, foul air streaming out of the wide doorways. In a dark alley a couple stood locked together; in another a drunk slept in his own vomit. On Fifth, I went into the doorway of Billie's hotel and up the

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stairs. Her room was dark, and the door stood open a crack. It looked screwy. I pushed the door open further, and stepped into the darkness. There was a dull crack, a blinding flash, and then deep, deep darkness, quiet, smooth and water-clear.

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# 7

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THE AIR WAS DUST; MY NOSE drew it in, my teeth grated against it, my mouth was dry with it. I opened my eyes to a fuzzy grayness with blurred specks of red and blue dancing through it. I raised my head. I'd been lying face down on a rug, my nose pushed into the short nap. I sat up, the room whirled around me, small golden sparks flicked in my eyes, my brain throbbed with a dull nagging ache. I felt the back of my head. There was a tender lump at the base of my skull and I could feel a small gash crusted with dried blood. I got unsteadily to my feet and looked around.

I was in Billie's room. The sun filtered onto the floor through the cracks in the green shade of the window. On the bed, body naked except for a pair of scanty pink pants and a silk stocking wound about the neck, the head twisted unnaturally over the edge, was a girl. It was Billie. She was dead. I stood looking at her. One arm hung over the side of the bed,

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the other stretched tautly against her side, the hand clutched the bed cover. On the side of her head, above the temple, a blackened bruise stood out from the pale skin. There was a long scratch on her chest, reaching from one breast to her shoulder.

My knees felt weak, my stomach was a cold, sour rag. I wanted to throw up. Somebody was trying to frame me. I tried the door; it was unlocked. I looked out into the hall; there was no one about. I closed the door and walked back to the bed. I wanted to cover her up, but I hated to touch her. She was cold and stiff. I left her the way I'd found her.

I picked up a yellow slip and set to work wiping every surface that might have fingerprints. I could have been destroying valuable evidence, but I couldn't risk being hauled in on a murder charge. I wiped everything. I checked my pockets to make sure that nothing of mine had been planted in the room; everything checked. I looked at my watch; it was six-thirty. I'd been out about four hours, so Billie must have been dead when I'd come into the room. I picked up my hat, and closed the door tight after me.

I didn't make any noise going down the stairs, and I didn't see anyone. I hurried up to Main Street. The



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city was beginning to wake up. The door next to the Lucky Spot led upstairs to a long, dark hallway. I walked into a room about halfway along the hall. Mick was sleeping on his back, snoring. The bed clothes were pulled loose from the bottom, exposing his bare feet. I woke him by shaking him.

“What the hell?” he rubbed his eyes. “Oh. . . . Hi, Anthony.”

“Listen,” I said. “I’m in a hell of a hurry. Somebody knocked Billie off.” His eyes popped wide open. “They knocked me out. I didn’t see anyone. She was dead when I got to her room last night—or this morning, I mean. You go over there about ten and discover the body, if nobody beats you to it.” He tried to interrupt. “I can’t tell you anything else; do what I said, will you?”

“Sure, Anthony, but . . .”

“No buts. I ain’t got time. I’ll see you later this morning. Go over to Billie’s room like I said, and pick up what you can when the cops get there, see?” He nodded.

There was no attendant at the lot when I picked up my car. I had that break, anyway. I drove fast, but carefully. I couldn’t afford a ticket right then. I parked the car a half block from the apartment and

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walked noiselessly around to my back door and let myself in. In the bedroom, I peeled my clothes off and slipped into my pajamas. I washed the blood from the cut on my head and tiptoed into the front room. The blonde hadn't moved. I went back to my room and got into bed.

I couldn't sleep, but I hadn't expected to. I couldn't erase from my mind the sight of a slim, white body with a red scratch across the breast. Some rat was going to sit in a little room and sniff gas for Billie. Even if it turned out to be Fatty and cost me a grand, and it could be Fatty.

Hell, getting me to hunt for Stone's murderer was no alibi. I'd told him I couldn't do it. With me, Fatty was number one on my list. He could have knocked off Stone, and then Billie. Stone for whatever the Smith Company was, and Billie because she knew Stone; and I was damn sure she'd known Stone's business. So far, she was the only one, outside of Fatty, that I was sure did know it.

If Billie had known Stone in the East, and had recognized him, she might have put the screws on him; might have found out what his racket was. Fatty could have known that, could have knocked off

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Stone, and then Billie, to keep her quiet. He could have, but somehow I couldn't see the little fat man doing it the way it was done. He'd have shot; he was the type. Stone could have been knocked off any time Thursday, after nine in the morning, and up to eleven at night; that is, if the doc hadn't cut the time down. If Fatty had been at the office, Eddie would have picked him up, and if Eddie had trailed him to the Maryland Thursday, it was ten to one Fatty was my boy. I planned to see Eddie again, soon.

Eddie could have done it. He could have gotten to Stone without any trouble, could have choked him because he knew what Stone was and wanted the dough Stone had, or at least whatever it was that made the dough. And, unless I was still silly from that crack on the head, I had an idea what that was. What worried me about Eddie was the three hundred and forty-two bucks in Stone's wallet; he'd have taken that. He looked better in Billie's set-up. He could have bumped her off during the early evening or late afternoon, and then followed me from his room and laid me out, knowing that I would keep quiet about being in the room if I came to before somebody discovered me. If I didn't, the cops would

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have me tied up for a couple of days at least. He was the type to find that good fun, and payment for my mussing him up.

Just why Fatty would be hanging around Billie's room so long after her death had me beat. Why anyone, except someone following me, would come back to the room after killing her, was a question to which I could find no answer. I could have walked in on someone just snooping around, but I had a hunch that whoever had laid me out had killed Billie, and whoever had killed her had knocked off Stone. Maybe that hunch was just my way of leaving Pat out of the mess.

I could hear the blonde moving around the front room, and then in the bath. I looked at the clock on my dresser. It was ten o'clock. I reached for a cigarette and lit it. The smoke tasted like burnt beans smell; my head ached, my eyes burned, and I felt dirty. The blonde left the bath and I heard her moving to the front room. The couch creaked as she lay down again. I grinned; she wasn't feeling very sharp either.

I went into the bath and shaved, brushed my teeth and took a long shower, hot as I could stand it, followed by stinging cold. I put my pajama pants back

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on and went into the bedroom. Jerry was sitting on the bed, a blanket held around her. She looked better in the morning light; there was less paint on her face. She was holding a water glass a quarter filled with Scotch.

“Only drunkards do that,” I said. I slid around her and got under the bedclothes. She handed me the glass and I drank half of the Scotch. I shuddered.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Nothing; you passed out.”

“Oh.” She reached for the glass and finished the whisky. She stood up and dropped the blanket to the floor.

“Move over.” She got under the covers with me.

“This is cozy,” I grinned.

“Yeah.” She didn’t sound interested. “What did I tell you last night?”

“Just a guy’s name,” I said, “a punk’s name.”

“Oh, God!”

“Why?”

“He’ll know I told you; he’ll find out.”

“So?”

“So I’ll get kicked around again. You’re the kind of a heel that don’t care about anyone, just so long as you get what you want.”

## ROUGH ON RATS

"If he pushes you around, tell me and I'll push him around," I said.

"What good's that going to do me?" she asked.

"Okay," I said, "stick around here until I look him up. That okay?"

"Yeah." She snuggled against me and I slid my arm under her.

"How long you been in Mick's?" I asked. She stiffened.

"Why?"

"Just curious," I said.

"About six months. I was at Joe's Bar before that."

"Quit?"

"Naw. The city council got tough about the girls. We had to scram."

"Hell," I said. "I can remember during the dry spell there were girls at the Lucky Spot. They've always been there."

"Sure. Mick can pay protection; my boss couldn't. Lots of places couldn't."

"Yeah." I was thinking about how she'd look in a year or so, maybe sooner.

"What do you ask so many questions for?" She wriggled against me. I moved my hand up and down the bumps of her spine.

## ROUGH ON RATS

“Did you ever make any movies?” I asked. She pulled away from me.

“Who the hell told you that?” Her voice was hard.

“Nobody,” I said. “I figured it out.” I grinned.

“You’re a smart guy, ain’t you?”

“I’m a G-Man,” I said. I pulled her back against me. “Who did you make them for?”

“Let me alone, will you? Let me alone.” She finally relaxed.

“Who?” I persisted.

“I don’t know.” She sounded tired, resigned. “I went to a hotel room. There were three guys with little movie cameras, like you can buy in the jewelry stores. I got fifty bucks for it.”

“When?”

“About three weeks ago. I was going to make another this week, but the guy never called me.”

“You mean Stone?”

“Yeah. He promised me a hundred bucks this time. Said it was going to be longer. I was going to ask if you’d found him; you never gave me a chance.”

“That’s a hell of a way to make dough,” I said.

“You got a hell of a lot to yell about,” she said. “You’d stab your own mother for a dime.”

“Nobody’s seen me in dirty movies.”

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"Nobody'd know me. I wore a black wig and they kept my face out of it as much as they could."

"One of your many admirers might recognize your body, I would."

"I don't care," she said, "I didn't do anything, just a strip tease. You can see that much at the burlesque."

"That's just a start; they use that to warm the boys up. The next one would be worse."

"I didn't make but one," she protested.

"You'd have done another and for a hundred you wouldn't have gotten away with the bumps and grind. I've seen some of them; they can be pretty bad."

"All right," she said, "maybe I wouldn't have done it. What's it to you, anyway?"

"It's not nice," I grinned.

"Listen to you!"

"You can't prove a thing," I said. I thought about getting up. It was ten-thirty and I should have phoned Mick and found out what had happened when he'd walked in on Billie's body.

"I found that Stone guy," I said. The girl's body trembled and she pushed her hands against my chest. I looked at her. She was biting her lower lip. "What's the matter?"



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“Nothing.”

“What are you trembling for? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, “honestly; there’s nothing wrong.”

I decided to let it go.

“Okay,” I said, “this Stone was in his room; he was . . .”

She pulled tight against me, trembling.

“Oh, God, I didn’t kill him, Anthony! I didn’t kill him!”

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## 8

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I HELD HER TIGHTLY AND MADE what I hoped were soothing noises. She cried against my shoulder, body-wracking sobs that shook both of us. I figured it had been inside her for a long time. She wasn't as tough as she tried to be.

"Cut it out," I said. I shook her. "Cut it out."

She stopped except for an occasional snuffle; she was relaxed, tired.

I grinned at her. "I don't think you did it," I said. "I never thought so."

"You kept asking questions," she sniffed. "I thought you'd try to trap me. I told you about Eddie and the movies; I hoped you'd forget about Stone, if you got enough other stuff."

"I'm going to get up and dress, and cook you some breakfast. Then you can tell me about it."

I had bacon and eggs fried, and the coffee perking by the time she was ready. She came into the kitchen with the two ten-dollar bills in her hand.

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"I can't take these, Anthony."

"You may have to stick around here for a while," I said, "until I can see Eddie. You'll need the dough."

"But I . . ."

"Hell," I told her, "I've got an expense account."

We had another shot of the Scotch and then I ate four eggs and a half a pound of bacon. I was on my third cup of coffee when I noticed that she wasn't eating; she was shoving the food around on her plate, and her coffee was cold.

"What the hell," I said, "quit worrying."

"The cops will try to pin it on me, I know they will."

"Did anyone see you in the hotel, the guy behind the desk or anyone in the halls?" I asked.

"I don't think so. Eddie told me the room number, and there wasn't anybody behind the desk. I didn't see anyone except a couple of guys in the lobby."

"How about the mug in the elevator?"

"I went up the stairs," she said.

"The guys in the lobby notice you?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you have those slacks on?" I asked. She shook her head, puzzled.

"Okay," I said, "nobody's going to frame you. Skip

## ROUGH ON RATS

it. Lay out here until I find out what the cops are doing, but don't worry about it." I got her a hot cup of coffee and she showed some interest in it. "Now, tell me how you knew he was dead."

She stirred sugar into her coffee. "Stone said he'd phone me Wednesday or Thursday, and when he didn't I went to the hotel to see him. I needed dough."

"When did Eddie tell you he was working for Stone?" I interrupted.

She thought for a while.

"Last Saturday, I think."

"Did you tell him you knew Stone?" She shook her head. "All right," I said, "you went to the hotel and walked up to Stone's room. Was the door locked?"

"Yeah, the door was locked, and I knew Stone wouldn't answer if I knocked."

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Eddie told me about a little fat guy trying to get in to see Stone, and how Stone was there all the time."

I nodded.

"So I tried to get him to talk to me through the door. You know. I said it was me, and I was alone."

I nodded again.

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“Then I looked through the keyhole, and I could see him lying on the floor, and I knew he was dead because his face was so funny colored.”

I thought it over. It held together. Stone had been lying in the center of the room, and in a line with the door. He could have been seen from the keyhole.

“What gave you the idea that I thought you did it?” I asked.

“I didn’t until you began asking all those questions.”

“Forget it,” I said. “I’m going to pin this on somebody else.” I grinned at her. “What time did you go to the hotel?”

“I don’t know exactly, but it was six-thirty when I got back to the Lucky Spot.”

I gave her a cigarette and lit one for myself.

“Who killed him, Anthony?” she asked.

“Maybe Eddie,” I said.

She laughed.

“Eddie hasn’t guts to kill anyone.”

“He pushes you around.”

“Hell, who doesn’t?” Her smile was brittle.

“He packs a rod,” I said.

“He wouldn’t use it. He’s just a punk, he’s not tough. He never shot Stone.”

## ROUGH ON RATS

"I got to phone a guy, and then I got a lot of things to do. Stick around here until I get back." I got up. "Don't sell my liquor to anyone."

She was swearing at me as I went out the door. I drove to the nearest drugstore, and called the Lucky Spot. Mick answered.

"Anthony," I said. "Can you talk?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"I went over at ten, like you said, and saw her and then I called the cops. They came out and asked me who I was and what did I know. I told them Billie hadn't been to work last night and I come over to see why and found her. I hung around for a while and then they said I could go."

"Did they say how she got it?"

"Yeah. She was knocked over the head, and then choked with a stocking."

"All right, Mick, and thanks."

"Who did it, Anthony?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, "I didn't."

"Hell, I didn't mean . . ."

"So long, Mick." I hung up.

I drove out Sunset to Vista Street and turned left up past Hollywood Boulevard. The Art Home Movies

## ROUGH ON RATS

Company was in a one-storied stucco building. It looked new. I went into a modernly decorated reception room. A flat-chested brunette sat behind a desk made of a piece of black soda fountain counter and a lot of chromium tubing. It looked like a movie prop.

"The boss in?" I asked.

She looked at me as if I'd made a pass at her. "Who's calling?"

"Me," I said. I felt cute.

"Your name?"

"Gordon," I said. "Flash Gordon."

"Just be seated." She got up and went through a door marked, "Max Stein, Manager." I followed her in.

The office was the same as the reception room. It looked like a movie set, and I was willing to bet it was used for one fairly often. A fat-faced, hook-nosed, dark-skinned guy sat behind a larger edition of the desk out front. He wore a tight, double-breasted, pin-striped suit and a polo shirt. He looked up.

"There's a man out there . . ." Flat-chest began.

"Skip it," I said.

Maxie looked bewildered.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

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"I want to see you," I said.

"All right, Miss Holmes." He waved her away. I grinned at her as she went out. "Now, Mr. . . . ?"

"Gregory. John Gregory. I want some movies."

"You want to rent some?" he asked.

"Well," I stalled, "I don't know."

"We only supply dealers," he explained. "I can give you a list of dealers that rent out films." He left it for me to take up.

"I have an organization that could use quite a few movies," I said. "I don't know whether you have just what I want, but I've been several places and so far I haven't found anything that would do." I smiled at him. He smiled back at me. It was on a very high plane.

"Just what did you have in mind, Mr. Gregory?"

"I want something spicy." I lingered over the word. "Something that would appeal to men." He offered me a cigarette and we lit up.

"Perhaps you can find something on this list." He handed me a mimeographed sheet. There were about fifty titles listed, from *Naughty Models* to *Saturday Night*. I made a show of reading them. At the top of the list it said that Art Movies were produced for the study of art, and the assistance of art students.



## ROUGH ON RATS

"This may do it," I said. "Can I see one?"

He told me to pick one I thought I'd like. I chose *Harem Party*. He led me back to a small room without windows. There were four or five easy chairs facing a small white screen. At the back of the room was a projection machine mounted on a stand. He went out and got a spool of 16mm film.

"Sit down, Mr. Gregory. I'll start this as soon as I get the machine set up."

I waited while he adjusted the film in the projector. He turned the machine on, and the lights off. We sat and watched the *Harem Party* unfold. Four girls scampered about an oriental room, removing their clothes. They were careful to display their breasts occasionally, but the major part of the party consisted of the girls standing with their backs to the camera, coyly covering and uncovering their fannies. The camera kept above their waists except in the back views. It ended with the four fully exposed for an instant, and then a quick blackout. He turned on the lights.

"Well?" He was smiling smugly.

"Look," I said, "I don't want to put on a show for a bunch of Sunday School kids." His face fell. "I'm willing to pay a price for what I want," I said, "and I

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can use a lot of stuff, but if that's your idea of something hot, it stinks."

I knew he wouldn't offer anything else, and I cursed myself for not having looked at the morning paper to see if the hotel killing had been mentioned. I decided to take a chance.

"I could get what I want from Joe Stone," I said, "but he's out of town."

Stein looked me over very carefully. "You know Joe Stone?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I've had stuff from him before."

"He told you to come here?"

I'd have liked to had this guy in a poker game; he had "trap" written all over his face.

"No," I said. "I couldn't get in touch with him, so I came here. I need the stuff as soon as possible."

He looked relieved. "We have nothing any—ah—spicier than what you've just seen, Mr. Gregory."

"Well, that's that." I got up and started for the door. "Joe told me you made the stuff for him; I thought you might have some of it around." I opened the door and started out.

"Wait!" His voice stopped me. I turned around. "You're wrong, Mr. Gregory, we have made no pictures for Mr. Stone."

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"Mr. Stone's wrong," I said; "he told me you did. He also told me that you processed stuff that he made elsewhere."

"No," he said. "We have no business with Mr. Stone."

"You know him, though." It was the same as calling him a liar.

"Yes," he admitted. "He wanted us to do some work for him. I refused."

Like hell you did, I thought. I shrugged.

"That's your story," I said. "I could prove different. Thanks anyway." I opened the door and went out before he thought of an answer.

The flat-chested brunette was behind her desk.

"I'm not really Flash Gordon," I told her. "I'm Clark Gable." I pulled my ears out. "See?"

I drove to a drugstore and phoned the Lucky Spot.

"Mick, Anthony," I said.

"Jesus, Anthony, you'd better get down here quick."

"Why?" I asked.

"That Eddie you were asking about—he was rubbed out this morning."

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# 9

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I SLAMMED THE RECEIVER down and hurried out to the car. I was at the Lucky Spot twenty minutes later. Mick was waiting for me and led me back to the kitchen. He motioned to the cook to follow and stepped out into the alley. The cook and I joined him.

“Tell him.” Mick spoke to the cook, and he wiped his hands on his apron and turned to me.

“I live in the same dump where Donley did. About nine-thirty the dame that cleans the rooms walks into Eddie’s hole, and finds him dead. She lets out a holler and I runs down to see what the hell. He’s lying on the bed with a belt around his neck. I called the cops.”

“Was there any sign of a crack on the head?” I asked.

“I don’t see none, but the doc that the cops got says that’s what happened to him. Knocked over the head and choked with the belt. The guy must have

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worked him over, though. His face was cut up some, and there was blood on the sheet." I nodded.

"Did the doc say how long Eddie had been dead?"

"I hear him tell the bull it's about eight hours, but he don't seem very sure. How the hell can he tell?"

I didn't know myself, but I knew Eddie had been alive at one-thirty that morning. I told the cook thanks and he went back into the kitchen.

"Did you see Eddie last night?" Mick asked me. I nodded.

"Yeah. I mussed him up, but I didn't knock him off. He was okay when I left." I went into the kitchen.

"Where was his rod?" I asked the cook. He was puzzled for an instant.

"Oh, under his pillow. The cops found it."

I went out to the phone booth in the bar and called Fatty's number. The phone rang six times while I waited. Then the fat man's voice said, "Yes?"

"This is Martin," I said. "Come down to my office."

"I'm busy right now," he said.

"It's twelve-thirty now," I said, looking at my watch, "be in my office at one-thirty or I'll come out to you." I hung up.

I sat at the bar drinking beer and trying to figure things out. With Eddie rubbed out, I had only two

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suspects left. Fatty and Patricia. The fact that all three deaths had been by choking after a blow on the head would fit either one. Fatty wasn't the type to grapple with anyone; he didn't have the build. And the beautiful Patricia was no Amazon. Using a cloth or belt to do the choking was against them, too. Neither had the strength required to do it by hand. It was a toss-up on the method, but Patricia led in the Stone death. She could have gotten to him without any trouble. Fatty had the motive. It was a mess.

I couldn't collect a grand by telling Fatty that he'd committed three murders, and I didn't like to think about mixing Patricia up in the mess. I was a hell of a detective. I ordered another beer and went to the phone and called my apartment. Jerry answered.

"Hi," I said, "how you getting along?"

"Okay. I'm cleaning the place."

"Eddie won't bother you any more," I said. "He was bumped off this morning." There was a long silence.

"You still there?" I asked.

"Anthony, who did it?"

"I don't know. You got any ideas?"

"Maybe that little fat guy he was trailing."

"Maybe," I said. "Listen, you stick where you are."

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Don't answer the door and keep yourself locked in."

"All right, but why?"

"It doesn't seem healthy to have known Stone. Do what I say. I'll be back as soon as possible. Okay?"

"Okay," she said.

Mick was at the bar when I went back. I drank beer while he talked.

"Three of them," he said, "all the same way. Why didn't he knock you off, Anthony?"

I grinned at him. "I'm hard, Mick, I'm tough; I can take it."

"Ain't nobody can take that stuff. The guy's nuts!"

"Did you do it, Mick?" I asked him.

He looked at me with his mouth open. "Me?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

He laughed. "Quit kidding."

"How did you know about Stone?" I asked him.

"Hell, you told me." He was getting sore.

"I didn't tell you he was choked. Was it in the paper?"

"No, the cook told me. He heard one of the cops ask another if there was an epidemic of choking cases. Three in two days, he said. I figured he meant Stone. There wasn't nothing in the paper."

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"I'm sorry, Mick, but the way my suspects are getting knocked off, I've got to find some new ones."

"I knew you weren't serious," he said.

But I was.

It was ten past one, so I walked over to my office. I unlocked the door, picked up the small pile of letters from the floor, went in and called the switchboard.

"Any messages?" I asked.

"Nothing yet." The girl had a swell voice. She was a swell girl, but she didn't approve of me.

I opened the mail. There were five bills, all past due, and a letter from a girl in San Francisco. Her name was Polly. She was on parole from a one to ten year manslaughter conviction. I had been pretty serious about her at one time and might have married her if it hadn't been for the law putting her away. I figured she was better off, at that.

I made out a deposit slip for the grand Fatty had given me, and then wrote five checks to cover the dunning notes. I hate like hell to pay my bills.

I heard the outer door open and hollered, "Come in."

Fatty pushed his big belly into the office. I told him to sit down, and he did.



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"I've got some things to say to you," I told him, "and some things to ask you. I want you to tell me the truth and I don't want a lot of guff or stalling around. If you want to play that way, we'll play. If not, you can take your dough and get the hell out. What do you say?"

He didn't stall with his fingers or get sore; he looked very meek.

"You call it," he said.

"Okay. Since you hired me to find out who killed Stone, two others have been rubbed out, just as he was, knocked in the head and choked. Both of them knew Stone. I figure the same guy did all three jobs. Who he is I don't know."

"Who are these others?" he asked.

"Billie Thomas, a B-girl who knew Stone in the East under the name of 'Bat Morton.' She may have known what his racket was there; I think she did, and was knocked off for that reason. She was killed sometime Friday afternoon. The third was a punk named Eddie Donley; he worked for Stone. He might have found out what Stone was doing, too. At least, whoever rubbed him out thought so. He was killed sometime this morning. He was hired by Stone to trail you." The fat man's eyes opened wide.

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"Trail me?" he exclaimed.

"Yeah. Stone didn't want to see you, but he wanted to know what you were doing. The punk picked you up at the Smith Company and trailed you to the Maryland on Wednesday. Stone was in his room, but the clerk covered up for him."

"The son-of-a-bitch!"

"Sure. Before I ask you these questions, I want you to know that I haven't told you everything I've found out. I know the answers to some of the things I'm going to ask you, because I talked to both of the people that got killed. If you tell me the truth, fine. If you don't, I'll know it, and you can scram. This is too serious to fool around with. The cops must know something, and so far they haven't said a damn thing. I don't like that. You still want to play?"

"I want to find out who knocked off Stone."

"Good," I said, "you can stop me when I go wrong. Stone came to you about a year ago with a proposition. He needed dough; he had connections, and your friends in the East gave him the O. K. He wanted you to put up the money. I don't know how much you chucked in, but . . ."

"Five grand," he sighed.

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“All right, you put up five grand, and Stone started to work. He set up the Smith Company, an office and a name; but he didn’t do any business through that office. He had a place somewhere else, and he kept everything there. You didn’t know where it was, because you didn’t want to; when and if the cops traced it, you wanted to be in the clear. I don’t know what line he handed you that kept you satisfied without dough and without security for your five grand, but that’s not important. He kept you satisfied until a week ago.

“I don’t know why you balked then, but you did; so he blew out. You tried to trace him, but didn’t get very far, so you called me in. Now you can tell me why you kicked when you did.”

“It wasn’t sudden,” he said. “Last Saturday was the date set for the pay-off. Before we started, he told me it would take him a year. I held him to it. About a month ago, I reminded him that the year would be up in a month. He said he would have about fifty grand for us to split, thirty-eight for me and twelve for him. His split included the stuff. He said he could set up again some place else. He figured a year was long enough to stay in one place. He wouldn’t have

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needed my dough, but the cops had cleaned him out unexpectedly in New Orleans. He didn't have time to save nothing, he said."

"I figured something like that," I said. "His racket was dirty movies. He tied up with the Art Movies Company and began to produce. What he didn't tell you was that he spent the dough he made, except enough to make more movies. I don't know what it costs to make a picture like that, but I figure maybe fifteen hundred to two grand, including a bunch of prints. He sold the prints and kept the negatives. Where, I don't know, but they're worth a lot of dough. There may be fifty or sixty of them."

Fatty nodded.

I went on. "I guessed most of this from a card I found in your office. You could have told me; it cost you money for me to get it the way I did." I grinned.

"Somebody wanted those films and probably got them," I said. "They had to kill Stone, but they got the negatives. Then they had to kill Billie, because she knew the lay-out and could put two and two together, and maybe wasn't above dropping a hint that she'd take dough for her silence. Anyway, she knew what Stone was doing in the East, and she'd figure he hadn't changed. She'd know his connections, too.

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So whoever tried to carry on Stone's business with them, she'd know that that was the guy who had bumped him off. That's clear, ain't it?"

Fatty said, "Yeah."

"The guy that bumped off Stone wouldn't know exactly how much Eddie had been able to find out, so Eddie had to go, too. He'd spill his guts to anyone who'd kick him around a bit, and cops sometimes do just that." Eddie had held out on me, but that was my fault; I didn't see any reason to tell Fatty how I'd muffed the deal.

"This guy maybe didn't want to kill so many people, but what the hell . . . ? He'd killed to get the stuff, and he'll go on killing so he can use it without someone putting the finger on him." I paused. "Did you knock off Stone?"

Fatty didn't give any of the signs you'd expect from a guilty man. "You think I did?" he asked.

"You could have," I said. "You had motive and, for all I know, plenty of opportunity."

"I didn't do it."

"Okay," I said, "then you'd better hire a body-guard, because you're next."

"Why?"

"Whoever this guy is, he'll find out about you, and

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he'll figure you know too much, just like Billie and Eddie, so he'll knock you off." I grinned.

Fatty thought it over for a while. "I'll take my chances," he said.

I shrugged. "You gave me a line of bull about Stone when you put me on his trail," I reminded him. "You said he owed you dough but didn't have any. How much of what you told me was the truth?"

"Like I said, he owed me dough. I figured he didn't have it, or he wouldn't have taken a runout powder. I told you he had a deal set. That's what I thought. I tabbed him to sell the stuff for get-away money. I knew he wouldn't leave town without the girl. I told you that."

"You didn't tell me what the racket was," I said.

"Do I know Stone's been bumped off?" he asked. "I just want him found; I don't want you poking where you don't belong. I wanted you to find him, and after that it's my business. I think maybe he's out of town on a deal, and if he shows up later, I don't want everything spilt. But I want to know where he is and what he's doing. I told you enough so that you could maybe find him before he sold the stuff and blew. That's all I wanted."

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I nodded. "Now you want me to find out who did it?"

"Yeah."

"I can try," I told him. "I may be able to do it; but that's all I'll do. I'm not finding the stuff. If it turns up, the cops get it. I don't want any part of it."

He looked as though I'd stabbed him in the back.

"I want the stuff," he said. I shook my head.

"You got enough to worry about without it," I said. "I hope you didn't do any of these killings, and if you didn't, I hope you're far enough out of the Smith Company so that the cops can't pin a vice rap on you. They may try to hang the killings on you, so if I can find out who really did them, that should be enough for me to do for you. If you got alibis for the murders, then you don't need me."

"Okay." He stood up. It was an effort. "Clear me; that's enough."

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# 10

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I LOCKED UP THE OFFICE AGAIN and walked over to the Maryland Hotel. Vincent was leaning behind the desk, reading the Racing Form.

"I know a system," I said.

He looked up. "You back?"

I grinned and looked him over. He was my height and of about the same build. His face was sharp and crafty, and his bald head gave him a deceptive appearance as to age. I figured him for about forty. He was dressed in a conservative brown suit, tan shirt and modest brown tie.

"You take the number of letters in the name of the horse listed as number five on the program. If there's a horse with that program number, you bet five to win and two to show. If the number's too high, cut it in half and add one. Never fails."

"I take the jockey's age," he said, "and divide by three; then I add the loose change in my pocket and use the last digit. I bet two across. It's good, too."



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"Sounds good," I said. "The cops give you much trouble?"

"Nope."

"That's fine," I said, "I didn't want to get you into any trouble."

"Nothing to it," he smiled. "What did you find?"

"Nothing, but then I didn't expect to; he'd been dead long enough for whoever did it to take anything useful. It was more or less habit that made me look, like locking the bathroom door when you live alone. Not my job, anyway. I was just hired to find him."

"The fat guy?" he asked.

"Yeah. Why didn't you let him in when he came around Wednesday?"

"Stone was in the room. He told me to keep the fat guy out."

"Was Stone around when Fatty called Monday and Tuesday?"

"Neither of them was here."

"The fat guy phoned," I explained.

"Oh yeah. No; Stone was out. He came in about ten Wednesday morning. I told him about a guy named Smith calling and he gives me a five to tell the story. He says to keep it quiet that he's back. He doesn't want to see anybody."

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“Anybody but Fatty call or try to get in touch with him?”

He shook his head. “You did, but that’s all.”

“Somebody might have phoned while you were away from the switchboard.”

“I don’t go away during the day. I’m here from eight in the morning until six at night.”

“How come you let me into Stone’s room?” I asked.

“I thought he was out. I didn’t hear anything from the room, and the maid said he didn’t answer when she asked if she could clean the room Thursday morning.”

“She didn’t go in?”

“Naw. He never let her clean unless he was there. He gave strict orders about that.”

“Did you ever go in the room when he was out?”

“Sure,” he smiled. “I was curious, but there wasn’t a damn thing in there that anybody couldn’t have seen.” He didn’t stop smiling. “I thought it wasn’t your job,” he drawled.

“It isn’t,” I said, “but I don’t walk in on a stiff every day. I’m kind of curious about the guy, but I guess I’m wasting my time. I don’t know a damn thing that anyone reading the papers wouldn’t know.”

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"How about the fat guy; he ought to know something."

"He don't talk," I said. "I told him about Stone and he says, 'Okay,' and pays me off. I'm giving it up."

"If you don't get paid for it why worry about it?"

"That's right," I said. "You ever see a punk named Eddie Donley around here?" I described him.

Vincent shook his head. "I don't remember him," he said. "Did he have something to do with Stone?"

"Naw." If Baldy didn't know, I wasn't giving out information. "He might know something about some stuff that was stolen from an old dame in Pasadena," I lied. "She wants it back, and no cops."

I walked back to Main Street and picked up my car. The early editions were on the street and I bought one. The war had everything pushed off the front page. The story I was looking for was in the second section. Billie was described as a gunman's moll, and Eddie as a minor gangster. The reporters intimated that the two were wiped out by a rival gangster, in a quarrel over Billie's body. I was surprised they hadn't tied the Reds up in it some way. It was a Hearst paper.

Stone wasn't mentioned in that story, but on an-

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other page his death was reported as possible suicide, under the heading, "Man Found Dead in Hotel Room." I threw the paper away.

The doorman at the Tower Arms gave me another dirty look. I walked directly to the elevator, hoping to avoid the punk at the desk. A bellboy stopped me about three feet from the cage door.

"Mr. Hammond would like to see you." He nodded toward the desk.

"Thanks," I said and handed him a quarter. "I'll get it on my way out."

The colored maid answered the chimes.

"Miss Temple in?" I asked.

"Miss Temple has gone for a few days."

"Do you mind if I look?" She didn't say anything, so I pushed past her and went through the apartment. Patricia wasn't there. The maid was still standing at the door when I got through looking.

"Where is she?" I asked. I didn't get any answer.

I stopped at the desk on my way out. The chinless punk had a smug expression on his pan.

"I could have saved you the trip," he said. "Miss Temple left last night. She won't be back for several days."

"I suppose they came after her, I knew they

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would.” He looked puzzled. “Norwalk,” I explained. “She gets violent.”

“Norwalk?” He didn’t know what it was.

“State nut house,” I said. “Shame. She’s such a pretty girl.” I left him.

I walked down the driveway into the basement garage and flashed the deputy sheriff’s badge on the attendant.

“Miss Temple keep her car here?” He said that she did.

“Is it here now?”

“Nope, she went out last night.”

“She say where she was going?”

“Just said fill it up.”

“What kind of car?” I asked.

“New Caddy eight, convertible coupé, black.”

Smart girl, I thought, as I walked back to my car. I had to buck the five o’clock traffic on my way back to town. I parked and bought a quart of Johnnie Walker and went up to my office. The afternoon mail was lying on the floor when I opened the door. I left the bottle unopened, and looked through the mail. It was all bills this time, and all past due again.

I put the lights out and sat in the dark, trying to figure things out. I didn’t get any place. Somewhere

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there was a bunch of movie film worth between thirty and sixty thousand dollars, and three people had been killed for it. It was a lot of dough, and it was a lot of killing. I decided to go to the 31 Club.

I walked to the Lucky Spot and went back to the kitchen. The cook was reading a detective magazine.

"What's the number of your room?" I asked. He looked up.

"Five-sixteen. Top floor, third room on the right. Got a babe?"

"You got the key?"

"Yeah." He handed me a common skeleton key. They cost a nickel at the five and dime.

"This open any of the doors?"

"Sure."

I took the key and walked down Sixth Street to the hotel. I went up to Jerry's room and unlocked the door. The room was the same as Eddie's as far as furnishings went. The place was strictly impersonal, neat and clean. The bed was made. I opened the closet and looked over her clothes. I picked out a blue evening gown and a pair of silver slippers. I found an overnight case under the bed. From the dresser drawers I picked out a pair of silk pants, a

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brassière, a pair of stockings and some pieces of costume jewelry. I took a bottle of perfume, a box of powder, three bottles of nail polish of different shades and dumped them into the case with the clothes. I went back to the closet and collected an evening wrap. She had nice clothes. I tried to think of what else a girl would need and checked over what I had already selected; dress, coat, pants, bra, stockings, shoes, powder, nail polish and perfume. I went back to the drawer and found an evening bag and a pair of long white gloves, threw them into the case and closed it. I was back to my car before I remembered a hat.

A pansy-looking sweetheart in the flower shop said all the girls were wearing flowers for hats this year. I got some. I also got some Scotch. I wondered if Fatty knew what he was buying. I went up to my office and rang the switchboard.

“Any messages?”

“A Miss Temple called.”

“What did she say?”

“She left a number. Shall I get it for you?”

“No,” I said, “just give it to me. You wouldn’t get a kick out of our conversation anyway.”

She snapped a Santa Monica number at me, and

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clicked off. I went downstairs to the drugstore and phoned from a booth. Honey-voice answered.

“Anthony Martin,” I said.

“I must see you; it’s important.”

I looked at my watch. Seven o’clock.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“The Cliffs Hotel; will you come down?”

“Sometime tonight,” I said. “It will be late. What’s your room?”

“Suite 106 A. It’s on the second floor.”

“Okay,” I said, “sit tight.”



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## II

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THE BLONDE HAD A STEAK ready to cook when I got home. She rushed at me when I opened the door and hugged me.

“What the hell?” I asked.

“I’m glad to see you, you lug.” She kissed me.

“Okay,” I said, patting her fanny, “break it up.” But it made me feel good. It had been a long time since anyone was glad to see me.

The apartment was cleaned from one end to the other and the smell of baking potatoes and perking coffee filled the kitchen. The steak was ready to slip into the broiler. I told her to hold things up a minute, went out to the car and got the suitcase, flowers and the Scotch.

“I went to your room and got you some clothes,” I said. I poured the Scotch while she opened the case.

“These aren’t what a girl wears around the house.” She was smiling.

“We’re going out,” I said. “I forgot the hat, but the

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guy told me you could wear that,” pointing to the flower box. She opened it.

“Gee, they’re swell, Anthony.” She sounded like a kid with her first doll.

“Sure.” I walked over and put my arms around her, her back against me; I cupped her breasts with my hands. “You’ll look swell in them. Nothing else, just the flowers.” She put her hands over mine.

“Don’t spoil it, please.” There were tears in her voice.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I was. I leaned down and kissed her behind her ear. She smelled fresh and clean, like good soap. We stood there quietly. . . .

“Let’s eat.” I got her the drink I’d poured. “Luck,” I said, and we drank.

The meal was the best I’d had in a long time. The Scotch built up my appetite and I ate until I felt uncomfortable. We took the coffee into the front room and sprawled on the davenport.

“I ate too much,” I said.

She smiled a very pleased smile. She looked a hell of a lot better without much make-up; not beautiful, like Pat, but better than most.

“I baked a pie, and I’ve got some cheese.”

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I groaned. "Hell, I can't do it, I'd like to, but can't. Sorry."

"Oh, it'll keep."

"Where did you get the food?" I asked.

"I went shopping."

"I told you to keep inside," I said, "locked in."

"Gee, Anthony, I wanted you to have a nice dinner. I . . ."

"It's all right," I stopped her. "I just don't want anything to happen to you. If you have to do any more shopping I'll go with you."

We smoked. I wished I could just go on sitting there without thinking, or trying to figure anything; with no case and no murders and no past. Jerry brought me another cup of coffee.

"Where did you learn to cook?"

"At home," she said. "I lived at home until a couple of years ago. When Dad died I went to work."

"We'd better get dressed. Do you want the bathroom first?"

She shook her head. "I took a bath before you got home; you go ahead."

I went into the bath and shed my clothes, shaved and showered. Jerry hollered through the door.

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“What clothes do you want?”

“Just bring me a pair of shorts,” I said. “They’re in the upper drawer.”

She opened the door a crack and handed me the shorts. I combed my hair and went into the bedroom. She was in the kitchen washing the dishes.

“Let them go,” I said.

“It only takes a minute. I’m waiting for the iron to heat. You don’t pack very neatly.”

“Did you clean in here?” I called to her. “Where the hell are my studs?”

She came in wiping her hands on a towel. “Here.” She took them from a drawer. “And here are your socks and ties in here, and your shoes are on the back porch. I polished all of them.”

I put the studs in my shirt and started fighting with the tie.

“Here,” she said, “I’ll do it.” She stood behind me and tied it, her arms over my shoulders. It looked neater than I’d ever been able to get it.

“All things to all men,” I said. She looked puzzled. “You’d better get started dressing.”

“I’m pressing my dress, I’ll be through in a minute.” She went back to the kitchen and I finished

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dressing. Just as I put my coat on, she came back with the dress and the case.

"The place is yours," I said. I went ahead putting things into various pockets; cigarettes, wallet, change, the stuff I carry. I looked up. She was still in sweater and slacks.

"Go ahead," I said, "I'm through."

"Do you mind, Anthony . . . ? I want . . ."

I got it. "Sure," I said. I went into the front room. I needed a drink. Now she was modest. Women! Brother, they're nuts!

It took her about forty minutes to get ready. I sat and fiddled with the radio until she came into the room. The tough "gal" from East Sixth Street was a stranger to the girl standing before me. She looked like a million dollars' worth of gold certificates. Her make-up was restrained and soft; her hair piled up on her head, graced with the flowers, her body sheathed in the form-fitting blue gown, giving it life. I sat with my mouth open.

"Do I look all right?" she asked.

I was mad. Not at her, but at something that had hit her.

"You look swell," I told her. "Swell."

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I held her coat and opened the door for her. I'd changed my mind about Jerry. She had class. At least she looked like she had class, and I meant that she should have a chance.

I drove downtown and parked on Figueroa. Across from the Maryland was a nice-looking cocktail room. We went in. I ordered two Scotch and White Rock.

"I've got a few things to do before we go to the 31 Club," I told her. "I'll have to leave you here for a little while. Will you be all right?" She nodded. I called the bartender over.

"I've got to go out for a while," I said. "Give the young lady whatever she wants; I'll take care of it when I get back."

He said sure; I patted Jerry's hand and grinned at her.

"Don't get picked up," I told her. I walked across to the Maryland.

Baldy was out, but there was a gray-headed man behind the desk. He was around fifty. I wondered if I'd have trouble with him.

"I'd like a room," I said.

"Yes, sir." He shoved the register at me, and turned to the pigeonhole rack behind him. I flipped the

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register to the first page. It didn't go back far enough. The old guy turned around.

"Any preference as to floor?" he asked. The tux impressed.

"High, top floor, if possible."

"I have a single, no bath, on the top floor," he said.

"I want a bath."

"I'm sorry," he said, "I have a single on the seventh with a bath."

"I'll take that," I signed the register, "John Gregory, Honolulu."

"My luggage will be here in the morning," I said. "I won't go up now. May I have the key?"

"Surely."

"I wonder if you'd be able to tell me if a man registered here about a year ago. It's not important," I said, "I just wondered."

"If you know the gentleman's name, and the approximate date, I can tell by the register. It's no trouble."

"His name is Stall, Martin Stall. He might have been here a year ago, between the sixteenth and the twenty-first." The old guy got a pile of registers from under the desk and sorted one out.

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“This will be the one. A year ago this month, between the sixteenth and the twenty-first,” he thumbed through the book. “Ah, we’ll start here.”

He turned the book toward me; I glanced at the names. Nothing. The seventeenth was a blank, too; but on the page given to the eighteenth two names caught my eye, Joe Stone, New Orleans, and George Temple, New York. The room numbers were 420 and 620.

I made a show of looking through the other pages. The old man shook his head.

“He doesn’t seem to have registered during that time,” he said.

“Well,” I tried to sound disappointed, “it isn’t important. I’ll pay in advance, as long as my luggage is held up.” I gave him a five spot, and he handed me the key. The tab had number 735 stamped on it.

I went back to the cocktail bar. Jerry was sitting, talking to the bartender, her glass empty. I joined them.

“Not drinking?” I asked.

“I decided to wait for you,” she said. I ordered Scotch again.

“Where were you?”



## ROUGH ON RATS

“Just checking up,” I said. “Drink your drink and let’s go. It’s ten o’clock.”

The 31 Club on Sunset turned out to be a swanky bar. It featured a band and floor show. It was bright with neon and fluorescent lighting on the outside. I drove up to the entrance and two attendants opened the car doors. We got out and the guy on my side handed me a parking check and slid under the wheel.

“Take good care of it,” I told him, “it’s an heirloom.”

A tall mug in a dress suit met us at the door.

“Have you reservations?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “we’re just slumming.” He looked shocked and opened the door.

The place was decorated with modern glass and tubing. We were in a small foyer, a hat-check booth on one side, and the doors to the cans on the other. Through a wide arch, steps led down to a large room filled with tables, smoke, chatter and people. The band was on a stand across the room from the entrance. Just in front of the band, the tables gave way to a clear spot, the floor bare and highly polished. An elaborate bar took up the space all along one side of the room.

## ROUGH ON RATS

There was a wide, low, familiar back before me at the check booth. I tapped the shoulder.

“Hi, Arthur.”

It was Fatty. He turned around, surprised. He was dressed in a soup and fish, and looked like a penguin. I helped Jerry off with her wrap, and checked it and my topcoat. Fatty licked his chops at Jerry.

“Miss Jones, Mr. Smith,” I drawled. Fatty bobbed his head.

“Have you a table?” he asked me. I shook my head. “Then you and Miss Jones must join me.”

“A pleasure,” I said.

“Do you come here often?” Fatty asked me when we were seated at his table.

“I only go to class joints when I’m on an expense account. This is my first time here.”

“I own an interest in this place.” He smiled at Jerry. She smiled back at him. I smiled at both of them. We were having a jolly time. The waiter interrupted the fun fest.

“Johnnie Walker Red and White Rock, twice,” I looked at Fatty; he nodded. “Three times,” I said. The waiter hurried away.

“Business good?” I asked Fatty.

## ROUGH ON RATS

“Very good.” We were silent. The band was playing something sweet.

“Dance?” I asked Jerry, and she nodded.

The floor could hold five couples comfortably, ten at a pinch. There were about twenty trying to dance. We stood and held each other while the music played; it was all right, but it wasn’t dancing. I felt Jerry stiffen in my arms.

“What’s wrong?” I spoke low, into her ear.

“That man”—she looked toward a table near the bandstand—“he was with Stone in the hotel room when I made that picture.”

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# 12

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I SPOTTED THE GUY. IT WAS THE slick hombre from the Art Movies Company. He was with a fat, overdressed and noisy woman, and another couple. I didn't recognize the other man.

"Forget it," I said, "he won't know you." She relaxed again. "Was the other guy in the room?"

"No," she said. The music stopped and we pushed back to the table. Fatty smiled at us.

"Jerry, you sit here for a minute, we'll be right back." I took Fatty's arm and led him toward the bar.

"There's a guy sitting over there," I indicated Stein's table. "Do you know him?"

"Fat-faced guy?" he asked. I nodded. "No. Who is he?"

"He runs the Art Movies Company," I said. Fatty looked him over carefully. We went back to the table.

We were just seated when the lights lowered and the band blew a fanfare. A guy in tails dragged a

## ROUGH ON RATS

mike out to the center of the dance floor and announced the floor show. Six scantily clothed girls danced their way through a tap routine. The applause was nominal, our table contributing none. The tails came back and introduced an adagio team, two fellows and a small, thin girl. They threw her around for a while, and then the six returned in less clothes and danced again.

After that, Tails took over and told a few smutty stories; he got quite a hand. A red-headed girl with a large bosom, and a skin-tight dress, sang a torch song, in a low suggestive voice. She wriggled seductively and got an encore.

I was bored, but Jerry and Fatty seemed to enjoy it. I excused myself, and made my way to the bar, while the six returned in flowers and crotch patches and danced.

While I was standing at the bar catching a quick one, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around. It was Vincent Koaler. He was rigged out in a tux and his bald head reflected the glow from the lights. I wondered why he didn't powder it.

"Your system must have worked," he said.

"Funny thing about that," I told him, "I've never used it."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"You don't gamble?"

"Just sure things. You must have hit them yourself."

"Yeah. What are you drinking?"

I grinned at him. "Johnnie Walker and White Rock, a buck a throw."

"I can afford that." He gave the bartender a nod.

"Very nice of you, chum," I said. "Come over to the table, and I'll see that Fatty buys you one in return."

"You're not alone?" he asked.

"I brought a girl, and ran into Fatty."

"Fatty?"

"The little fat guy I did the job for. Remember?"

"Yeah. But I don't think he likes me. Who's the girl?"

"Why?" I asked.

"Why?"

I nodded, and watched him.

"I don't know," he said. "I saw you dancing with a blonde; thought she looked familiar."

"She's very familiar. An old friend of mine from the East."

"Oh."

"Come over and meet her," I invited.

## ROUGH ON RATS

He shook his head. "One more drink, and I'm going. Have another?"

I shook my head. "Thanks, but I'd better get back. Take it easy, Vincent. See you around."

"Yeah." He turned around to watch me as I left.

When I got to the table, Tails was introducing the feature of the evening—Tanya.

Tanya wore a gipsy costume, and was accompanied by a young man in an organ grinder's get-up. He had a hurdy-gurdy and a live monkey on a string. The hurdy-gurdy was a fake, but he ground the handle while the band played and Tanya danced. They put on a pantomime, Tanya and the monkey; as she danced, he snatched parts of her clothing and took them to the organ grinder. The thing finished with Tanya nude, and the monkey clapping his hands. The monkey was very amusing. Tails thanked us and the lights went up.

Jerry and Fatty had enjoyed it. I wondered what kick women got out of seeing other women undress in public. I figured Fatty came every night. Jerry and I had another spell of holding each other to music.

"Is this fat man the one Eddie was trailing?" she asked.

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Yeah."

"Maybe he killed him."

"He says he didn't," I told her.

"Did you ask him?"

"Sure. I can't figure out who did it, so I'm going to ask everybody. Did you kill Stone and Eddie and Billie?" I asked.

"Billie! Billie Thomas?"

"Sure, she was knocked off, too."

"Oh, God. Why?"

"She knew Stone," I said.

Jerry held me tightly. "So did I," she whispered.

"That's why I told you to keep yourself locked in," I explained.

"Anthony, I'm scared."

"Nothing's going to happen, if you do what I say. Relax."

"I won't go out of the house any more."

"That's right." I said, "but you didn't tell me if you're the one who did the killings."

"You know I'm not," she smiled.

"But you could have."

"When?" she asked.

"This morning, when you were supposed to have passed out."



## ROUGH ON RATS

"I didn't."

"I don't suppose you did."

The music stopped and we went back to the table.

"Maybe you'd like to dance with Jerry," I spoke to Fatty.

"I'm sorry, I don't dance so good."

"I ran into a friend of yours at the bar, Arthur."

"Who?"

"Vincent, the clerk at the Maryland. He wouldn't come and meet you. He figures you don't like him."

"I don't. I don't like people who lie to me."

"You're oversensitive," I told him.

The waiter brought more drinks. I looked at my watch; it was five past midnight. Fatty was pumping Jerry about who she was and what his chances were; he was as subtle as a sailor.

"Did you get yourself a bodyguard, Arthur?"

"What?"

Jerry had him groggy.

"Bodyguard," I repeated. "Did you get one yet?"

"Oh, no. I don't think I need one."

"It's up to you." I shrugged. "We'd better go, Jerry." She nodded.

"Don't hurry away," Fatty said. "There's another floor show at one."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"I'll just hate missing it," I said, "but I've had a big day." I stood up and pulled back Jerry's chair as she arose. Fatty looked disappointed. "Get the check, Arthur," I told him; he nodded, and watched Jerry as she picked her bag up from the table. I glanced toward Stein's table as we went up the steps. He was gone.

Vincent was just going out the front door.

I got our coats and tipped the check girl. The tall evening clothes opened the door for us.

"It's been quite an experience for us," I said. He didn't speak.

I drove up Sunset to La Brea and turned left. I stopped at a liquor store and bought a pint of Scotch, and put it in the glove compartment. At Wilshire I turned once again and drove toward the beach. Jerry snuggled up to me and I slid my arm around her.

"Where we going?" she asked.

"Down to the beach and neck," I told her. "All us college kids finish our dates that way. You'll love it."

"I probably will, you lug. I don't like Mr. Smith," she said.

"I'm not fond of him myself, but he pays me. I do anything for money."

"Nuts."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"That's not lady-like," I told her.

"I'm no lady."

"You could be. Just try."

"Gee, you're swell to me, Anthony."

"Don't believe it; I'm a heel."

"You're a swell heel."

"You're drunk," I said.

"Just a little," she said, "but I really do think you're swell."

"Skip it."

We rode through Beverly Hills and out past the Los Angeles Country Club. There was no traffic. A little past the club entrance, a small coupé drew up alongside of us and crowded me to the side of the road. A gun began to bark and I felt or heard a tearing thump behind me. I pushed Jerry down to the floor and slammed on the foot brake. The wheels locked and I ducked down on the seat; my foot slipped off the brake pedal. I could feel the car sway across the road, skidding—then the crash as we bounced over the curbing and thumped over uneven ground and finally banged into something solid and unyielding.

I held Jerry down and lay quiet until my head stopped spinning. Somewhere along the way I'd

## ROUGH ON RATS

picked up a crack on the head; one hell of a crack, and my right eye ached. I shook Jerry gently.

“Honey, you all right? *You all right, Jerry?*”

“Yeah.” She untangled herself and sat up.

“What happened? Oh, Anthony, you’re bleeding. There’s blood on your face.”

I tried to grin but my lip hurt, sharp stabbing pains. I looked into the rear view mirror. My lower lip was cut at the corner and bleeding profusely. It didn’t look serious. There was a small gash on my cheek, and blood dripped from it. I was a mess; I put my handkerchief to my face.

“Get out and walk around and see if you’re all right, Jerry. See if you hurt any place.”

She got out and walked slowly around the car. Her dress was torn, so that one leg was visible to the knee.

“I’m okay,” she smiled at me, “now you try.”

I was fine except for the two cuts and the swollen eye. I must have fallen on the gearshift lever. I turned the car lights out and switched off the ignition. I got a flashlight and the bottle out of the glove compartment. We sat on the running-board and I handed Jerry the bottle. She tipped it up.

## ROUGH ON RATS

"It's not lady-like to drink that way," I said. She grinned and gave me the bottle. It burnt the cut on my lip, but it helped me a hell of a lot more than it hurt.

"Well, let's check up," I said.

We looked the car over. It was a mess. The front end was shoved against a tall bank of earth and from what we could see it looked badly smashed. Somehow we'd threaded through several rows of trees, so that we were hidden from the road. I flashed the light carefully over the body. I counted four bullet holes, one of which was in the window just behind my head as I sat in the driver's seat.

"Close," I said.

"The son-of-a . . ." Jerry began.

I put my hand over her mouth. "Tut, tut, be a lady!"

"He might have killed you." She was sore.

"He tried. I don't know why he let me go the first time. He just ain't consistent."

"Who, Anthony?"

"Maybe Fatty," I said. "I left him with the check." We had another drink and then walked out to the street and up to the Country Club entrance road.

## ROUGH ON RATS

There were a lot of cars parked in the drive and I spotted a cab.

"You want to make a dollar while you're waiting?"

The driver said sure.

"We've had an accident; take us to Westwood Village."

We got out at a drugstore and I paid the driver. The clerk gave us the eye when we went in.

"When she says 'no' she means it," I told him. "Can we use your can?" He nodded.

"Go ahead and fix yourself up, Jerry. I want to phone a guy." I went in the booth and dialed a Los Angeles number. The phone rang and rang.

Finally the operator said, "Your party doesn't answer."

"Keep ringing," I told her. It was almost five minutes before a sleepy voice asked, "What do you want?"

"You, Red," I said. "This is Anthony."

"I ain't coming to no God damn party. I ain't drinking all night. I work."

"Hold on," I said. "I've been shot up. Get your tow car out here and get my heap away before the cops smell something."

"You been shot?" Red asked.

## ROUGH ON RATS

"No, the car. I don't want cops, see?"

"Where are you?"

"Right near the entrance to the Los Angeles Country Club. I'm off the road in some trees, left-hand side going out Wilshire. You'll have to look for it, I can't wait for you."

"Okay," he said. "You can get into more damn trouble."

"Thanks, Red. I'll see you sometime tomorrow." I hung up.

Jerry was sitting at the fountain and except for the tear in her dress she looked fine. The flowers were gone.

"I'll wash some of this stuff off my face while you call a cab." She went into the booth.

"Give me two large glasses of charged water, about three-quarters full," I told the clerk. He sat them in front of me and I poured them full to the brim with Scotch.

"You can't drink in here," the clerk said.

"Vitamins A, B, C and D. Doctor's orders. We're deficient."

Jerry came out and I handed her one of the glasses.

"He's against it." I pointed at the clerk. "Give him your phone number."

## ROUGH ON RATS

I took my glass and went back to the can. I washed the two cuts and wet my handkerchief with cold water and held it against my eye while I drank. The eye was turning blue around the edges, and there was blood on the white of my shirt. The clerk was smiling when I came out.

"Convince him?" I asked Jerry. We had another drink before the cab came. I gave the clerk a dollar and told the driver to go to Santa Monica, the Cliffs Hotel. Jerry snuggled against me in the back seat.

"You're going to have a beautiful shiner," she said.

"A collector's item," I agreed.

She kissed my eye and the two cuts. "I had to throw your flowers away." Her voice was sad.

"I'll get you some more," I said, "with my own money."

"Why are we going to the Cliffs?"

"To see a very lovely girl," I said. "She may be surprised to see us. She may think we're dead."



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# 13

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THE CLIFFS HOTEL, OVERLOOKING the Palisades in Santa Monica, is a very ritzy establishment. It is a six-storied, square white stucco. A large lawn and a twisting drive front the main entrance.

At two-thirty in the morning only a few of the windows showed shaded light. I paid the driver and we waited on the porch until his lights turned out of sight.

“Hold your wrap around you so that tear in your dress doesn’t show,” I told Jerry. “We won’t stop at the desk.”

I covered the blood on my shirt with my coat and we walked through the lobby to the elevators. The clerk at the desk gave us a “good evening.” We rode up to the second floor and I piloted Jerry down the hall. As soon as the car dropped out of sight, we checked door numbers. We’d taken the wrong direction. Suite 106 A turned out to be the last door on

## ROUGH ON RATS

the right at the front of the building. I knocked and Patricia opened the door. She was wrapped in a fuzzy white robe that fitted snugly above the waist, and then flared into a wide skirt that touched the floor.

“Surprise,” I said.

She looked rather startled, whether at the condition of my face or the sight of Jerry I couldn’t tell; then stood to one side and said, “Do come in. I’d about given you up.”

We walked into a large living room furnished in Swedish Modern, low and comfortable looking. The Venetian blinds were closed at the windows that lined an entire end of the room, and dull maroon drapes adorned this long row of windows. The indirect lighting was soft.

Patricia took our coats and asked us to sit down. I introduced her to Jerry. We settled ourselves into comfortable chairs and she brought us drinks.

“Now,” she said, “what happened to you?”

“Don’t you know?” I asked.

“Why, no.” She looked at me blankly.

“Just an accident,” I told her. “We hit a tree. I thought you’d guess.”

“How terrible!”

“Yeah. You said you wanted to see me.”

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Yes." She hesitated. "I . . ." She glanced at Jerry.

"Miss Jones is my secretary."

"Oh. Well, today my maid brought me this." She handed me an envelope. It was addressed:

*Mr. George Temple*

*The Tower Arms*

*Los Angeles, California*

I noticed the return address of the sender. It was the City Trust Company of New York.

"Read the letter," she told me.

It was short and to the point. Mr. Temple's checking account was overdrawn one hundred and ten dollars. The bank had covered a check drawn by Miss Patricia Temple rather than refuse payment. They hoped that Mr. Temple would cover the deficiency by return mail. I looked up.

"Well?"

"But I don't understand it," she said. "It's my account. George had nothing to do with it."

I shrugged. "I don't know anything about it," I said. "Why me?"

"There wasn't anyone else to turn to, and I had to

## ROUGH ON RATS

find out what this means. I'll pay you, of course." Her tone was cool.

"If it means what I think it does"—I grinned, and it hurt my lip—"you won't be able to pay anyone."

"What do you mean?"

"I wouldn't be sure until I've checked, but to me it looks like your husband had been supplying the money you spend, whatever you think."

"But that's impossible; I have my mother's money. George had nothing whatever to do with that."

"Then he was your husband?"

"No . . . oh well, you might as well know, yes. It can't make any difference now."

"Are you going to claim the body?"

It was like hitting her in the stomach. She looked at me with hate in her eyes. I was glad she didn't have a gun handy. Jerry looked shocked, too.

"We might as well let our hair down," I said, "and get some truth told. I can pretty well figure your set-up with the trust company. You can tell me a few things I'd like to know, if you want to trade. Okay?"

She thought it over, while I leaned back with my eyes closed and wished I could lie down and sleep. I heard the click of a lighter and sat up. She was smoking thoughtfully.

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Well?" I asked.

"Just what do you want to know?" she asked.

I noticed Jerry's head drop down, so that her chin rested on her chest; she sat up with a jerk. "Is there some place where Miss Jones could sleep for a while? She's had a hard day."

"I'm all right, Anthony."

"I have an extra bedroom, Miss Jones," Pat said. "I'll show you." She stood up.

"But I'm all right, honest I am," Jerry protested.

"Go on," I told her. "You may as well be comfortable while you sleep." They went out of the room together. I lit a cigarette and finished Jerry's drink. Pat came back.

"She'll be comfortable now. Where were we?"

"You asked me what I wanted to know," I said.

"And what do you?"

"It's no use my asking a lot of questions if you're not willing to trade. I'm pretty well shot myself."

"I'll trade," she said.

"Okay. Tell me the truth about Joe, I mean George. About you and him."

She sighed. "After my mother died I went to New York. We had lived in Camden. I settled her affairs with the City Trust Company. She had a great deal

## ROUGH ON RATS

of property and some very good stocks and bonds. I arranged to have the income paid into my checking account. It was while I was in New York that I met George.”

“Did you ever receive any letters from the trust company, or did you ever make any different arrangements with them?”

“I received a letter shortly after George and I were married. He went to New York and talked to them. He said they were just checking up on all their accounts. All the other letters were addressed to George, in care of me; I didn’t open them.”

“Didn’t you go to the trust company after you were married to arrange about the change of name?” I asked.

“They didn’t know about the marriage,” she said. “I didn’t change my name at all.”

“How come?”

“George’s name was Temple, too. I kept signing my checks ‘Patricia Temple.’ They just assumed that I was still ‘Miss.’ ”

“Did you ever give him power of attorney?”

“What’s that?”

“Did you ever sign a paper giving him power to act for you?”

## ROUGH ON RATS

"I had to," she said, "or else there was no use him going to New York instead of me."

"Okay. You met him in New York. What then?"

"Well, I was very lonely. So I went around with him quite a bit, and then we decided to get married. We went to Chicago after the wedding, and he made me stay at a different hotel and register as 'Miss Temple.' He said he was known as 'Mr. Morton.' I thought it was rather queer, but we were very happy and it didn't matter. It was fun."

"Then you went to New Orleans?" I asked.

"Oh, no. We went to Cleveland, and then to Pittsburgh, and then to New Orleans."

"You always stayed at a different hotel?"

"No, in Cleveland we had a house together."

"What name did you use?"

"Our own, Temple."

"You left Cleveland in a hurry?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I guessed. In Pittsburgh you had to go to different hotels, right?" She nodded. "And he used the name 'Stone.' Then in New Orleans you had a house again, and you left in a hurry. You used your right name there—I mean he did. When you got here, you went to different hotels, and he was 'Stone' again."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"That's right," she said.

"And you don't know what his business was?" I asked.

"No."

"Didn't you ever think that maybe he was a crook?"

"Why should I?" She was serious.

"Skip it," I said. "Have you anything of his?"

"Just a suit case."

My heart jumped. "What's in it?"

"It's locked. I haven't the key."

"Is it here—I mean did you bring it?" I was excited.

"Yes."

"Let's see it," I said. She led me down the hall, into a bedroom and opened the closet door.

"It's the black one," she said. It was a black Gladstone. I hauled it out and took my knife and cut the bag open along one side.

"Nuts!" I said. It was full of papers.



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# 14

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WE SAT ON THE BEDROOM FLOOR and looked through the junk from the bag. There were bank-balance sheets, deposit slips, canceled checks and some letters from the City Trust Company.

“That’s the whole story,” I told her. “He got your power of attorney and fixed the account so that it was in his name, but you could draw checks on it. You were spending more than you got from the investments your mother made, so he arranged for the securities and property to be turned into cash. When you ran through that, he deposited money in the account to keep you going.”

“But why didn’t he tell me? I didn’t need to spend so much.”

“My guess is that he married you for your money, but fell in love with you and gave up the idea of bunking you. I don’t think his name was Temple, either.”

## ROUGH ON RATS

“But he did bunk me. He had them sell everything.”

“Christ!” I said. “He planned to keep you going, he didn’t figure on being bumped off. For two years you’ve been spending his dough.” I threw the papers at her. “For all I know, he didn’t like the way he made the money, but he had to make it—for you.” I was sore.

“And how did he make it?” she asked. She sounded tough, too.

“He made dirty movies.”

“Dirty movies?”

“Yeah. There’s a big demand for them in some places. It pays off in big numbers. That’s the money you were spending.”

“I see.” She covered her face with her hands.

“Here’s the catch; it’s not legal. That’s why he had to skip from place to place. That’s why he used different names; and the times you left in such a hurry were the times that the cops got too close. He had to keep you out of it, so he’d leave everything and run; then he’d stake you in a different hotel and use a phoney name himself to cover you. He would have done all right here in Los Angeles, but he had to get money. He was wiped out in New Orleans and you

## ROUGH ON RATS

had him broke, so he had to get backing. It's the kind of business that banks don't finance, so he took in a partner. That was bad, because you spent all the profit and there was none for the partner. Then he had a little bad luck. He was ready to run again, but somebody knocked him off. Get it?"

"You don't like me, do you?" she asked.

I looked her over. She was sitting on the floor, cross-legged, her back leaning against the bed, her honey-colored hair reaching to her wide shoulders, her eyes green satin again.

"What difference does that make?" I asked.

"You think I'm spoiled and mean. I didn't know any of this. I didn't know what he did, or that I was spending his money. I thought it was my own. I offered to give him all of it, but he wouldn't take it. I didn't love him, but stuck to him because I knew he loved me and I couldn't bear to hurt him." Tears ran down her cheeks leaving little wet paths. I leaned over and held her head against my shoulder, stroking her soft hair.

Brother, I thought, she costs fifty grand a year, and a mug like me can hold her in my arms!

"Skip it," I said, "you didn't know. It wasn't your fault." She snuffled a few times, but didn't make any

## ROUGH ON RATS

move to get out of my arms. I moved around, so that she was alongside me, and she straightened her legs and snuggled down close against me. My arms were still around her.

“There are a lot of things for you to think about besides what’s past,” I said. “Have you any money?”

“I’ve got about two thousand dollars in my checking account.”

“It’s overdrawn.”

“No. I started an account in a local bank, because it’s so much trouble to cash checks from an Eastern bank.”

“Then you’d better send the trust company enough to cover that overdraft. And move to a less expensive place than this.”

“The apartment in town is paid until the first of the month,” she said.

“Is there any place you can go after that, any friends or relatives?”

“I’ve got an aunt in Camden, but she’s not very well fixed. I’ve been sending her money.”

“Well, you’d better stick in town for a while, at least until I see what’s what.”

She looked up at me and smiled. “Do I call you Tony?”

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Nobody calls me Tony," I said. I kissed her. She slid her arms around me and held me. I kissed her again and again. I pushed her gently away, and stood up. The little clock on her dressing table pointed to five o'clock. I felt sorry for Joe Stone.

"I'm sorry," I helped her to her feet, "but I've got to get back and get some sleep."

"You could sleep here." She was standing close to me. I looked down at her and she blushed. "I mean, the couch in the front room, I could sleep there."

"I'd better get home," I said. "After all, I'm only human. . . ."

I went to the other bedroom and woke Jerry. She was bleary-eyed.

"On your feet, rugged," I said, "we're leaving." I went into the front room and collected my hat. Pat watched me.

"I'll call you at your office when I get back to the apartment," she said.

"Okay. Find some place to stay after the first, and don't throw your money around. You'd better let that maid go, too." She said she would, and Jerry came into the room. We collected our coats and walked to the elevator. Pat stood at the door watching us until the cage door closed.

## ROUGH ON RATS

At the desk, I asked for the cabstand and the clerk directed us to the side entrance. Two cabs were parked. I woke one of the drivers.

"L. A.," I said, and gave him the address.

The dawn was turning the sky gray and a chill breeze from the ocean blew wisps of fog in from the water. Jerry slept on my shoulder all the way home. I woke her in front of the house and paid off the driver. We went in.

I lit the oven, and then started a pot of coffee. Jerry went into the can, and I could hear her splashing water. When she came back her face was rosy from cold water.

"You going to stay up all night?" I asked her.

"Where did you get that lipstick on your face?"

"I kissed you on the way home." I grinned.

"Nuts. That's not mine. Her face was smeared, too."

"Jerry, you don't think I'd make a pass at a girl like that, do you?"

"Yes, I think you would," she said, "and she'd go for it, too."

"You want some coffee?"

She nodded. "I'll get the cups." She brought them to the table. "Anthony?"

## ROUGH ON RATS

“Yes?”

“You said that that girl might have thought we wouldn’t get there, that she might think we were dead. Do you still think she did it?”

“I didn’t think she did it,” I said. “I thought she might have had it done.”

“Do you still think so?”

“Her lipstick wouldn’t change my mind.”

“She wouldn’t have, she’s not that kind. I mean, I don’t think she is.” It was an effort for her to say it.

“I don’t either,” I said, “but somebody did, we didn’t dream it. Whoever did it was serious, too damn serious. I wonder what the hell I know that’s got the killer worried.”

“That fat man could have followed us.”

“So could Stein. He might have recognized you and knew that you recognized him. And I made some crack about being able to prove his connection with Stone, when I called at his office. The hell with it, let’s get some sleep.”

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” Jerry said.

“We could both sleep in the bed.”

“If you want, Anthony.”

I kissed her. “You take the bed,” I said, “I’ll take the couch. Good night.”

## ROUGH ON RATS

I went into the front room and undressed. Jerry had left a blanket folded on the davenport. I spread it out and crawled under it. I was asleep as soon as I lay back.

A shrill ringing brought me to semi-consciousness and then I could hear a voice, low and mumbling. I thought I was dreaming. I opened my eyes, sunlight streamed under the blinds. Through the kitchen door, I could see Jerry, lost in a pair of my pajamas, talking on the phone.

"You can't. He's asleep. I won't wake him."

"I'm awake, Jerry," I said. "Who is it?"

"Oh damn! It's Mick."

I got up and went into the kitchen and took the phone. "Hi, Mick."

"Jesus, Anthony, I thought you was dead!"

"What the hell, I'm a sound sleeper," I said.

"That ain't what I mean. I was over to Red's place and saw your car. He wasn't around and I seen the bullet holes and the blood. I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay," I said. "What time is it?"

"Eleven-thirty."

"I've had enough sleep. I'll see you sometime today. Don't say anything about my car, huh?"



## ROUGH ON RATS

“Naw. I won’t. So long, Anthony.”

I hung up.

“I told the mug to hang up,” Jerry said. “You haven’t slept enough yet, and why didn’t you get your pajamas?” Standing there in my shorts, I grinned at her, and my bruised lower lip felt like a Ubangi’s.

“Yes, dear,” I said.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Anthony. But you don’t take care of yourself at all.”

I mussed her hair, and went on into the bathroom. In the mirror my cheek was puffed, but the cut looked clean. The gash on my lip drew the corner of my mouth down and my eye was a dark bluish black, ringed with a circle of unhealthy yellow. I was a mess. Various aches patched my body. I gave up the idea of shaving, took a shower and stuck a band-aid tape on my cheek. I dried myself and went into the bedroom and put on clean shorts, a pair of slacks and a polo shirt. From the kitchen, I could smell frying bacon. Jerry had my gown and slippers on, and her feet made slapping noises when she walked.

After we ate, I read the paper. There was no mention of the three murders. Flash Gordon got himself out of one mess and into another. I envied him, he

## ROUGH ON RATS

was smarter than me, and he had Dale. She was a dish. About one o'clock I phoned for a cab.

"Do I have to tell you to keep locked in?" I asked Jerry.

"Don't worry, after last night I'm scared."

"Okay. I'll phone you before I come back and find out if you need anything."

"Anthony." I stopped at the door, and she came and put her arms around me. "You'll be careful?"

I kissed her. "Sure, don't worry."

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# 15

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I RODE THE CAB DOWN TO LOS Angeles Street, and got out at a large white garage building. The big folding doors were shut, but the office door opened when I turned the knob. The office was empty, so I went out into the big room behind it. Mick was sitting on the running-board of a gray sedan talking to a pair of feet that stuck out from underneath the car.

“Hi, Mick,” I said, “you going some place?”

“Hell, no.” He looked puzzled. “Why?”

“Those are your bags, aren’t they?” I pointed at the feet. Mick laughed. The feet disappeared and a long, broad body rolled clear from underneath the car. It sat up.

“Who gave you the shiner?” it asked.

“Hi, Red,” I said.

He was about six foot six, the long way, and looked almost as much across the shoulders. He had red hair that curled tightly on his head, a pug-nosed Irish

## ROUGH ON RATS

map, studded with freckles. His grin was half his face.

"You get married?" he asked.

"No. I collected these from the smash-up last night. How is my car?"

"Was that a car?" he asked. We walked over to what had been a nice little coupé. The front end was bashed in, and both headlights were twisted and broken. The fenders were bent and scraped where we'd brushed against the trees on our way through. Three tires were flat.

"There was four flats, but we put on the spare; saved one that way, and she never ran on the front ones. You're only out one tire," Red explained.

"Can you fix it up, Red?"

"I'll tell you, Anthony. It's all out of line and there's lots wrong with it up front. It ain't worth fixing."

"Well," I said, "it's insured, but I don't want to explain about the bullet holes."

"I can fix that," he said. "I'll tear them up so's nobody will know what they was. They didn't miss you far, huh?" He pointed to the window. I grinned.

"Who was the son-of-a-bitch, Anthony?" Mick asked.

"Jack Benny; he found out that I don't like Jello."

## ROUGH ON RATS

Mick took a pint bottle out of his pocket and handed it to me. I shook my head and passed it to Red.

"I wonder if any of those slugs stuck in the car," I said. "Did you notice any, Red?"

"Here." Red handed me a piece of lead. "It was in the door frame. Must have gone through the window and buried itself there."

I put it in my pocket, and reached for the bottle. "Nobody bothered you?" I asked. I took another long drink.

"Wasn't a sign of anybody near the place."

"Who you got at your house, Anthony?" Mick asked. "Some dame answered the phone."

"My aunt," I said. "She's going to stay until her old man comes back."

"Where'd he go?"

"She don't know. He just went out to get some gin." Mick puzzled it over. "You got a car I can use for a few days?" I asked Red.

"Yeah. A Ford V-8. That one over there"—he pointed to a black sedan—"but don't wreck it. I just got it fixed up, and I'm going to sell it."

"Gas?"

"Yeah, the tank's full; she don't use no oil, either."

## ROUGH ON RATS

The bottle passed around again. "You got anything in this heap you want?" Red asked. I shook my head.

"The guy probably got anemic," Mick said.

"Who?" I asked.

"Your aunt's old man. You know, he probably lost his memory, anemic."

"I know a guy that that happened to," Red said. "He was away two, three years. Come back one night and walked in on his wife just like he'd never been gone."

"I'll bet she was surprised," Mick said.

"Yeah, she was. She was in bed with the guy that lived upstairs. Got tired of waiting."

"What happened?" I asked.

"They was a hell of a fight. The guy that come back almost killed the other guy. They lived right next door to us. If he'd come home a night sooner, he'd have run into me." He roared.

"Let's go up to the Spot and drink beer," Mick suggested.

I said okay, but Red shook his head. He'd promised a job for six, and couldn't go. Mick and I got into the Ford and drove up to Main Street. The Lucky Spot was doing business as usual. We went to a back

## ROUGH ON RATS

booth, and the waiter brought us a couple of bottles of Bud. It was cold and tasted fine.

“You know, Anthony, that blonde hasn’t been here since Friday night.”

“Maybe she blew town,” I said.

“Yeah, maybe. She couldn’t have knocked all them people off, could she?”

“I don’t think so, Mick.” I reached in my pocket for cigarettes and felt a key. It was the cook’s. I went back to the kitchen and found him peeling potatoes.

“Here’s your key,” I said. “I forgot it or I’d have brought it back last night.”

“Didn’t need it,” he said. “I don’t lock the door, anyway.” I went back to the booth.

“I was reading a story about a guy that choked people,” Mick said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, he choked his gal because she was knocked up, and then he shot himself.”

“Tough case,” I said.

“He didn’t shoot himself until the detective found out he choked the girl,” Mick explained. “The detective knew that this guy did it because the girl pulled one of the buttons off his coat while he was choking

## ROUGH ON RATS

her, and the dick found it. The guy tried to burn his coat, but there was some of it left in the ashes. It was a true story.”

“I haven’t found any buttons,” I said.

“Haven’t you got any clues?”

“Nope.”

“Hell, Anthony, how you going to find out who did it?”

“I know who did it, it came to me in a dream. I know who did it, and why and how,” I said, “but I can’t prove a damn thing. How about some more beer?” Mick was sitting with his mouth open, so I went to the bar and got two more bottles.

“Anthony,” he said, when I got back, “how can you know who did it, if you can’t prove it?”

“Skip it, Mick. I know.”

“Sure.” We drank in silence, Mick giving me side glances, as though there was something wrong with me.

“Okay,” I said, “spill it.”

“Look, Anthony, did the same guy try to bump you off last night?”

“Could be. I’ll find out tonight.”

“If I was you I’d frame the rat. I’d fix it so the cops could get him.”



## ROUGH ON RATS

"I'll frame him," I said, "one way or another." I went up front to the phone booth and looked up Stein in the book. There were three Max Stein listings. I took the one in Beverly Hills and dialed the number.

A voice said, "Hello?" It was a man.

"Mr. Stein?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Are you the Mr. Stein of the Art Movies Company?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." I hung up, and copied the address from the book. I had another bottle of beer with Mick and then walked over to my office. The elevator was an automatic on Sundays. I went up to the fifth floor and unlocked the door to my hole in the wall. I sat in my reception room and tried to figure how to play my hand. To get the guy, I had to frame him, but I was damned if I was going to let him go. I wasn't any farther than that, at the end of two hours, so I locked up and went back to pick up my car.

There was no answer when I rang the doorbell at my apartment, and I was scared. I had visions of Jerry on the floor with a stocking around her neck. I unlocked the door and hollered to her, and she

## ROUGH ON RATS

came running out of the kitchen and into my arms.

"I didn't know it was you, Anthony. You said you'd phone before you came home."

I hugged her tight, and I didn't tell her how scared I'd been. "I forgot," I said. "Do you need anything from the store?"

"Well, there's not much food here. Would you eat an omelet?"

"Sure."

"Then we can get by."

While she got supper ready I went into the bedroom and took my gun from the dresser drawer and checked it. It was loaded. I put a shirt and tie on and strapped a shoulder holster in place before I slid into my coat. I needed a shave, but decided to skip it. My face was still too tender, and I wouldn't have looked much better anyway.

"Is there any Scotch left, Jerry?"

She handed me the bottle. It was about three-quarters full. I fixed two drinks and then we ate. The omelet was light and fluffy. After supper we sat in the front room and drank coffee, and I felt like an old married man.

"When this is over," I said, "you can get a job cooking."

## ROUGH ON RATS

She smiled. "You'd like any home-cooked food after eating in hash joints the way you have."

"Maybe I ought to get married."

"Yeah."

"That blond dish wouldn't be bad," I said. Jerry didn't say anything. "If I went for blondes," I added.

"You go for them," she said. "You go for blondes or brunettes or red-heads."

"Sure."

"Oh hell, I ain't got any right to crab. It's been a long time since anybody's treated me as decent as you have," she said.

"I'm a Boy Scout, Troop Three, Little Church of the Flowers."

"You better not tell anybody how swell you've been to me."

"Why?"

"They'll find out that you're not such a tough guy as you'd like to make out."

"Humphrey Bogart doesn't get shot at the way I do," I said. "He's tough, ain't he? And with this lip I can talk like he does, too."

"You're a softie."

"That's just one of my many sides," I said. "I'm a very complex nature."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Nuts."

"I am hard, bitter, disillusioned, but with a heart of gold."

"You're a mug. I could have played you for a sucker."

I went over to her chair and sat on the arm and then slid down onto the seat, so that she was crowded. She lifted herself into my lap and I wrapped my arms around her.

"Why didn't you?"

She buried her nose in my shoulder.

"I guess I fell for you." Her voice was muffled. I held her tight; she was crying softly.

"What's wrong, honey? Don't cry."

"Nothing's wrong, everything's wrong." Her shoulders shook. "I'm just a damn fool, that's all."

"It's all right, Jerry," I said. "Don't cry."

"Oh, Anthony, I'm so in love with you, and I know I shouldn't. I'm just a tramp. What chance has a girl like me got." Her voice was broken, dreary, hopeless.

"Look, Jerry," I said. "Forget the past, that's over and done, all done, see? You don't have to grieve over something you hated. Hell, I'm no saint, few people are. You took pawing for dimes, so what?"

## ROUGH ON RATS

“I’m going to have a guy killed, Fatty’s walking around with murder in his heart, Stein makes his money out of men’s lust, Mick gives drunkards death in little glasses and even the lovely Patricia makes a crime of having money.”

I put my hand under her chin and turned her face to mine and kissed her on the lips.

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# 16

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I DROVE DOWN TO SIXTH STREET and went up to the room with her while she collected her clothes. The tight slacks had begun to gripe me. On the way back to my place I stopped at a drugstore and phoned Pat at the Tower Arms.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you, but the office doesn't answer," she said, and her voice made my stomach tingle.

"I was there this afternoon," I said. "How long have you been back?"

"About an hour; haven't you a phone at your apartment?"

"Yeah, it's unlisted, like the movie stars'."

"Oh."

"I'll be over to see you pretty soon, stick around."

"All right, Anthony."

"Phoning that blonde again?" Jerry asked when I got back to the car.

## ROUGH ON RATS

“Made a date,” I said. “We’re going over to see her.”

We drove back to my place and Jerry changed into a sweater and skirt combination. She wore a tweed sport coat, and a little hat that looked like a man’s pork-pie. Her shoes were high-heeled sports in blue and white buck.

“You look swell,” I told her.

“Thanks.”

“Where did you get all the clothes?” I asked.

“I bought them; they’re all I have.”

We drove out Sunset to Rossmore, and parked opposite the big blue building. The punk at the desk didn’t stop me or send any bellboys after us, but the elevator operator took a lot of interest in my face.

“He looks fine,” I said.

“Who?” He was puzzled.

“The other guy,” I told him. “I lost.”

The chimes brought the neat jig to the door of 6 A.

“Miss Temple in?” I asked. The jig ushered us into the white living room. The place impressed Jerry.

“Nice, huh?” I looked at her. She was staring

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around like a kid in an ice-cream factory. "M-G-M did it, I think."

Pat came into the room. She was in blue slacks and a white sweater trimmed in red. The slacks were tight around her ankles like ski-pants and her shoes were square-toed and low-heeled. She had a tiny white bow tied in her honey hair. She looked surprised when she saw Jerry.

"Oh, hello, Miss Jones, hello, Anthony." Jerry mumbled something, and I said, "Hi." Pat got some drinks started around and we sank into the big white chairs.

"Well?"

"Well, Pat?"

Jerry sat and watched us.

"No more questions, Mr. Detective?" Pat smiled.

"I thought you might want to ask me some," I said.

"Why?"

"Well, there's still George." She drew in her breath sharply. "Don't get upset about it," I told her. "We've got to decide what to do."

"Of course," she said, but she looked drawn.

"If you go to the cops you'll have to tell the whole story, and I don't think they'll believe you. Now, wait a minute. *I* believe you, but that's no



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proof that they will. I don't know how much they know, but if they haven't found out about you yet, they may not. That's a chance you'll have to take for a few days longer. How do you feel about George now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to claim the body?" She thought it over. I was glad I wasn't in her shoes. "If you don't claim it," I helped her, "and if the cops can't trace anybody connected with him, they'll bury him. He had dough on him. It won't be potter's field."

"I—I don't want to be mixed up in it," she said.

"I don't blame you."

"It will be all right, won't it? I mean if I don't do anything about it."

"Sure, but if they trace you, you've got to have a story. I don't know if he had a record, but if he didn't, they can't bother you much. Just stick to it that he was a casual acquaintance."

She nodded. I could guess what Jerry was thinking about her. If it had been Jerry's man she'd have stuck, hell or high water. Pat, to her, had proved to be a heel by ducking out of a jam just because the cops were massing around. Heel or not, she was a

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beautiful dish, and I'm not too critical of some people's actions, especially if they're blond and affect me the way Pat did.

"Okay," I said, "play it that way. If he's got a record, and they trace it, they'll get the whole thing, anyway. Just sit tight."

"I wrote to my aunt and told her I was coming to see her." She was making conversation, glad to get off the subject of George.

"Fine," I said. We sat and looked at each other, and I wished I hadn't brought Jerry along.

"It must be fun working for a detective," Pat said to Jerry.

"Great," Jerry said.

"I'll have to get a job myself. Did you go to business school?" Pat continued.

"She went to Vassar," I said.

"Oh, I know several girls that went there. What year were you?"

"'06," I answered before Jerry could speak.

"He's nuts," Jerry said. Pat looked at us. "You know, crazy," Jerry added.

"I didn't want Pat to know that," I said.

"I'd have guessed," she said, and smiled at me. A little white clock on the mantel rang out nine

## ROUGH ON RATS

times. Pat took our glasses and refilled them. The silence was getting embarrassing. Jerry broke it, asking about the bathroom, and Pat led her out toward the back of the apartment. I got up and went over to a large radio-phonograph combination; a Crosby record was on the turntable, so I switched it on and set the needle in place. Pat came back into the room alone and came over to me. I put my arms around her and kissed her. She held me tightly.

"You didn't lock her in, did you?" I asked. She shook her head and tilted her face up to kiss me again.

"Why didn't you come alone?" Her voice offered me things—things I wanted.

"I'm scared," I told her. She pressed her lips hard against mine, her body against me.

"Come back later—alone," she whispered. I heard a door close, pushed her away and turned to the radio just as the record ended and Jerry came back. With my back to the room, I got out my handkerchief and wiped my lips; a red stain dyed the white cloth. I felt guilty as hell. I turned the record over and started it going. Pat had gone back to the davenport and Jerry was sitting in the same chair she'd left. I took a long drink and wiped my lips.

## ROUGH ON RATS

"We'd better shove off, Jerry," I said. Jerry got to her feet and walked to the door. Pat winked at me behind Jerry's back. I grinned.

Jerry and I didn't speak as we rode down to the main floor. We walked over to the car and I opened the door for her.

"The slut," she said. I started the motor.

"Who?" I asked.

"That blonde." There was hate in Jerry's voice.

"Hell," I told her, "I'd have done the same thing; there's no use her getting mixed up with the cops just to get a body."

"I don't mean that. I mean the way she's making a play for you."

"It's some strange power I have," I said. "Beautiful girls can't stay away from me."

"Nuts!" she said.

I grinned. "Oh, it's more than that."

"You and your strange power," she sneered. "You go on the make for every dame you see."

"I've never even made a pass at my landlady," I denied.

"You'll get around to it sometime."

"Have you ever seen her?" I asked.

"Yes, another blonde."

## ROUGH ON RATS

“That’s her daughter, she’s only sixteen, and she’s not a blonde, not really.”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?”

“Sure. I knew her before she changed,” I said.

We drove over to Wilshire and stopped in a drive-in. Jerry was still sore. I ordered two hamburgers and coffees and sat smoking until the girl brought the food. We ate and I kidded Jerry a bit, but she wouldn’t laugh, so I gave it up and finished my sandwich in silence. The night air was warm and soft and a big moon lighted the sky. The stars seemed close enough to touch.

“Forget it, Jerry,” I said. “I told you I was a heel.”

“She’s the heel.”

“Forget it.”

“I’m sorry, Anthony, she burns me up.”

“Yeah, me too, but not the same way.”

“Anthony, do you think that we’ll get shot at again?”

“You scared?” I asked.

“No, I just wondered.”

“I don’t think we will. The guy’s taken enough chances.”

“I don’t think it was that Mr. Smith,” she said.

“Why?”

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Well, the car was too small."

"He could get into a small car, Jerry," I said. "A Ford or something like that. He's not that big."

"I don't mean that. What I mean is that he wouldn't have a small car like that; he'd buy a big car. He's got dough."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"He told me. He wants to get me in the movies." I laughed.

"Well, that's not so damned funny," she said, "I could be in the movies. I'm as good-looking as lots of those dames and I got a better build than most."

"You've been in the movies," I said.

"Dammit, Anthony, you said we'd forget that."

"We will," I said. "But that's the kind of movies Fatty's interested in. He was Stone's partner."

"He said he knew some of the big shots in Hollywood. I thought he meant regular movies, the skunk."

"Didn't I tell you to try to be a lady?" I reminded her.

"Oh, he makes me sore. Kidding me along when all the time he just wanted me to do that kind of stuff."

"He was just trying to get next to you. He prob-

## ROUGH ON RATS

ably knows some of the big shots, at that. I don't think he wants you to make any dirty movies, I was kidding you. But don't go up to see his etchings."

"I won't go near him," she said.

"Good. Now, we're going up and see a friend of yours." I paid the girl and started out Wilshire.

"Who?" she asked.

"One of the guys that you made movies for. Max Stein."

THE STEIN ADDRESS TURNED out to be a large two-storied Spanish-style stucco house. The front lawn was smooth and studded with shrubs and plots of blooming flowers. A winding walk led up to the front porch. I rang the bell and Max himself came to the door.

“Hi, Max,” I said.

He was surprised and looked me over before he spoke. “Yes, Mr.—ah—Gregory, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” I said, “and you know Miss Jones. May we come in?”

It took him a few seconds to decide that a row would be better inside than out on the porch. “Yes, of course.” He led us into an entrance hall and on across to a small den furnished with heavy red leather overstuffed furniture and a desk. Jerry and I sat on a long couch together, Max behind the desk.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Gregory?”

“You can tell me if you followed me from the 31 Club last night and tried to kill me.”



## ROUGH ON RATS

His look was blank. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

I didn't think he did. "Let it go. My name is Anthony Martin, I'm a private investigator." He didn't offer anything. "I can prove your connection with Joe Stone, and unless you're willing to talk, I will. I'll prove it to the cops, and they'll be interested, because right now they're puzzling over a murder. Joe's murder."

"Joe Stone?"

"Yeah."

"But he committed suicide. I saw it in the paper."

"He was murdered. He was knocked over the head and choked." I waited. The silence lasted a long time.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Did you kill him?"

"No. No, why should I?"

"He had a lot of negatives, most of which he made at your studio. I don't know how many there are, but I think they're valuable," I said.

"I was well paid for what I did, I have no use for the negatives."

"But they're valuable?" I asked.

"Yes."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"How valuable?"

"It would cost about fifty thousand dollars to produce them again."

I whistled. "That much?"

"Yes. It was a year's work. Any studio would charge a great deal for the processing alone. The actual investment in material is small, of course, but getting people to act in them costs money and everyone connected with them has to be well paid to keep quiet. Stone used my studio and equipment at night and the processing was done by my own dark-room man. Stone had to pay well for silence and protection. About a thousand dollars a spool is the cost for the actual negative. Prints are cheaper, but even they cost twice what an ordinary print would."

"I can't see a grand apiece," I said.

"You employ three or four people at about a hundred each, two or three hundred for the studio and something extra for the men who film and process the job. A thousand dollars at least."

"Yeah."

"Of course, there are some made for less, but Stone made a high-class film." I snorted. "It does sound strange to call them high-class; what I mean is that Stone had a script and a story, and he used

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settings and sometimes supplied costumes for the actors, if you could call them that. He distributed his films to the better-class trade and they were willing to pay high prices for them. He used good-looking girls in his stuff and he had to pay high for them."

"Whoever's got the negatives will need prints, won't they?" I asked.

"No. They could be sold outright for at least thirty thousand."

"Who'd buy them?"

"I don't know. Stone had the connections for that sort of deal, as well as for sales of the prints."

"It seems to me it would be cheaper to make your own," I said.

"I don't think so, at least not for that class film. A great deal are made in hotel rooms," he said, and avoided looking at Jerry. "But they're not comparable to the film Stone turned out. They are made on home-movie outfits, poorly lighted and really don't sell very well and they don't bring enough money."

"It's a big business."

"Very big, and Stone wasn't the biggest one in it. There are a great many others making that type of film, and there's a market for all of them."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Yeah," I said. "You can't tell me anything about Stone's connections, who he sold to, and where he met them?"

"No."

"Okay, I guess that's all. Let's go, Jerry." Max walked to the front door with us. "Thanks for the information," I said.

"It's all right. You held the cards."

I grinned at him. "You don't happen to have that film of Miss Jones that you and Stone shot in the hotel, do you?" His face gave him away. It was a lucky shot. "I want it," I said.

He left us standing at the door and walked back to the den. He was gone about five minutes and came back carrying a thin yellow box. He handed it to me.

"It hasn't been developed yet," he said.

"This the only one you've got?"

"Yes. I brought it here after you came to see me."

When we were back in the car, I handed Jerry the box.

"Your film career," I said. She leaned over and kissed me.

I drove back to Vine Street and Hollywood Boulevard and parked in a lot. We walked down Vine

## ROUGH ON RATS

from Hollywood, and went into a bar in the first block. There was a colored trio, piano, bass and guitar, beating out swing in the back. We sat at a small table and drank Scotch and White Rock and listened. A girl in a tight evening dress came by with a tray of gardenia corsages, and I bought one for Jerry.

"If Fatty turns up with an interest in this place, I'll hit him in the puss," I said.

"I've never been here before," Jerry said.

"It's a nice place, no B-girls, but a nicer class of people."

"It costs more."

"Sure. But look at the people you see, that's worth something." I looked them over. They were the same you'd find in that class bar in any city. People are pretty much the same, if their surroundings are much the same. The crowd here was dressed a little brighter than they would have been in Kansas City, but they drank the same mixtures, and talked about the same things, mainly themselves.

"What did you think of Mr. Stein?" I asked.

"He didn't make any argument, did he?"

"He couldn't. Like he said, I held the cards. He can't afford to be mixed up in a murder case. And

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you could mix him up in it plenty. He's a smart hombre; he pays off when he has to, but he won't forget it. Some day I might have to pay him off."

"He wouldn't do anything to you, would he?"

"Nothing physical, but his kind hang together and some day, some way, I'll hear from Max again. That is, if I want to do any business in this town."

"Why?"

"Skip it, honey, it's too involved," I said.

"Anthony, when do I go back to my place?"

"Do you want to?"

"No, but I can't just live at your house all the time."

"We'll figure that out later," I said.

"Your landlady saw me."

"It'll do her good. Her life is very dull."

"With you chasing her daughter around, I don't see how it can be."

"The daughter chases me," I said. "It's that strange power." I looked at my watch; it was a quarter to twelve. "Let's go."

I drove back to my apartment, with Jerry snuggled against me and my arm around her.

"When I go," I said, "I want you to lock up behind me, just in case. And if you hear anything, don't

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stop to find out what it is, see? Just start hollering. Yell and keep yelling until somebody wakes up and comes over.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got to go to the Lucky Spot. I’d take you along, but I don’t want you seen there again.”

“Don’t go, Anthony, please.”

I held her close. “I’ve got to,” I lied. I unlocked the front door and went in with her and checked the back door and the windows. They were all locked.

“You’ll have to do without fresh air,” I told her. “Keep the windows locked.”

“Shall I leave the lights on?”

“Sure, leave all of them on. Heat the coffee, will you?”

She got the cups and the cream, and put the coffee pot on the fire. My conscience began to trouble me. I didn’t have to go to the Lucky Spot and I shouldn’t leave her alone. I laid my gun on the table.

“Forget about that yelling I told you to do,” I said. “If you hear anything blow this off into the floor a couple of times.”

“I’ll be all right and you may need that.” She pointed at the gun.

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"I'm scared of them," I told her. "I wouldn't dare use it. Keep it."

We sat drinking coffee. I could feel my whiskers against my hand; I needed a shave, but gave it up. I knew what Jerry would think. I finished my coffee and kissed her.

"Lock the door and don't open it to anyone," I told her. "I can get in with my key and nobody else has any business here."

"Take your gun, Anthony, you need it more than I do."

"I'll be okay."

"Will you be back tonight?"

"Sure, as soon as I can. You go to bed."

At the Lucky Spot I found Mick in the kitchen talking to the cook.

"Why not split it fifty-fifty?" I asked them.

"Split what?" the cook asked.

"Hell," I said, "I thought you two had rolled a drunk."

Mick grinned at me. "Ain't no drunk on Main Street worth rolling."

"Can I shave up in your room, Mick?" I asked.

"Yeah."



## ROUGH ON RATS

“Don’t have to go that far,” the cook said, “if you can handle a straight edge. I got shaving stuff and hot water here.” He pointed to a small sink with a medicine cabinet and mirror above it. I lathered up and shaved.

“The only guys I ever seen shave at night were going either to work or to a dame, and you ain’t going to work, Anthony.”

I turned around from the mirror; two hundred and ten pounds of plain-clothes dick was speaking to me from the kitchen doorway.

“HI, PHIL,” I SAID. HE HAD A happy face. In large, black high-top shoes, he stood a few inches over six feet. His hands, two hot-water bottles, stuck out of the sleeves of a shiny blue serge coat. The pants were baggy at the knees and fitted tight around his thighs. The battered old felt hat on the back of his head covered the few remaining wisps of sandy hair. He was freckled high up on his bare forehead. His name was Phil Arken, and he was a dick on the vice squad. I liked him. I wiped my face and dried the cook’s razor.

“What the hell happened to your pan?” he asked.

“I refereed a bout between two lady wrestlers,” I said.

“Good clean fun.”

“Yeah. What smells around here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Flannagan told me you smelled out vice,” I explained.

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“Oh, nothing. I just come in to warn Mick about B-girls. They got to get out; the papers are hollering again.”

“They’re always hollerin’ about somethin’,” Mick complained.

“Well, at least you got to have the girls quit wearing them low-cut evening gowns and them pajamas. The paper had some pictures of a gal working a guy in the morning edition. If she’d been dressed in something besides a frontless and backless dress, she could have passed for the guy’s girl, but her clothes was a giveaway.”

“Okay,” Mick said. “I’ll tell them. How long’s this going to last?”

“I don’t know,” Phil said. “Maybe two, three weeks, ’til they find something else to fill the front pages of the early editions.”

“If it ain’t one damn thing, it’s another.” Mick went grumbling out to the front.

“How about a beer?” I asked.

Phil nodded. “Yeah. Bring it out here, the air’s better.”

I went to the bar and got four bottles of Bud. Phil and I sat out in the alley and drank from the bottles.

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"How's the vice business?" I asked.

"Hell, you ought to know."

"Any complaints in about me?"

"The office is full of them, but we ain't interested in you small stuff, we're after the ringleaders."

"I'm a ringleader, Phil," I said, "take me in. I want to have my fingerprints taken. I want to get the old rubber-hose. I want to sit in the room with the lights and be asked questions."

"Who the hell do you think you are, George Raft? We don't put that stuff on except for Warner Brothers. We're under contract."

"Shucks," I said.

"How you doing, Anthony?"

"I can still use a partner, Phil, any time you're ready."

He shook his head and opened the second bottle.

"I ain't got long for my pension, and then I'm going to get me a little place out in the valley and grow stuff. No more snooping for me, no more knocking over cat houses, no more pushing reefer boys and street whores around. Boy, I'm going to get out of the whole stinking mess."

"Your big, flat feet will start itching and first

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thing you'll be nosing around the neighbor's hen house looking for the reason behind the eggs."

"Not me," he said. "I don't like any part of my job, I never did. I'm just hanging on for that pension."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," I told him.

"Sure I'm right, Anthony. What kind of a job is it for a man to be doing, poking around in the filth and scum? Hell, we can't stop it. We knock over one cat house and two start up; we round up a bunch of reefer boys and there's fifty more starting out selling. We raid one stag party while maybe eight or ten are going on; knock over some gambling dive and another starts. People must want 'em or they wouldn't make dough, and they make dough. Jeez, Anthony, the dough I've been offered, just me, see, one guy! And they got to pay every guy that kind of dough, every guy on the squad. Boy, I could have had that place in the valley five times over, and plenty besides. I been in it for nearly thirty years."

"You should have taken the dough," I said. "I would have."

"Naw. I wouldn't have gotten much pleasure out

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of that kind of money, and you wouldn't have taken it either. I got you figured pretty well, Anthony. You talk like a hard guy, but you ain't."

"If everybody keeps telling me that, I won't have any confidence left in myself."

"You fool a lot of people, boy," he said. "But there's some you don't."

I went up to the bar for four more beers.

"I shouldn't be filling myself with this beer," he said when I came back, "but sometimes I'm a stranger to my own thoughts, and it depresses me." He sighed. "Have you seen Flannagan lately?"

"I ran into him in the Maryland Hotel when I found that dead guy," I said.

"Oh, you found him, huh?"

"Yeah, the guy at the desk asked me to go up to the room and see if everything was okay. I walked in on a stiff."

"Funny case, that. They ain't got a thing on the guy. Can't find anyone who knew him. Few people saw him, but they don't know nothing about the guy. He ain't got a record, and his prints aren't on file." He paused. "They're putting him away tomorrow."

"Tuesday?" I asked.

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"Naw, tomorrow." He looked at his watch. "I mean, today." We sat and listened to the sound of the juke box playing a torch song that filtered through from the bar out front.

"Polly out yet?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "She's been out about six months. I got a letter from her a couple of days ago. She's working in San Francisco."

"You see her?"

"No."

"You should; that was a tough break for her. She was a nice girl."

"She killed the guy," I said.

"He was a heel, Anthony."

"Yeah, I don't blame her any."

"But you don't want to see her, huh?"

"I thought a hell of a lot of her, Phil," I said. "But she was two-timing me; one of those every-other-night deals. I did all I could for her at the time. I almost lost my license."

"I didn't know that."

"It's all over now, and has been for a long time; I don't like to think about it."

"I'm sorry, boy," he said.

"Forget it."

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Mick came back and sat down with us. He brought some more beer. "I told the girls tomorrow night they dress in their regular clothes. They're sore as hell."

"Why?" I asked.

"Ah, them bums spill drinks on them, and aight away they got cleaning bills. There's a couple of hustlers out there, Phil."

"Let them stay, Mick; if they ain't in your place, they're on the street. I feel in a mellow mood anyway." Phil belched. "I've been bribed by beer and Anthony's soothing words. It's a pleasure to talk to people who like you; it's amazing how many people on Main Street hate my guts . . . it depresses me . . . it's a hostile atmosphere."

"Drunk on duty again," I said.

"But I'm not. I'm neither drunk, nor on duty. My friendship led me here tonight with a friendly tip for Mick. The few bottles of beer have given me a small glow, I'll admit. But I'm not drunk, Anthony, not drunk . . . mellow, perhaps, but not drunk."

I grinned. "Your education is cropping out, Phil," I said.

"Well, it might. The poor Jesuit Fathers worked hard enough pounding it into me."



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"Go on, Phil," I said. "Cops so seldom let their hair down."

"Cops, Anthony, are people. Remember that."

"Also, heels," Mick contributed.

"No, Mick, not very often," Phil said. "The percentage is reasonably low, as compared with the quantity. Anybody that won't let you do what you want to do is a heel, in your opinion. I'm not being personal in the use of the word 'you,' Mick," he added.

"It's a good point," I said. "You left out your 'ain'ts' and 'hells,' but it's a good point."

"I speak a language that the people I talk to can understand, Anthony. To a whore I speak like a whoremaster; to bums I speak like a bum. You do it, too; I've heard you talk to people of different status. You accommodate your language to them. I speak to you as one intelligent man to another. It's a trait that all cops develop; it brings them closer to people. A Harvard accent doesn't get much out of a stool pigeon." He opened another bottle.

"I agree," I said. "But you left something out of your defense of the police: the fact that, given authority, and an organization to back it up, what was 'people,' as you call them, turns into little

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'Hitlers'; and those without the authority, and little redress to it, become inferior to them. In other words, Phil, the fink becomes the typical cop and vice versa. I rest my case on the fact that nine out of ten of them are first-class heels."

"Hell, yes," Mick said. "Most cops are poison."

"You may be right, both of you, but being a cop and a lieutenant at that, I suppose I lack perspective. To me, cops seem very human. Well, I've enjoyed this, Anthony; if you can overcome your aversion to the police, come to see me sometime, and you too, Mick." He got to his feet. "Home and bed are indicated. Good night, gentlemen."

We said, "Good night," as he walked on up the alley.

"There's a cop who's aces," Mick said.

"Yeah, one of the exceptions that proves the rule." I finished my beer and walked down the alley a way to relieve myself. I was feeling sort of mellow. I told Mick so long, and got the car.

It was past one, as I drove out Sunset. The moon still shone over the hills back of Hollywood and stars blinked in the clear sky. I drove slowly and whistled softly to myself. The traffic was light, and most cars held couples sitting close together. A lot

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of one-armed driving was going on. I turned down Vermont, but didn't make the other turn. A tingling was acting on my spine. I turned right on Fountain and right at the next corner, and came back on Sunset.

There were quite a few lighted windows in the Tower Arms. I parked and looked up at the sixth floor. Lights shone through the glass bricks that made up the corner walls. The elevator was on automatic, and getting in, I closed the grille and pushed the button numbered six. Pat opened the door when the chimes rang. She was wearing something made of black lace. She smiled at me.

"Come in," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dawn, gray with a touch of chill, peeked at me as I unlocked my apartment. Jerry was asleep on the davenport, breathing softly. I tiptoed back to the bedroom, switching off lights as I went. I undressed noiselessly, put on clean pajamas, set the alarm clock for nine in the morning and slipped into bed, damning the squeaks my weight brought from the springs.

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# 19

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THE "FIRST IT WHISPERS THEN it shouts" alarm clock shouted before I woke. Monday, to me, is a bad day—a hold-over attitude from my working days. And this was no exception. A half hour ticked away before I coaxed myself out of bed and into the bathroom for a shower. Jerry was up and had the breakfast going before I was dressed and ready. She gave me a dirty look as I came into the kitchen.

"Hi, Jerry," I said.

"Hi, Rat." She set a large platter of bacon and scrambled eggs in front of me, and poured two cups of coffee.

"Why didn't you sleep in the bed last night?" I asked.

"I didn't think you could handle both of us in one night."

I shut up and ate. After breakfast I went into the bathroom and examined my face. The swelling

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had gone down around the two cuts and my eye had lightened to a sickly looking yellowish blue. I shaved and was able to get closer around the wounds. Jerry was washing the dishes when I came back to the kitchen. I walked up behind her and put my arms around her waist. She pulled away from me. I shrugged and went into the front room.

“I saw a friend of yours last night,” I said.

She followed me into the room. “She’s no friend of mine.”

“I saw Phil Arken,” I said. “He was at the Lucky Spot.”

“Oh.”

“They want the B-girls out again.”

She went back to the kitchen. I turned the radio on and listened to a couple of records from a local station; I switched it off when the commercial began.

“I’ve got to go, Jerry,” I called.

She came and stood in the doorway. “When will you be back?” she asked. “I want to know about supper.”

“I’ll be back for it.”

“I’ll have to do some shopping,” she said.

I took out a ten-dollar bill and handed it to her.

“I’ve got money; is it all right to go out?”



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"No. Phone for what you need and don't unlock the door until you're sure it's really the grocery boy. Take this dough."

She came in and took it from me, and I pulled her over and kissed her.

"Don't be sore, honey," I pleaded.

She kissed me back. "Okay, heel," she said, and I grinned.

I drove downtown and went up to my office. I got the twenty fifties and the deposit slip out of the desk and went down to the bank. It was just opening for business. I made the deposit and stopped in a drugstore and called Fatty's number from the phone booth. He answered.

"Hi, Arthur, this is Anthony."

"Yeah."

"Come down to my office," I told him.

"I'll be down in a half-hour."

I went back to the office. The mail had come in while I was gone, and I took it in to the desk. I put the unopened bottle of Scotch into the top drawer and opened the three letters I'd received. The first one offered me a course in fingerprinting, available to licensed detectives only. I threw it into the waste-

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basket; criminals were using gloves these days. The next envelope contained a bill and a notice of last demand. I sighed. The last letter offered me a liberal trade-in on my old car. I was tempted to take it. I wrote a check for the bill and filled out an insurance form about my wreck. I said I'd run off the road and slammed into a bank, and the car was at Red's garage. I grinned. I'd been paying on that insurance for three years, and had never collected a dime.

I heard the outer door open, and then Fatty's belly peeked through the office door at me. He followed it.

I said, "Hi Arthur," while he lowered his bulk into a chair.

"What's the matter with your face?" he asked.

"Somebody don't like me," I said. "They tried to rub me out. You got a bodyguard yet, Arthur?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. You know who hit you?"

"Nobody hit me. A car drove me off the road and somebody tried to shoot me," I told him.

"Who?"

"The guy we're looking for."

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"When?" he asked.

"After I left you at the 31 Club. Did you stay long after Jerry and I left?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I had another drink and then went home."

I grinned at him. "You didn't follow me, did you, Arthur?"

"No. You're working for me," he said.

"Did you see Stein leave?" He shook his head. "Cops trace you yet?" I asked.

"Naw. How you coming along?"

"Fine," I told him. "I don't know nothing, but I'm getting along just swell."

"That Stein guy, would he have the stuff?"

I shook my head. "Stone had the stuff. The guy that bumped him off got it." I took the bottle out of the top drawer, opened it and filled jigger glasses. I pushed one over to Fatty. "Skoal," I said, and we drank.

"I think I know where the stuff is," I said casually.

"Huh?" Fatty's eyes bugged out.

"I think I know where the stuff is," I repeated.

"Where?"

"It will cost you ten grand," I said. I leaned back in my chair and watched him. His face took on a



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very mean look, his stubby fingers were balled into fists.

“You dirty, double-crossing son-of-a-bitch. You won’t get away with it.” His voice was low and hoarse, like he had a sore throat. I didn’t say anything.

“You won’t get away with it,” he repeated.

I shrugged. “You don’t want it?” I asked.

I pushed the bottle toward him. He didn’t touch it.

“Nobody double-crosses me,” he said, “nobody.”

I rolled the jigger glass around the desk. “I used to know a paperhanger in Kansas City, lost both his arms in an accident. His brother was a stonecutter and he went into business with him. The guy was a good stonecutter, I mean the guy with no arms, but nobody could figure out how he did it. His brother and he were killed in a bar fight and nobody ever figured it out. You want the stuff?”

Fatty sat and steamed, his eyes little black slits, his face red.

“I told you I wouldn’t look for the stuff,” I said. “I was hired to find out who knocked off Stone, and I’m going to find out, but the stuff is extra. I think I know where it is. I want ten grand to get it for

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you. If you don't want to pay it, skip it. The cops will pick it up. I agreed to find the guy, not the stuff. You figure a double-cross out of that."

"The stuff is mine." Fatty managed to cool off enough to get that out.

"The hell it is," I said. "A guy killed three people for it. I think I can find it, and I can turn it over to the cops or I can keep it. It's got nothing to do with you. You're paying me two grand to find out who killed Stone."

"Who knocked Stone off?" he asked.

"Not yet; you couldn't get the stuff that way."

"Have you got it?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. I'm pretty sure where it is, but not sure enough to let you blunder in and spoil it. It may not be where I think it is, and if you make a move for it there ain't going to be another chance to get it if I'm wrong. I'll get it for you for ten grand, and that's cheap. You only put five grand into it in the first place and it's worth between thirty and fifty gee's now. You knew what you hired me for; I took a lot of trouble to explain that to you."

"Okay," he said, "but it's a lot more than I figured on paying."

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"A hell of a lot more," I agreed. "You figured to sweat it out of the guy that bumped off Stone. This way, Arthur, you get it without all that trouble."

He thought it over.

"When will you get it?" he asked.

"You get the ten grand—make it eleven and a half," I told him, "and bring it here tomorrow. If I'm right I'll have it by then."

"What's the extra for?"

"The grand is for finding out who knocked off Stone, and the five hundred is expenses," I told him.

"You don't miss nothing, do you?"

"Here's something else," I said. "If I take the stuff, there ain't any proof that will pin it on the guy. You can play it either way—send him to the gas room, or get the stuff for yourself."

"I'll take care of the guy," he said. "Nobody double-crosses me."

"This is where I came in," I said.

"I'll have the dough tomorrow, and you better be right."

"I'll be right or I won't take the dough," I said, "and Arthur, don't have me followed, and don't plan any surprises for me. No rough stuff, see? If you do,

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you're going to have some trouble with a bunch of nosy cops. I got that fixed, and if you want to take a chance on whether I'm bluffing or not, go right ahead."

"Ten grand ain't worth getting in no trouble about," he said.

I grinned at him. "But five grand was, huh?"

"That was a double-cross. I don't take that." He poured himself a jigger of Scotch and drank it. "Some day," he said, "you're going to be too smart and you're going to get yours."

"From you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I got no reason. You didn't cross me, you just played smart. I'd do it that way myself, but some day somebody ain't going to take it."

"Well, as the poet says, Arthur, ashes to ashes, nobody lives forever." He got up and waddled to the door. I followed him. "Ten tomorrow morning," I told him. "Bring the dough and come alone."

"I ain't got any gunmen," he said. "The guy that drives me packs a rod, but I've got a permit for it, and he don't ever use the gun. I'll be alone."

I watched him down the hall to the elevator. He didn't look back at me. I went back to the office and

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thought it all out again, and hoped I was right. I wasn't too damn sure about it. The phone rang. It was Pat.

"Will you be over tonight?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I'm busy."

"Oh."

"I really am, honey, but you get packed and be ready to leave tomorrow."

"All right, I'll be ready." She hung up.

I decided against another drink, and put the bottle and glasses away. I locked up the office and walked down to the Lucky Spot. Phil's warning must have had results, because there were only two girls in the bar, and they were dressed in regular street clothes. Mick wasn't in front, so I went back to the kitchen. Mick and the cook were sitting at a table drinking coffee. I said, "Hi," and asked the cook to fix me a sandwich. Mick told me to sit down and we shot the bull until the cook brought me the food and a cup of coffee.

"Have you seen Barney around lately?" I asked them. The cook shook his head.

"Last time I seen him," Mick said, "he was flush. Must have been over a month ago."

"Where does he hang out?" I asked.



## ROUGH ON RATS

"In the can most of the time," the cook said. "I don't know where he spends his time when he's out." Mick didn't know either. I finished the sandwich and coffee, said so long, and walked out through the front.

I went up Main Street past Seventh, and at a basement stairway in the middle of the block I turned down the stairs. A door led into a long, narrow room, filled with three green-topped pool tables and a row of chairs along each wall. There were cue racks mounted on the wooden paneling. Up at the front was a counter filled with cigars and cigarettes, and behind it a tall stool and a small cash register on a shelf. On the stool a little rat-faced man was sitting. He had a cigar stub screwed into the corner of his thin mouth, and he talked around it.

"Looking for somebody, Anthony?" he asked.

I glanced around the room. There were four guys playing at one table, and the two others were dark.

"Barney," I said.

"He ain't here."

"I noticed that. He been around lately?"

Rat-face looked at the ceiling. "What's he done?" he asked.

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"He shot my old man and raped my sister," I said. "I want to pay him off; he did a nice, neat job."

"You kill me."

"No," I said, "you kill me, I bleed Scotch." Rat-face went back to the ceiling. "How's the reefer trade?" I asked.

He jerked his head down. "Dammit, Anthony, keep quiet."

I grinned at him. "Where does Barney hang out?"

"He's got a dame out in Lincoln Heights." He gave me an address on North Broadway.

"Thanks, chum," I said. "See you around." He nodded.

I walked back to my car and drove out to Broadway to the address he'd given me. It was another cheap hotel. I parked and went up the stairs to the desk. An old gray-haired man in shirt sleeves and vest, and his shoes off, lolled behind the counter.

"Hi, pop," I greeted him, "Barney around?"

"Upstairs," he said, "301. I don't guess they're up yet; ain't seen him today." I walked up the stairs and knocked on the door of 301.

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# 20

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I KNOCKED THREE TIMES BEFORE the door was opened. Barney was in his shorts, his hair mussed, his eyes clouded with sleep. He was tall and thin, with a square face and a large, loose mouth. He had a tooth missing in the upper front, so that he whistled his "s's."

"I'll be damned," he exclaimed, "Anthony!" He turned to the room. "Hey, Millie, it's Anthony."

"How you been, Barney?" I asked.

"So, so, kid. Come on in."

I followed him into the room. It was crowded with a large double bed, set against one wall. A dresser, a table and three chairs sat across from the bed. In the bed, a red-headed woman was sitting up, clutching the cover around her neck. She looked about forty. I'd seen her around the Lucky Spot several times.

"Hi, Millie," I said. She nodded.

"Sit down, Anthony. I'll put on some clothes."



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Barney pushed a chair at me. Louie's doing five at Quentin now," he explained. Louie was the guy that Millie usually lived with.

"Tough," I remarked.

"Yeah, but that's the way it goes, ain't it?" He had his pants and a T shirt on. "You wait here a minute, Anthony. I got to get some beer." He put on a pair of low tennis shoes and left.

The red-head threw back the covers and got out of bed. She was naked. Her hips were broad and her breasts sagged. She got into a housecoat that zipped up the front, and went to the dresser and pulled a comb through her hair a few times. She rubbed a powder puff over her face and spread some rouge on her lips. She didn't pay any attention to me. I lit a cigarette and smoked until Barney came back. He had a large cardboard box full of canned beer.

"You get me any wine?" the red-head asked him. Her voice rasped.

"I got beer. You want wine, you get it, see?" Barney didn't look at her.

He put the box on the table and took out two of the cans and opened them. He handed one to me. I took a long drag. It was good and cold.

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"Must be six months since I seen you, Anthony," he said. I nodded. "I been strictly quiet since I got out," he explained.

"I haven't heard anything; I guessed you were laying low," I said.

"Yeah, just keeping quiet, that's all."

"Money?" I asked.

"I had a little, see. I get along."

"Sure," I said. We sat and drank, while the red-head lay on the bed and filed her nails. She didn't look at us.

"You on a case?" Barney asked me.

"Yeah," I said.

"I been quiet, like I said. I ain't been doing a thing." He looked at me carefully.

"Sure."

"I ain't seen you for a hell of a time. Must be six months." He opened two more cans of beer and gave me one. I figured he'd been up to something, but it wasn't any of my business.

"I want you to do a job for me," I told him.

He shook his head. "I ain't been doing anything since I got out; you got the wrong gee."

"Skip it," I said. "I want you to do a job for me."

"But Anthony, I ain't got nothing."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"I don't want anything. I don't give a damn what you got, I just want you to do a job for me."

"I thought you was after hot stuff, Anthony. I ain't got any." The red-head snorted. "You keep your God damn lip buttoned," Barney growled at her.

"You want the job?" I asked him.

"Sure, Anthony, sure. I need the dough."

"Okay. Tonight I want you to come with me and bring your tools."

"You ain't going to open no box, are you?"

"No," I said, "nothing that tough, and no risks. I'll give you twenty bucks."

"Sure, Anthony, I'll crack it for nothing if you want."

"Sure, big shot," the red-head piped up, "kiss the dough off, you got so much." Barney got up and walked slowly and deliberately over to the bed. He grabbed the woman by the hair, twisted her head back and hit her in the mouth with his fist.

"I told you to keep your lip buttoned, see?" He let her head drop on the bed, and came back to the table and sat down. The woman made no sound.

"I'll do it for nothing, if you want," he repeated.

"I'll pay you, Barney," I said.

"Whatever you say, Anthony."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Come up to my office about nine tonight. I'll see you there." I got up. "Thanks for the beer."

"Sure, kid. I'll see you tonight."

I drove back to town and went up to my office. There was no mail, and the girl at the switchboard said no messages. Business was lousy. I went down to Red's garage and drove in. Red crawled out from under a car and walked over to me. He went around the car, inspecting it carefully.

"Still in one piece. I was worried," he said.

"Anybody come in about my heap yet?" I asked.

"Naw, but I got those holes fixed."

"Good. I'll need this can for a few more days. Okay?"

"Sure. Want gas?"

"No. I got enough. See you around."

It was five o'clock when I got back to my apartment. Jerry peeked through the curtain before she opened the door.

"Still sore?" I asked.

"Gosh, Anthony, I been worried. You forgot your gun."

I laughed. "You get the groceries delivered okay?"

"Yes. I've got a pork roast in the oven. I hope you're hungry."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Sure," I said. "I'm going to take a nap; call me when it's ready." I went into the bedroom and lay down on the bed.

I awoke with Jerry shaking me. I sat up feeling dopey; my head was stopped up and my eyes refused to focus. I pulled my clothes off and stumbled into the bathroom. A cold shower picked me up and left me feeling aces. We nearly stripped the pork roast between us, and then sat in the front room drinking coffee.

"You going out tonight?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah."

"Oh."

"It's business," I said.

"You don't have to explain."

"Don't get sore again," I told her. "I've got a lot to do tonight, and Pat doesn't come into it any place."

"I'm not sore," she protested. "You don't owe me anything."

"I owe you a hell of a lot. I haven't wanted to come back to this hole before now, that I can remember. If you weren't here I'd have been hanging around the Lucky Spot, courting indigestion with one of Mick's meals."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"And when it's safe for me to go back to my room?" She left it a question.

"I don't know what you're going to do, but you're not going back to that room. I'll figure something out."

She came over to me and sat on my lap. "If you want me to," she said, "I'll stay here and keep house and cook for you. It wouldn't cost as much as it does for you to eat out. You wouldn't have to pay me or anything." She put her arms around my neck and held my head to her breasts. "Then if you want me, I'll be here," she whispered.

"It wouldn't be fair to you," I said.

"It's what I want. I wouldn't be any trouble."

"We'll see." I got my gun and a hat and overcoat out of the bedroom. "I don't know when I'll be home," I said, "but I don't want you to leave any doors open tonight."

"Please be careful, Anthony."

"I'm not worried about myself, but I don't like your being here alone."

"I'll be all right."

"I wish I was sure," I told her. "Would you rather stay with Pat?"

"No!"

## ROUGH ON RATS

“Okay, but don’t let anyone in, and don’t leave anything unlocked.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, but I could see that she was scared. I kissed her before I left. I drove down to Broadway and went up to the office. It was a half-hour before Barney knocked on the inner door. I gave him a quick one.

“We’ll wait a while,” I said.

Barney was dressed in a neat blue suit and black shoes. We sat in the office until ten o’clock, drinking a little, and talking less. I smoked five cigarettes. At ten the phone rang. It was Pat.

“I took a chance on your being at your office,” she said.

“I was just leaving.”

“Coming over here?” It was an invitation.

“Still busy,” I told her.

“I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “This is serious stuff. I’d come if I could, you know that. I just can’t.”

“All right, Anthony.”

“Are you all packed?”

“Almost.”

“It will be tomorrow, late afternoon or evening. I’ll come after you,” I said.

## ROUGH ON RATS

"You'd better."

I hung up. "Dames," I said to Barney.

"You telling me?" he asked.

I grinned. "Let's go." He followed me out of the office and waited while I locked up. We drove to the parking lot next to the Maryland.

"You go in and talk to the guy at the desk," I told him. "Get a room and go up to it. Wait until the coast is clear and come to room 620. Come by the stairway. I'll be there."

"That all?"

"If a certain guy has been following us, it's plenty. Go on ahead."

I waited until I saw him go in the door, and then I followed. I had the overcoat turned up around my neck and the hat pulled down, with the brim over my eyes. I kept my head down and walked across the lobby to the stairway, keeping Barney's back between me and the guy at the desk as much as I could. I walked up to the sixth floor and waited in the hall by the elevator. I didn't meet anyone on the way. It was about fifteen minutes before Barney came down the hall to where I was. I led him to the door of 620.

"Open it," I told him. He took a flat leather wallet



## ROUGH ON RATS

out of his pocket and selected a tool from it. He had the door open in a few seconds.

“Cinch,” he said. I switched the light on and crossed to the closet and opened the door. There were two suits on hangers and a hat on the shelf, but I wasn’t interested in them. On the floor of the closet was a large, shiny black suitcase. I pulled it out, and lugged it to the hall. It was as heavy as restaurant piecrust. I switched out the light, closed the door and told Barney to lock it again. It took a few seconds and then we hauled the case up to room 735. I opened that door with the key I’d gotten on Saturday night. There was no evidence that anybody had rented the room since. With the suitcase inside, I locked the door and sat on the bed. Barney straddled a chair.

“So far, so good.” I said. “Now, we’ve got to get the damn thing out.”

“What the hell’s in it? It weighs a ton.”

“We’ll lug it down to the first floor and then you take the elevator to the main floor and talk to the guy at the desk again. Keep him interested while I get the damn thing out the front door. Got it?” He nodded. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We carried the bag out into the hall and I closed

## ROUGH ON RATS

the door and left the key in the lock. It was a long haul down, but we weren't interrupted. Barney took the elevator and I waited until he had time to get to the desk, before I started down the stairs. I carried the suitcase as well as I could, without disclosing how very heavy it was. The back of my neck felt like it was on fire as I crossed the lobby.

I waited in the car for Barney. He joined me in a few minutes and we drove back to the office and hauled the case up to my rooms. I paid Barney, and watched the elevator drop out of sight before I went in and locked the doors and opened the suitcase. It was full of round, flat cans, each of which held a spool of film.

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# 21

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I CLOSED THE BAG, UNLOCKED the door and dragged the suitcase down the hall to the freight elevator and waited until the janitor answered the buzzer.

“This elevator don’t run at night.”

“Hi, Gramp,” I said.

He squinted at me through thick glasses. “You drunk again, Anthony?” he asked, recognizing me.

“Naw. I want to store this in the basement.” I pointed at the bag.

“Sure,” he tried to lift it. “What’s in it?”

“Gold,” I said. “I’m a hoarder.” We loaded it into the cage and rode down to the bowels of the building. “I want to put it where no one will be able to find it,” I told him.

“Ain’t nobody’d ever bother it there,” he shoved it well behind a stack of old lumber. I gave him a five-dollar bill, and he rode me back up to the fifth floor.”

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Can I get that bag when I want it?" I asked him.

"Sure."

"I mean, without anyone knowing about it?"

"Just take it; you know where it is."

"How about the day janitors?"

"Them guys are always upstairs or in the second basement," he said. "Nobody'll notice you."

"Okay, Gramp," I told him, "you forget about it. I haven't been down here. And wipe that bag off with a rag, carefully, all over, will you?"

"Sure, and I ain't seen you, Anthony."

"See that you keep away from blondes, Gramp," I told him.

"You're sure as hell drunk again, Anthony."

I grinned at him and went to the office, locked up and walked over to the Lucky Spot.

The bar was quiet, Mick leisurely tending the needs of a few regular soaks. The B-girls, less alluring now than when wearing their low-cut gowns or tight pajamas, were gathered together by the booths. They looked disgusted.

"Things slow?" I asked Mick.

"Yeah," he said. "Monday's a bad day, anyway, but the girls can't bring them in, dressed like that."

"You ought to get a floor show."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"I may have to if this keeps up. If they'll give me a permit," he said. "You find Barney?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"He was in here a little before you come."

"I saw him this afternoon," I said.

"There's a game down to Red's tonight, want to go?"

"I got to meet a guy a little later," I said.

"Red said for me to tell you, in case you wanted in."

"You going?"

"Naw. The cook says the game owes him dough, so I'm letting him go. I got to be in the kitchen."

"The game will owe him more after tonight."

"Yeah," Mick agreed. "He thinks he's a big shot at stud. But what the hell, it's his dough."

"If it wasn't for poker that guy would have quite a wad," I said. "The way he lives, he don't have to spend anything."

"You ain't kidding, Anthony. He ain't got no dame, and no clothes, and I've never seen him buy a drink."

"And you feed him."

"Yeah. I figure he spends about five a week on his room and smokes; the rest he loses at poker."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"A full life," I said.

"Yeah. How's your aunt?"

"My who?" I asked.

"Your aunt you got staying with you."

"Oh. She's fine, Mick."

"Her old man come back yet?"

"Yeah," I said. "He came back this morning."

"The hell he did. He say where he'd been?"

"Well, he had the gin with him. Said he had to go quite a ways for it, but he had it."

"How the hell far did he have to go?"

"San Francisco," I said. "He saved twenty cents."

"The guy is whacky."

"He won't pay more than he thinks a thing is worth," I explained.

"I get that, but any guy that goes five hundred miles to save twenty cents is whacky."

"What he always says, Mick, is that a penny saved is a penny earned."

"He's whacky," Mick insisted.

"Maybe so, but my aunt likes him."

"The way I figure, Anthony, a guy can go too far with that saving stuff."

"I guess you're right, Mick. Give me a drink."

"Sure." He poured a large shot into an old-fash-

## ROUGH ON RATS

ioned glass and slid it across the counter to me. "Chaser?" he asked. I shook my head. It was a big mouthful. Mick leaned over the counter and talked in a low voice.

"That cop Flannagan was in here this afternoon, right after you left."

"What did he want?" I asked.

"He didn't say nothing to me. He was talking to Babs."

"Which one?"

He pointed to a dark-headed girl.

"What did he want to know?"

"She says he asked about Billie and Eddie; says he was just fishing around. She don't know nothing."

"What could she know?" I asked. "What is there to know?"

"I mean about you," he lowered his voice to a whisper. "About you seeing Billie and mussing Eddie up."

"Yeah, sure."

"She don't know Billie very well, anyway. They shared a room a few years back."

"He's been too damned quiet," I said. "I don't care what he knows, but I want to know about it."

"That's all I know, Anthony. I ain't heard nothing."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"He's not dumb, Mick. If I figured this thing out, so can he. He's got a hell of a lot more to work with than I have, and so far, I can't find out what he's done about it."

"Ah, he pokes around," Mick said. "But the way he was talking to Babs, he don't know nothing."

"A lot of smart guys up at San Quentin figured the same way," I told him.

"You want an alibi?"

I laughed. "No. I'm in the clear, so far."

"Okay, so what can he do?"

"Nothing," I lied.

"Want another drink, Anthony?"

"Naw. Is that clock right?"

Mick had a battered alarm clock on the back of the bar. It said twelve. "Ten minutes fast."

"I got to go. Take it easy, Mick."

"Sure."

I walked to the Crail Building, careful to keep next to the curb, away from the darkness of buildings. I took the elevator up to the seventh floor and walked noiselessly down two flights. The hall was empty. I unlocked the outer door and switched the lights on. The room was empty. I switched off the lights and went into the office and turned the desk light on, and



## ROUGH ON RATS

went back to the dark reception room. I left the outer door open a crack and sat in the dark. The light from the inner office shone under the door.

A hundred thoughts streamed through my mind as the minutes coasted to wherever they're collected and kept. . . . Polly and the man she'd killed, Jerry and the men she knew, and Pat and the man or the men in her life. Vincent and the gray-headed man that took his place at night, Phil Arken and the chickens he wanted to raise and the stuff he wanted to grow, Mick and the Lucky Spot, and the whores and B-girls and barflies that hung around it, Barney and Millie, Rat-face and the punks that shot pool in his joint, Red and Flannagan and even Gramp. I was puzzled and worried and scared, as I sat there. Puzzled, because somehow I had to end the mess that had already killed three people. Worried, because I didn't know how to do it, and scared because I expected the killer to come for me.

From the hall, I heard the whir of the elevator. I got up and stood pressed tightly against the wall next to the door and waited. The elevator went on past my floor and I relaxed, but stood there. The seconds dragged by. I took my gun out of the holster and held it by the barrel. I heard a soft step out in the hall and

## ROUGH ON RATS

I drew back against the wall and held my breath. The sound was repeated a second later. I breathed quietly and gripped the gun barrel tightly. The door swung slowly in, and a shadow fell across the rug from the dim hall light. A man stepped through the doorway and paused. I raised the gun and brought the butt down sharply on his head. He dropped forward, and the thud of something metallic echoed down the hall. I knelt on the man's back and hit him again with the flat side of the gun butt. He lay quietly. I switched on the light and picked up the gun that had fallen from his hand. He was lying face down on the rug. I pulled him into the inner office and propped him in a chair. I went back to the reception room and locked the hall door and turned out the light.

The unconscious man's pockets were not so interesting except for a key; the tab on it was marked Maryland Hotel 735. I forced a drink of Scotch between his lips and poured a thermos jug full of cold water over his head. I couldn't see any cuts from the blows. I sat across the desk from him and waited. He blinked, reached up and felt the back of his head, then focused his eyes in my direction.

"Hi, Vincent," I said.

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# 22

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I KEPT MY GUN POINTED AT HIS belly. "I've got your rod, chum, so don't move around much."

"What's the idea?" he snarled. He'd decided to bluff it out.

"You tell me."

"I came up to see you." He tried to look puzzled.

"It's past my bedtime, Vincent. I'll stay as long as you talk, but unless you do I call the cops, and you can explain your way out to them." I reached for the phone. "Make up your mind."

It didn't take him long. He shrugged. "What's the deal?"

"You're not in the right spot for a deal," I told him.

"Okay, call the cops. I'll take a rap for whatever they say this is."

"I don't know what they'll call it. Attempted robbery and carrying a gun without a permit."

"Call them."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Unless you were dumb enough to use the same gun when you shot me up Saturday night. I've got one of the slugs from my car. Of course, if it don't match, you got nothing to worry about." I took the phone off the receiver and spun the dial once.

"Wait a minute," he stopped me. I waited. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Not much. I know most of it, and I've got the stuff." He glanced around the office. I grinned. "Not here," I assured him. "I want to know why you didn't finish me in Billie's room."

"I didn't know how much you knew. I figured there'd be too big a stink if I knocked you off. After I got Eddie I thought you'd be through."

"You tried again, though."

"Yeah. I saw you with that blonde of Eddie's; I thought she'd tell you whatever she knew. Whatever Eddie told her, if he did."

"Eddie didn't know anything."

"He knew about the stuff and who Stone was. He said he hadn't told you. I told him I knew where the stuff was and we would go fifty-fifty."

"He was smarter than me."

"He's dead."

"Yeah."

## ROUGH ON RATS

"I didn't think you knew much or could find out much. It was a mistake."

"Your mistake was telling me you didn't know Eddie," I said. "I knew you did, because he got through to Stone when he called."

"Yeah, I thought about that later; that's part of the reason for your accident Saturday night."

"Why didn't you try again?"

"I found out who the fat guy is, and I could only watch one of you at a time. I picked Trenton. I figured if I stopped him, you'd quit."

"Who's Trenton?"

"The fat guy, Arthur Trenton. Used to be a big shot in Detroit. Things got too hot for him after his mob wiped out the Red Polk gang, and he lammed out here, two, three years ago."

I nodded. It explained a lot about Fatty. "I should have guessed," I said.

"He put on a lot of that fat out here. I recognized the guy that drives for him. He's a mobster from Fatty's old gang; been in the clink for some time."

"Fatty got a mob out here?"

"Naw. Just the guy that drives for him, and he don't make trouble. He's wanted in Detroit."

"You let me go and followed Fatty, huh?"

## ROUGH ON RATS

"Hell, I didn't know whether I'd got you or not until I saw you Sunday night. I was keeping an eye on Fatty. I thought he was the brains. I figured as long as he stayed away from the stuff I was safe, so I parked on his trail."

"You saw me Sunday night?" I asked.

"Yeah. In the Lucky Spot. I was just going by."

"Oh. Why didn't you move the stuff?"

"Why? That was the best place in the world for it. If the cops stumbled over it, I don't know nothing. If that damn fool had told me about you and the register deal Saturday night when I got in, instead of waiting until tonight, I'd have moved the stuff and you wouldn't have been able to walk off with it."

"He tell you about it?"

"Yeah. The bell hop brought the key you left sticking in 735 down to the desk. I was there and the old bird told me about the odd ball that had the room, and how he'd never slept in it, and how he'd tried to trace a guy through the register. I went up and found the stuff gone, so I asked him what the odd ball looked like, and when he told me, I came over here. How did you know I'd be over?"

"I figured that as long as you thought the stuff was in 620, you wouldn't leave it for very long. I guessed

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that you'd check back at midnight and either find the stuff gone or hear about the key in the door and put two and two together, so I waited." I grinned at him. "The crack on the head wasn't necessary, but I owed it to you." He gave me a tight smile.

"Why did you wait so long to knock off Stone?" I asked.

"I didn't find the stuff until about three months ago. After I found it, I spent about a month finding out who his contacts were so that I'd have a market for it. Then I noticed that he was adding to the stuff all the time, so I figured I'd wait and get all I could. About a week or so ago, he told me he was checking out in a few days. I waited until he got ready to run, and then I bumped him off."

"When?" I asked.

"It was a Thursday. The day after the fat guy came hunting him."

"How about Billie?"

"She was at the hotel once, and Stone told me to give her the brush off. He said she was putting the screws on him, because she used to know him in the East. He gave me a line of crap about having been a rounder then, and how he was a good kid now, and had a nice, respectable business. I knew she'd be able

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to put the finger on me as soon as I tried to deal through Stone's contacts."

"You know these contacts?"

I had an idea.

"Yeah."

"How would you like to work a double-cross on Fatty?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've got the stuff. Fatty will give me ten grand for information as to where it is. That's mine. But it's worth a hell of a lot more. We can sell it through Stone's contacts, and split whatever we get, fifty-fifty."

"And?"

"That's all. I've got no proof of what you've done except taking a few shots at me. Even if I did have, it isn't worth anything in actual cash. Cops don't pay for information. Just one thing, though."

"What?"

"I don't want you near me if you're hot."

"I ain't."

"How sure are you?"

"Plenty. They haven't got a thing on me, nothing. That's why I don't mind talking to you. I ain't going to sit in that gas room holding my breath for any of



## ROUGH ON RATS

them. The only thing can be proven is my taking a shot at you and that blonde, that's all."

"Okay. Is Fatty too tough to double-cross?"

"He'd be better out of the way," he admitted.

"That's the way I figure it," I said. "I'll take care of him."

"How?"

"I don't know. I've got to get my ten grand out of him first."

"How the hell can you do that without delivering the stuff to him?"

"I didn't say I'd deliver it," I lied. "I said I'd tell him where it was. So I'll tell him where it was."

"When he finds it gone, he'll take it like you would. You'll end up dead."

"I want that ten grand," I said. "I need it."

"It ain't worth ten grand to get dead."

"Okay," I sighed, "I'll let it go. I'll tell Fatty I don't know anything and then we can take care of him later. I get an extra five grand on the split. Okay?" He nodded.

"Do you work for Fatty?"

"He offered me ten grand to find the stuff. I'll tell him I can't. I'll say I've tried, but no dice, and I've got another case. He'll take that."

## ROUGH ON RATS

Vincent shrugged. "You're the one that's taking the chance," he said.

"He can't do anything but take it. We'll get him before he has too much time. You sit tight until you hear from me. Don't try to cross me, Vincent, we need each other."

"Don't worry about it."

"I don't worry," I lied. "I'll call you after I blow Fatty off."

"Okay." I handed him his gun and put mine back in the holster. I may have been taking a hell of a chance, but Vincent seemed to be the kind of a guy that would save what he could.

"Be careful of Fatty," I told him, "he packs a rod."

"I'll take care of myself. You get in touch with me when you're ready. The sooner the better." I told him I would and let him out. I waited at the office until he had time to get out of the building. I locked up and roused Gramp at the freight elevator. He took me down to the basement and let me out through the back and I picked up my car. I was willing to take a few chances with Vincent, but only while I was face to face with him. When I got to my apartment, Jerry was asleep on the davenport, so I took the bed.

It was a long time before I went to sleep. I kept

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thinking about Vincent and what to do with him. I figured that with him thinking I'd deal with him he'd be on ice for a while, maybe long enough to let me find some way to hang the murders on him. I knew that I couldn't stall him for very long, but as long as I had the stuff he'd be careful of what happened to me. If the worst came to worst, I could tip Flannagan about the slug and put the finger on Vincent for that shooting. Guns weren't easy to come by and I didn't think that Vincent would get rid of his. It would be better for Flannagan to find the rod on him than for me to give it to him myself. So much for Vincent. He'd be quiet for a few days at least, and by that time I'd frame him even if I had to plant evidence in his pockets.

Fatty was a different problem. I didn't mind holding him up for the films, but I couldn't cross him after taking the dough, and I want that dough. Somewhere I had to cross somebody, either Fatty or myself. If Fatty got the film I'd be a heel to myself. I don't like that kind of entertainment. But I couldn't cross Fatty by hollering cop as soon as he got his hands on the film. Rat or not, Fatty was my client. I finally dozed off without settling it.

It was nine o'clock before I woke. I shaved and

## ROUGH ON RATS

caught a quick shower. I only had time to gulp a cup of coffee before rushing out of the house. It was five minutes of ten when I reached the office, and by the time I'd unlocked the door and picked up the mail, Fatty was coming down the hall. I ducked into the inner room and was seated behind the desk when he waddled in.

"Sit, Arthur," I said. "A lovely day to be alive."

He grunted. He was carrying a large manila paper folder like a briefcase in his hand. He lowered his lard into a chair and laid the folder on the desk.

"There's the dough," he said.

I reached for the folder and opened it. There were eleven bundles of ten one-hundred bills each, and a bundle of ten fifties.

"Good," I said. "What do you want first, the killer, or the stuff?"

"The stuff."

"Well, I found it in room 620 at the Maryland Hotel, in a black suitcase in the closet. It's in the basement of this building now." I described its location. "You can pick it up there. Nobody'll see you."

"Okay. Who knocked off Stone?"

"Vincent," I said.

## ROUGH ON RATS

“Who the hell is Vincent?”

“Vincent Koaler, the guy that blew you off at the Maryland when you tried to get into Stone’s room.”

“What’s he want to kill Stone for, if he don’t get the stuff?”

“He thinks he’s got an interest in the stuff.”

“You tell me it’s in the basement.”

“It is. I better tell you about it. When Stone got the dough from you, he went to the Maryland Hotel and rented two rooms, one under the name of Stone and the other as Temple. He kept out of sight that way. When he was out of town as Stone, he was in the room as Temple. You see, he had a pretty good idea that he’d have to run out on you before he ever started. He knew there wouldn’t be any dough left to split. He was farsighted; he figured to string you along for a year, and then blow. He made all the plans for it at the start.

“I don’t know what story he gave Vincent about the rooms, but it was quite a while before Vincent got on to the set-up. I think that maybe Stone didn’t move the stuff into 620 until he thought you were getting restless. He moved too soon, because Vincent found the stuff. He waited until Stone was ready to

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check out and then bumped him off. Stone was going to sell out and run when he didn't show up Monday, like he told you he would.

"The Thomas girl was blackmailing Stone, or trying to, and Vincent knew about that. He figured she'd do the same with him, so he knocked her off. Then, after he'd killed Billie, he started looking for Eddie. But when he found him, I was there. He followed me and laid me out in Billie's room, and then went back to Eddie. He had Eddie soft-soaped into thinking they would be partners, so that Eddie told him that I hadn't been able to get anything out of him, and then he put Eddie away.

"I talked to Vincent after that and he denied knowing Eddie. But later he got to thinking that I must have known about Eddie's phoning Stone and getting him, so he tried to knock me off. He waited outside the 31 Club and followed Jerry and me that night. He wasn't able to stick around and see if he'd got me, and by the time he found out that he hadn't, he'd also found out who you are. He thought that as long as you didn't know where the stuff was, I didn't. He's been following you around." I grinned at him.

"What's he found out about me?"

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"He knows that you used to be a big shot in the gangs in Detroit."

"How do you know that?"

"Vincent told me. I talked to him last night. He knows I've got the stuff. He doesn't know where it is, but I've got him on ice for a few days."

"How?"

"He fell for a gag. I told him that he and I would cross you and sell the film. I'm supposed to put you out of the way." I grinned. "He told me that you are Arthur Trenton. I think he'll be quiet for a day or so, and by that time I'll find some way to pin the murders on him."

"Okay," Fatty said. "I hope you ain't trying anything funny, because if that stuff ain't where you said it is, I'll be back and you're going to have trouble. Nosy cops or not." He looked decidedly mean.

"I'm not crossing you, Arthur. When you get that stuff, we're square. Quits. From there on out, I'm neutral. The cops will get you sooner or later for something, anyway."

He stared at me, his little black eyes cold and hard. "Just don't you tip them, Martin."

"I don't play that way," I said. "If you'd been on

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the up-and-up with me from the first, I wouldn't have worked for you at all. I was in too deep when I found out. The whole thing leaves a very bad taste in my mouth."

"You can buy mouthwash with that eleven grand."

"That's very funny, Arthur, and a good exit line. Good-by."

He left without answering.

I took fifteen hundred out of the folder and locked it in the top drawer of the desk. I took the folder with me, locked the office and went downstairs and got the car.

Jerry was lying on the couch in the front room when I got back to the apartment.

"Hello, honey," I said.

"What was your big hurry this morning?" she asked.

"I had a very important appointment."

"You want something to eat?"

I shook my head. "I'm going to lie down for a while, honey." I went into the back bedroom and stretched out on the bed. I was completely fagged out. I remember thinking that I had never been so tired. I slept a restless, unsatisfying sleep. I dreamed, a dreadful, harrowing dream.



THERE WAS A LONG NARROW room, without doors or windows. The walls seemed to glow with a faint greenish color, giving a sickly light. I was alone and in the green glow, my flesh seemed to be decayed. I walked slowly around and around the room, looking for a way out. At first I just looked, and then I reached as high as I could, and made the circuit that way, feeling the walls, my hands stretched above my head. Around and around, each time lowering my hands, until at last I was crawling and finally, I had only the floor left to search. And when I'd felt each square inch of that, and I knew there was no way out, I cried, because it seemed that getting out was the only thing that had ever mattered to me.

And I lay in that green paleness, with my head cradled in my arms and cried, until I heard someone walking around and around, just as I had been doing. I looked up and recognized Vincent. He was crawl-

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ing, feeling. I watched him until he started on the floor and then I told him that there was no way out, ever. He looked at me, his head raised, so that he seemed like an animal, resting there on his hands and knees. The light cast shadows on his face, and he looked sinister and evil. But I remember how glad I was that I wasn't alone, that there were two of us with no way out of that room.

He stared at me and said, "But I'm dead, you're not the one; it's the other one. You're not the one."

And then I named all the people I knew. Jerry and Pat and Red and Mick and Flannagan and Billie and Eddie, and hundreds of people I'd met and thought I'd forgotten and hadn't. And every time, he shook his head, until I said Arthur's name. Then, he said, "That's the one," and I woke up.

It was three o'clock.

I'd forgotten something important.

I got out of bed and hurried to the phone. Jerry was in the kitchen, but I didn't have time to explain to her. I dialed the Maryland's number.

A voice I didn't know said, "Maryland Hotel, good afternoon."

"Is Vincent Koaler there?" I asked.

"Mr. Koaler hasn't been here today."

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I hung up and dialed Fatty's number. I waited while the phone rang, until the operator finally said, "Your party doesn't answer."

"What's the matter, Anthony?" Jerry asked me.

"I don't know," I said, "I've made a terrible mistake. I've got to go to the office. Keep yourself locked in, and don't answer the door until I let you know it's all right." I went into the bathroom and splashed water in my face and combed my hair. Jerry followed me.

"I'll try to phone you or let you know some way. If you don't hear from me by six, call my lawyer at Gladstone 1186, and tell him you haven't heard from me. He'll know what to do."

I got my hat and the folder, and started for the front door.

"Lock this after me, Jerry." I kissed her.

I drove like hell, but it was a quarter of four when I walked into the lobby of the Crail Building. I left the folder with the guy at the cigar stand and gave him instructions to deliver it to Miss Patricia Temple, at the Tower Arms, if I didn't pick it up before six o'clock. He said he would.

Upstairs in my office, I sat and waited for whatever was coming. It wasn't fun. Vincent was bound

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to have kept an eye on me, and I hadn't thought of that; as long as I could lead him to the film, he'd watch me. And watching me, he'd have been bound to see Fatty carrying that folder into my office, and then leaving without it. A two-year-old kid could figure that one out, and to Vincent it would mean just one thing, the old sell out. I knew it now, but I simply hadn't thought of it that morning. And because I hadn't thought of it then, one of them would be gunning for me. I was pretty sure of what had happened. Fatty had left the office, and Vincent saw him without the folder and decided to see where he was going. That's why I hadn't run into him when I'd left. Fatty led him to the basement and the film, and whichever one came out would figure me for a double-cross, and that one would be looking for me, with a gun. I was in a hell of a spot and I was scared.

I sat there for more than an hour before I heard the outer door open. I got my gun out, and held it pointed toward the office door.

"Come in," I said.

It was Flannagan. At the sight of him, my stomach relaxed and I felt like crying. I acted like I was just checking the gun, turning it around and looking it over.

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“Hello, Anthony,” he said. “Mind if I sit down?” I pointed to a chair across from the desk. “Thanks. I had a hunch I should have come here yesterday.”

“What’s on your mind?” I asked. I hoped my voice was steady.

“A couple of guys got shot.”

“Do you want me to sign a confession?” I asked, and grinned at him. It was an effort.

“One of them was your pal at the Maryland Hotel.”

“Vincent? That’s tough. He hurt bad?”

“He’s dead. The other guy was the one you’re working for.” I don’t know how I looked right then, but if Flannagan couldn’t hear everything inside me unwind, he must have been deaf.

“I’m not working for him. Is he hurt bad?”

“Yeah. He’s dead, too.”

“How did it happen?” I asked.

“I don’t know exactly. The fat guy and his stooge went down in the basement and this Vincent must have followed them. The stooge says he sees the guy aiming at Fatty and he plugs him, but not before the guy gets Fatso. The stooge don’t know what it’s all about. It’s a very neat job. Is that the way you planned it?”

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"Say that before witnesses and I'll answer you."

"What do you know about it?" he asked.

"Just what you've told me," I said.

"One was your pal, and one was your boss, and you don't know nothing."

"That's right, except Vincent wasn't my pal; I just knew him. And I wasn't working for the fat guy."

"He came to see you a couple of times."

"Sure. No law against that. I don't work for mobsters. He was Arthur Trenton."

"Yeah, we found that out." He was sarcastic. "He was here this morning."

"That's right."

"You're a bad guy to know. First that stiff that you found, and now two guys getting shot."

"They tie up?" I asked.

"You tell me. So far, we got nothing on that Stone. He didn't have a record. A lot of reports come in about what he's supposed to be, what he's suspected for, but that's all. He could have been a big shot in the dirty-movie racket, but how the hell are we going to prove it?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know nothing. I had a hunch to come and see you yesterday. I should have done it."

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"I couldn't have told you anything then, either."

"No? Maybe if I'd picked up Vincent and the fat guy and talked to them, maybe then you could have told me something." I shook my head. "Maybe a trip down to headquarters will open you up."

I reached for the phone and called my lawyer's office.

"This is Anthony Martin," I said. "Let me talk to Dick." The girl put me through to him and I heard Dick say hello.

"Hi," I said. "Flannagan is here, and I may take a trip to headquarters with him. If I don't call you in an hour, drop over and spring me. But be sure it's me calling." He said he would, and I hung up.

"What you scared of?" Flannagan asked.

I grinned at him. "Nothing," I said, "but the last time you and me went down to headquarters to talk things over, I developed a headache and I stayed three days."

"Why don't you give me the set-up, Anthony? Play ball with me; I'll cover you, no matter what you done."

"Crap," I said. "I haven't done anything. Remember the last time I played ball with you? I damn near lost my license. I don't know nothing. I'm a punk

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detective; I get evidence for dames that want to stick their old men. I ain't any big shot. You and your boys are the brain squad. You figure it out."

"No use getting sore about it," he said.

"I'm not sore, I'm just telling you. Nine out of ten of you flat feet are sitting on your fannies, waiting to grab some little guy like me; while a big shot like Fatty can buy you off. That guy was a rat! He probably killed more guys on purpose than you cops do accidentally, and that's one hell of a crowd. You knew that. He didn't change, but you cops were too busy slapping two-bit punks around to notice him."

"You shouldn't talk that way, it sounds like you don't like cops."

"Nuts," I said.

"Okay, Anthony. If you want to play them that way, close to your vest, go ahead. Maybe you're right, if you're not . . ." He shrugged and got up. "I'll see you around."

After he'd gone, I phoned Dick and told him everything was all right.

I thought it over. Evidently the shooting took place before Fatty got to the film, so it must still be there. I didn't like it, but there wasn't anything I could do



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about it. It wasn't anything I'd ever brag about, but I wasn't sorry. Vincent got what he asked for and Fatty had it coming, too. However, I didn't feel too good that he got it because I forgot to have him take the empty folder out when he left. But I couldn't change it. Somebody else had worked it out. I called Jerry, and told her everything was okay and that I'd be home for dinner. Then I called the cigar stand and told the guy to send the folder up to my office. I waited for it, and gave the kid a dollar when he brought it in.

With Fatty and Vincent out of the way, nobody knew enough to touch me. Jerry wouldn't talk; Mick, I was sure of, and Pat didn't know enough. Barney wouldn't go within ten feet of a cop. The stooge might have dummied up to the bulls, planning to come after me later; but if he was wanted in Detroit, he'd get sent back. I couldn't see any loose ends, except the suitcase in the basement.

I went to the freight elevator and rang the buzzer.

"Is Gramp here yet?" I asked the lift man.

"He just came in."

"I want to see him," I said. I got into the cage and rode down to the basement. Gramp was there.

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"Get rid of the day man," I told him. He sent the kid home, and we were alone. "I want to burn that suitcase."

"We can put it in the trash incinerator," he said. "It will burn there." I said okay.

We hauled it out of the stack of lumber and over to the fire and threw it in.

"There's some metal in it, Gramp. Cans with film in them."

"Why didn't you say so; they may not burn." We fished it out and it was a hell of a job. It had caught and was smoldering when we got it out on the floor. I opened the bag and we set to work. It took quite a while to open the cans and throw the spools into the fire.

"What'll I do with the cans?" I asked.

"I'll use some for nails and stuff. The rest can go in the trash that gets hauled to the dump. Won't nobody notice them." We threw the bag into the fire. "What was all that stuff?" he asked.

"Pictures of my trips," I said. "My friends got tired of seeing them. We just talk about the races."

"Sure, but you ought to quit drinking, Anthony. It's getting so I can't tell when you're sober."

"You take this, Gramp"—I handed him a ten-spot

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—“and forget about our little bonfire. Come up to the office and I’ll give you a drink.”

“What the hell good’s a drink going to do me?” he asked me when we were on our way up to the fifth floor. “I got a whole night ahead of me.”

“I’ll give you the bottle,” I said. After we had a drink together, I did.

It was seven o’clock when I picked the car up. I drove to the new Union Station and bought a compartment to Camden, New Jersey on the *Chief*, using some of the money in the folder. From the station, I went to the Tower Arms. Pat was waiting for me. She kissed me.

“Put this in your bag,” I said and handed her the folder. It was good-by to ten grand. She opened a small case and laid the folder on top of her stuff and closed and locked the bag.

“I’m all ready,” she told me. A couple of bell boys lugged her five suitcases down to the freight elevator and loaded them into my car. I drove out Sunset to Figueroa and turned onto the new cut-off to Pasadena.

“What did you do with your car?” I asked her.

“I sold it.” We didn’t say anything until I drove into the Sante Fe station at Pasadena. I turned off the

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lights and motor and took her in my arms and kissed her. The lights of the train were flickering up the track.

"This is good-by," I said. "I'm not coming."

She held to me tightly and I kissed her again and again.

"Anthony, you said you'd come, you promised. Please."

I unlocked her arms and pushed her away. "It wouldn't work out," I said. "I'm not in your class." She tried to pull me close again, but I held her away, my hands on her shoulders.

"In that folder I gave you is almost ten grand; here's your ticket." I got it out of my pocket and handed it to her. The train was waiting. "You can get along on that dough for a while. If you need me, let me know." I kissed her hard and got out of the car. A red cap came over and unloaded the bags. I told him the compartment number and carried the small case to the train. Pat was crying.

"Please, Anthony," she said.

I grinned at her. It was pretty sickly. "You'll find a nice, young guy, honey. Send me an announcement." I kissed her again as the conductor hollered, "All

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aboard." I watched the train until it was out of sight.  
I never saw her again.

\* \* \* \* \*

I found the closest bar and went in.

"Double Scotch, not much soda," I said, and all I could think of was how sore Jerry would be when I showed up late for dinner, drunk.