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A Peter Chambers Novel

BY HENRY KANE



Precise Moment

WHEN you're alone in a graveyard, you have many thoughts. When you're alone in a graveyard, that is, and you're not dead.

And I was not dead.

I was, in fact — if one can be said to be — *too* much alive. Nervous. Jumpy. Prickles ridged along the back of my neck like the risen hackles of a fighting cock. Nerve-ends jagged, and every fibre taut. And why not, at one o'clock in the morning of a silent fog-wisped night, alone in a stone-infested graveyard out at the eerie edge of Long Island?

And what was I doing there?

Have a laugh.

I was there on business.

I had a flashlight in my left hand, and a brown-paper package in my

Graveyards are for corpses. That's why Peter Chambers didn't want to wait around for the gunman in the cemetery . . .

right, and I was glued, like a peeping-Tom at an inviting aperture, to a flavorsome tombstone, enticingly inscribed, in curlicues yet: *J. J. J. Tompkins, Rest In Peace.*

Tompkins, I hoped, was resting more peacefully than I.

I shrugged, scratched, grimaced and clicked the flashlight again. It was five after one. I had been there, at Mr. Tompkins' tombstone — as directed — since twelve-thirty. I stiffened, stretched and returned to the whirligig of random thinking, but my unconscious mind must have sought succor, because it presented a picture of Trina Greco.

Ah, that Trina Greco. Tall, dark, lithe and graceful, she had the longest, shapeliest legs in New York, and they were legs that stood up against the staunchest of competition — Trina was a ballet dancer. This very afternoon — before I had returned to the office, and before the call from Mrs. Florence Fleetwood Reed — I had attended a rehearsal with Trina. Legs, legs, legs . . . legs and leotards . . . but my Trina won hands down (or is it legs down?). Afterward, we had sat about sipping peaceful afternoon cocktails in a peaceful afternoon tavern, and she had looked off wistfully — Trina, the unusual: with a brain to match the legs — and she had said, apropos of nothing:

"A fragment of time in connection with a fragment of space . . . creates the precise moment."

"Wow," I had said. "In the mid-

dle of the afternoon. Just like that."

"It's from the Greek philosophers."

"Trina, my Greek."

"I *am* of Greek extraction. You know that, Pete."

"Sure. Sure." I had pondered it. "Fragment of time . . . fragment of space . . . precise moment."

"And that precise moment . . . can be ecstatic or catastrophic."

"Wow. Again with the words. Slow down, my lady love. I'm only a detective taking off part of an afternoon."

"Even here . . ." Her dark eyes crinkled in a grin. "You and I . . . this might be . . . a precise moment."

My grin had answered hers. "No, ma'am, and that's for sure. I can think of a better time and a more appropriate space for *our* precise moment. But I do believe I know what you mean, big words or little words."

"Do you, Peter?"

"Sure. Something like this, let's say. Deciding game of the World Series. Last half of the ninth, home team at bat, one run behind. Bases full, two out. Third baseman moves a little to his left for some reason, just as the batter hits a screaming line drive. Third baseman lifts his glove, practically to protect himself . . . and he's made a sensational catch. At the right fragment of time he was in the right fragment of space . . . and for him, it was the precise moment. Ecstatic for his team, catastrophic for the other."

"Very good, Peter. Very good, indeed."

The way she had said it, the way her dark eyes had narrowed down, the promise in the soft-sweet smile — right here in the fog-tipped graveyard, a pleasant little shiver ran through me. Everything else was forgotten — even Johnny Hays, small-time hood with big-ideas, good-looking lad with a smooth blue jaw — Johnny Hays, who had come up to me just after I had put Trina into her cab — Johnny Hays, talking through stiff lips:

"You just beg for trouble, don't you, Mr. Chambers?"

"Like how, little man?"

"Like making with the pitch for this Trina Greco."

"That have any effect on you, little man?"

"It figures to have an effect on you, big man."

"Like how?"

"Like Nick Darrow."

"Darrow, huh?"

"Friendly warning, big man. When Nick don't like, Nick cuts you down to size. Then you're a little man, very little, and very dead. So smarten up. There's a million dames. Skip this one."

I forgot about Johnny Hays, thinking of the expression on Trina's face, of her dark eyes, of that secret little smile, and, as I clicked the flashlight, the pleasant little shiver went through me again — but then the shiver remained and all the pleasantness went out of it.

A quiet voice said, "Put that light out."

I put the light out. I was back in the graveyard working at my trade. I stood still and I said nothing. I saw nobody.

The quiet voice said, "You Peter Chambers?"

"I ain't J. J. J. Tompkins."

"Never mind the jokes. Turn around, and stay turned around."

"Yes, sir." I turned and stayed turned.

"Now reach your arm back and hand me that package."

"You're a little premature, pal."

"What?"

"You're supposed to give me the word, pal. This is a real eccentric bit, but my client is a real eccentric lady, and she's rich enough to afford her eccentricities. You're supposed to say a name. So, say it."

"Abner Reed."

"That's the jackpot answer. Reach, and grab your prize."

There were soft footsteps, then somebody reached, and somebody grabbed.

"Very good," somebody said. "Now stay the way you are. Stay like that for the next five minutes."

But I didn't "stay the way you are" for the next five minutes. Fast count, I'd say there were two reasons for that. First, five minutes in a graveyard, in the middle of the night, after your business is finished, is like, say, five *years* on the French Riviera. And second, I'm blessed, or is it cursed, with a large lump of

curiosity. I turned, and I didn't turn a second too soon, because I ran right smack up against Trina's "precise moment." Somewhere through the faint fog there was enough light to put a glint on metal — and I dropped — as five shots poured over me, and then . . . nothing.

Running feet . . . and nothing.

I got up, but I didn't even try going after him. The guy was gone. Go search for a needle in a haystack. *You* go — but at least you've got a chance. The needle is inanimate, and it *is* in the haystack. But searching for a gunman in a graveyard . . . no, sir. I'll take the needle-in-the-haystack deal.

Anyway, I brushed at my clothes, and I got out of there, and I was damn glad to *get* out of there. My car was parked about a quarter of a mile down, and when I slammed the door behind me and pushed down the buttons, I permitted myself the luxury of a couple of real deep-down shudders, and then I turned over the motor and went away from there, fast. When the clustered lights of civilization finally rose up before me, I visited the most civilized place I could think of — a bar — where I had three quick constituents of resuscitation and a slow chaser. Then I went back to the car and my progress to Manhattan was less precipitate and more thoughtful.

2.

Names ran through my mind like tape running through a clinking cash

register. Trina Greco, Johnny Hays, Nick Darrow, Florence Fleetwood Reed. I gave the first three a quick-think, so I'd have time to concentrate on the last, and then, perhaps, hash them all up together. I was relaxed now, and moving without hurry. I was heading for the Reed mansion at Gramercy Park, and it figured for about an hour.

Trina Greco. A dish for a king, and I make no pretense at royalty. I had seen her once, about six months back, dancing at the Copa (and had admired her from afar), but I'd met her at a party about two weeks ago (admiring her from very near), and had commenced a small but concentrated campaign. She had quit the night-club job (which was bread and butter) and was rehearsing now with a ballet company, for which she had been trained most of her life. I knew very little about her, but was eagerly trying to learn much more.

Johnny Hays. A good-looking kid who had been inoculated by slick-type movie heavies in his early youth. A no-brains young man who would wind up, one day, neatly dressed, but grotesquely sprawled in a gutter with a generous portion of his intestines splattered beside him. Meanwhile, he was a killer-diller with the ladies, and drew his pay within one of the varied echelons which went to make up the intricate empire of Nick Darrow.

Nick Darrow, very much more important. Brains, cunning and the conscience of a crawling lobster. Neat,

young enough, and at the height of his ambition. Politically well-connected, reasonably cautious, and one of the top ten narcotics outlets in the United States. Owner of the *Club Trippa*, on Madison Avenue.

Florence Fleetwood Reed, completely removed from any of the others. Until late this past afternoon, unknown to me, except through legend. Café society, real society, and snob-rich to the tune of a hundred million dollars inherited from a five-and-dime pappy who had passed away leaving little Florence as his sole and avaricious beneficiary. Reputed to be inordinately shrewd in business, stuffily stingy, and weirdly eccentric. Young, beautiful, headstrong, imperious, commanding. Married once, a long time ago, to a movie actor, divorced, and recently, about six months ago, re-married.

Late in the afternoon, I'd had a call at the office . . . from Florence Fleetwood Reed. I'd been summoned to her home, and I had answered the summons. I had met her alone, at her Gramercy Park home, a firm-hipped blonde with a lot of control and hard grey eyes within an almost imperceptible network of crepe-like wrinkles. I had been informed that I had been selected as a final cog in a peculiar business transaction. I was told that I was not to ask questions, was to return at eleven o'clock, was to pick up a package, was to go to a cemetery on Long Island, find a tombstone marked *J. J. J. Tompkins*, wait until somebody came there who

asked for me by name, and then mentioned the name Abner Reed. I was then to turn the package over to him, and return to Gramercy Park and collect my fee. Said fee, one thousand dollars. Time of appointment at said J. J. J. Tompkins' resting place, twelve-thirty, and wait if the caller is late.

In case you haven't heard, I'm a private detective, which is synonymous with anything confidential, including cockeyed-type messenger boy (if the fee is large enough). In my business, if the client is right, you ask no questions, you give not whit nor wisdom (unless requested); you take it, leave it and forget about it unless an acute or wildly unforeseeable incident occurs.

Gunplay in a graveyard, when your client is the esteemed Florence Fleetwood Reed, is both acute and wildly unforeseeable.

Was the gunplay, then, connected with your client, or was it mixed up with Trina, Hays and Darrow? True enough, it was a vastly populated cemetery, but just as truly you were the only one present upon whom bullets could have even the slightest effect, so, as you turned into the driveway of the Reed home, you were grimly determined to breach the canons of your profession and fling questions until a couple of appropriate answers bounced back.

3.

A sleepy-eyed maid ushered me into the downstairs living room and

vanished. Uncomfortably, I waited alone, and then a door opened and Florence Fleetwood Reed strode in. And, striding behind her, in measured steps, like a couple of pallbearers — a tall silver-haired man and a tall silver-haired woman.

"All right, Mr. Chambers?"

"Yes, Mrs. Reed."

"You made your delivery?"

"Yes, Mrs. Reed."

She had blue eyes and blonde hair and a patrician nose with easily quivering nostrils. She was in her young thirties, thin-lipped and severe, but plenty good-looking, with a firm full figure, ramrod-straight, but a little bulgy in spots if you're inclined to be critical. She flung a hand over a shoulder and introduced me to the pallbearers. "My uncle and my aunt. Mr. Harry Fleetwood and Mrs. Ethel Fleetwood."

The man smiled and said, "Uncle Harry."

The lady smiled and said, "Aunt Ethel."

I smiled and said, "How do you do?"

The guy was about sixty, hawk-nosed and yellow-toothed, with a deep gruff voice slightly British in accent. The lady had a round smooth face and a porcelain smile and more flirtatious sparkle to her eyes than double the girls half her age.

Mrs. Reed snapped her fingers at Uncle Harry and Uncle Harry drew an envelope from his jacket pocket.

"Uh, excuse me," Mrs. Reed said. "That was a one-sided introduction.

This is Mr. Chambers, Peter Chambers, and that envelope, Uncle Harry, is for him."

Uncle Harry came to me, bowed somewhat, and handed it to me.

Mrs. Reed said, "As per agreement. One thousand dollars."

I took it and I said, "Thank you, ma'am," and then I said, "For what?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What's this all about, Mrs. Reed?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Look, lady, after I completed your cockeyed business transaction, somebody took a couple of pot-shots at me. Could be part of your business, or could be some business of my own. Before I go to the cops with it . . . I'm asking."

"Cops?" Uncle Harry brought bushy eyebrows down over the hawk-nose.

"No," Mrs. Reed said. "No." The nostrils quivered and for the first time the eyes betrayed agitation.

Right then I knew I was in on a deal and some of the flop-sweat shook off me. High society or low-society, thousand-dollar fee or more, mansion on Gramercy Park and a lady reputed to be worth a hundred million bucks . . . suddenly I shook it all off and I was treading on familiar ground. Because something around here stank. Out loud.

"The bullets," I said. "Were they part of your business?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Then what's all the objection to my going to the cops?"

"Well, because . . ." She turned and looked at her uncle and aunt.

Aunt Ethel continued to smile pleasantly, but Uncle Harry pursed his lips, coughed, grunted, hoisted the eyebrows, then said, "I think you ought to tell him, Florence. Since he was selected for so delicate a mission, he *must* be a man of character."

"Tell me what?"

Aunt Ethel said, "Why you shouldn't, young man, at this particular time, take your troubles to the police."

"My troubles," I said, "seem to be your troubles." I looked at Mrs. Reed. "Then the bullets were your business, weren't they?"

"No. I'm certain they weren't. There wouldn't be any purpose . . ."

"Look. What the hell is . . . ? Pardon me."

"Time," Aunt Ethel said, "for a drink. Brandy for me. What will it be, please? I'm serving."

Nothing for Florence Fleetwood Reed and nothing for Peter Chambers but Aunt Ethel and Uncle Harry buried their noses unto the bouquet of over-sized snifter-glasses into which Aunt Ethel had poured as though she were a bartender who hated the boss.

Florence Reed said, "Have you any idea, Mr. Chambers, what was in that package?"

"Goulash," I said. "For ghosts."

Very funny. Mrs. Reed looked blank, not even contemptuous. Uncle

Harry gazed at me sadly over his brandy. But Aunt Ethel winked slyly and smiled. There was plenty of life in that old dame, too much life for Uncle Harry, no question about that.

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars," Mrs. Reed said.

It went by me the first time. Mildly I said, "Pardon?"

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"What?"

"Three quarters of a million." Uncle Harry wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "In thousand dollar bills."

I came back to Mrs. Reed. I said, "Look. You've got a reputation for being, well . . . two things . . . stingy and eccentric. Stingy, that's none of my business. Eccentric, that fits in with this. You're also supposed to have a lot of good practical horse-sense. So, business transactions in the middle of the night, even in a graveyard, nobody'd put it past you, nobody'd think twice about it, you're supposed to have pulled a couple of real wing-dings in your time, but —"

"That wasn't exactly a business transaction, Mr. Chambers?"

"What then —"

"It was a delivery of ransom money."

"*What?* What the hell is going on around here? You mean to tell me that I'm involved in some kind of cockeyed kidnapping?"

Aunt Ethel didn't stop smiling.

"That's what she means to tell you, young man."

"Not exactly involved," Mrs. Reed said. "You were an instrument of delivery. An instrument, period."

"Instrument, huh? The police know about this?"

"No, they don't."

"Don't, huh?" Sarcasm blurred my voice. "Expect to inform them?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

I headed for the brandy bottle. I poured and I drank brandy like it was a chaser for bourbon. Then I smacked down the glass, turned, said, "Look. What happened here? Let's have it, huh? Let's stop with this casual deal. Let's have the story."

Florence Reed went to a divan, sat wearily, lowered her head and touched fingers to her temples. "Last night. It seems a year ago. Last night, he went out, my husband, he went out for a newspaper."

"What time?"

"About ten o'clock. He . . . didn't return. It's happened before. He'd step into a tavern, become involved in a discussion, or just drink in the company of others. Anyway, I went up to bed, fell asleep, and when I awoke, suddenly . . . it was two o'clock, two in the morning. He wasn't back yet and I became . . . apprehensive. Just then, the downstairs bell rang. I thought it was he . . . that he had left his keys. I slipped into a dressing gown

quickly, I hoped the servants hadn't awakened . . . and I opened the door myself. It was Uncle Harry."

"I think," Uncle Harry said, "I ought to take over at this point."

I said, "Okay with me."

"Well, sir, I live nearby, on lower Fifth Avenue. At about one-thirty last night, I received a phone call. It was from Abner . . . my niece's husband, Abner Reed. His voice sounded somewhat muffled, and for a moment, if you'll forgive me, I had an idea that he was inebriated. But that idea was quickly dispelled. He informed me that he was talking to me with a gun pointed at his head. He told me that he'd been slugged, rendered unconscious, and kidnapped. Naturally, I was frightfully perturbed."

"Naturally."

"He said that he didn't know where he was, that he was blindfolded, that this phone call had been made for him, and then he was put on, and that he was merely repeating what he'd been told to say."

"And what was that?"

"That I was to come here and inform Florence, and that there would be another call, here, in the morning. And, that if the police were notified, he'd be killed. Then there was a click, and the wire was dead."

"Then?"

"I came here — I told my wife to follow in half an hour, which she did — and the three of us sat up until morning. At eight o'clock in the morning, the second call came."

"Abner again?"

Mrs. Reed said, "Yes."

"You sure it was he?"

"No question. He sounded tired and . . . and beaten . . . physically beaten . . . but it was he. Anyway, to make a long story short, the arrangements were made, and . . . you must have quite a reputation, Mr. Chambers . . . because your name was given to him to give to me as . . . I believe the word is intermediary. You know the rest."

"That all?"

She stood up. She tried to control it, but I saw she was trembling. Uncle Harry put his glass away and went near her, holding her lightly at the elbow. She sighed, said, "It was promised that he'd be returned to us during this night."

I shook my head and softly I said, "Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"I . . . I'm regarded as, well, a rather frugal person." Tears brimmed over and spoiled her face, but it didn't break up, there was no grimace, the face remained haughty and expressionless. "But . . . this is different. I love my husband. We've only been married six months . . ."

Uncle Harry said, "I think you ought to go upstairs now."

I said, "But you *are* going to notify the cops about this, aren't you?"

"Yes." She leaned heavily on Uncle Harry. "Tomorrow morning. Whether he's returned to me or not. I've got to give it a chance . . .

and then I'll go to the police, either way." She shivered once, violently. "I was warned . . . we were being watched . . . that even the phones were tapped . . . that if we went to the police . . . they'd . . . kill him."

"I understand, Mrs. Reed. I'll keep my nose clean. It's your affair, entirely. Now, easy does it, ma'am."

Uncle Harry led her toward the door. He said, "Ethel, you'll show Mr. Chambers out," and then they were gone.

Aunt Ethel came to me, still smiling and smelling of brandy. Aunt Ethel's silver hair was deceptive. Aunt Ethel was no youngster but she wasn't senile. Aunt Ethel was a beautiful woman, mature but not aged. Aunt Ethel wore a blue dress which matched her eyes. Aunt Ethel's blue dress was cut deep in front and a good deal of firm cream-skinned bosom was exposed. She took me out to the small dim vestibule. Aunt Ethel wasn't smiling now and her lips were full and red and glistening. Aunt Ethel said, "I'm drunk."

"So?"

"So . . . this."

She slid her arms under my arms and hooked her hands over my shoulders. She drew me close and opened her mouth on mine. Oh, Aunt Ethel. She smelled of brandy but she smelled too of a vague and attractive perfume. She moved her mouth away and I made one last small attempt at trying to keep the

track clear. I said, "You people could have gone to the cops. There are ways. Who advised her?"

At my ear she said, "Nobody advises Florence. She supports us, just as she supports her husband, not too liberal with any of us, so . . . nobody advises Florence . . . except Florence. You're sweet." The hands on my shoulders tightened and her warm body was close. "I'm drunk, but I've wanted to do this from the moment I came into that room. Drunk. Anyway, it's an excuse."

Then her mouth came back to mine.

4.

It was late, but I tried the *Club Trippa* anyway. There was a bar in front and a cocktail lounge in the rear. It was done in maroon and silver and had a glow that was warmer than a bachelor-girl on vacation. The bar was crowded three deep and the inside room was jumping. The bartender winked and waved and said, "Hi."

"Nick around? Or Johnny Hays?"

"Don't know myself, Mr. Chambers. Try upstairs."

Upstairs, up a maroon-carpeted flight of stairs, was the floor show, the band, the dance floor, and the heavy spenders. Upstairs, too, were a couple of choice back rooms, one of which was Nick Darrow's office, if a studio fitted out like a sultan's reception room can be termed "office." The merry-makers were engaged in watching a stripper called Bonnie

Laurie so I strolled along the periphery of dimness and opened the office door without knocking.

Nick Darrow wasn't there.

But Johnny Hays was.

He unfurled off a couch, black-eyed and contemptuous, and lounged toward me.

"Still looking for trouble, my dear shamus?"

"Where's Nickie?"

"None of your business. Any message?"

"Yes."

"I'll take it."

I gave it to him. High, hard and handsome with a lot of shoulder behind it. It splattered blood from his mouth and sat him down with his toes pointed at the ceiling. I didn't wait for him to get up. I went downstairs and had a Scotch highball and my palms were wet with expectancy. But nothing happened. Johnny Hays didn't show, nor did Nickie Darrow. Johnny was still sitting there, or he didn't want to come down, or he'd gone down the back exit and was out front waiting. I paid and went out. Nobody was there. I walked along a couple of quiet streets but nobody sprang at me. So I gave it up and went back to the lights. I had ham and eggs in a cafeteria, with coffee, ketchup, and well-buttered English muffins. Then I went home.

I showered, dried down, slipped into a pair of shorts. I bought myself a Scotch and chased it with more Scotch and I was ready to wrap this

day up and put it to bed. I thought about Florence Reed and felt a little sorry for her, as sorry as you can feel for a dame with a hundred million bucks, and then I thought about Aunt Ethel and I got a belt out of that. So . . . my door-buzzer buzzed.

In the middle of the night, the door-buzzer buzzes.

Each to his own. Poets sleep in the daytime. Tramps work at night. Charwomen come home at dawn. Editors read in bed. Actors awake at the crack of noon. Atom experts ponder through the night. Doctors are always on call. And a private richard . . . there is no reason why business should not be buzzing the door-buzzer in the dead of night. Private richard. He has about as much privacy as a parakeet in a kindergarten.

I opened the door to darkness. Somebody'd switched off the corridor lights. When lights are out that should be on, you drop, you learn that early when you're in my business. But I didn't drop in time. Blazes of light punctuated the blackness, and when I dropped, it wasn't because I wanted to drop, it was because I was knocked down by the force of the bullets. I heard the pound of feet in the corridor, but right then I wasn't interested. I felt blood on my naked body, and I heard the labor of my breathing. My one interest was reaching the phone. I tried to get up, but I couldn't make it. So I crawled, and I

lifted the receiver, and dialed o, and heard my whisper: "Operator . . . hospital . . . hospital . . . emergency . . ."

5-

I was under sedatives for a day, while they probed for bullets, and then I was sitting up in the hospital bed, ready to go, but they told me five days, five days before they'd let me out of there, and then I got a caller, amiable but worried-looking, Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, Homicide, good cop and good friend.

"Hi, Detective," he said. "I hear you're coming around real good."

"Hi, Lieutenant. What brings you?"

"Well, when a friend is sick . . ."

"What else brings you?"

"That Abner Reed shindig. I hear tell you were an innocent bystander . . . in a cemetery. You well enough to chat?"

"I'm well enough to get the hell out of here. Did they return that bird?"

"Yah." He sighed and sat down. Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, squat, thick, ruddy and black-haired, stump of an unlit cigar in his mouth. "And none the worse for his experience. Got hit in the throat a couple of times, a little damage to the wind-pipe. Had to do the questions and answers by writing, but it's a condition that figures to clear up quick enough."

"Has it broken in the newspapers?"

"Nope. Not a word. We're trying to work it through before it gets any publicity. Now, let's hear your story."

I gave him the story without frill or furbelow. When I was finished he said, "Any ideas?"

"About what?"

"About what makes you a shooting-gallery target?"

"Yeah, I've got a couple of ideas, but I'd rather not talk about them."

"Why not?"

"Because they're personal, and I'd like to give them some personal attention, as soon as they let me out of here."

"Okay, Peter Pan, if that's the way you want it." The cigar rolled around in his mouth and stopped. "What about the snatch? Want to discuss that?"

"Love to."

"Any ideas on that?"

"Not a one. You, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing."

"That's a good basis for discussion. Okay, what have you got on it?"

"Nothing more than you have. The guy showed up at his house about seven o'clock yesterday morning, period. Tired, a little banged up, and his throat on the blink. Had a doctor in, who couldn't find anything really wrong. Cold compresses and rest, that's the treatment."

"Get his story?"

"Got it the best possible way. Complete statement in writing, then questions and answers in writing. Sum total . . . nothing."

"Well, let's hear, anyway."

"Went out of his house for a paper. Got jumped in the dark and figured it for a mugging. But then he was slugged, and when he came to, he was in a car, bound and gagged and under a blanket. Also blindfolded. There was a stop, where he was put on the phone to that Uncle Harry; then he was riding again. Then there was another stop, where they roughed him up a little; then the call in the morning to the wife for the ransom dough, where you were suggested as go-between, and he transmitted that suggestion to the wife. You know what happened in between. Then, yesterday morning, about six o'clock, he had another car ride. He was dropped out near the bridge on First Avenue and a Hundred and Twenty-fifth, and the car roared off. He wandered around a little dazed until he got a cab, and went home. That's his story, sum and total."

"License plate of the car?"

"Couldn't get it. It was still dark, and they had their lights out. Nice, huh? A lot to work on."

"Yeah."

Silence. Of the heavy type. The kind of silence you can only get in a hospital room. Then he said, "Can I smoke?"

"Sure you can smoke."

He lit up. "Well . . . ?"

"What about the background of the guy himself? Abner Reed. What kind of a guy?"

"Nice enough young fella. Tall,

rangy, young, good-looking. Used to be a dancing instructor. That's how he met the lady with the bucks. She came for lessons and she fell for the teacher."

"How they get along?"

"Swell, from what they tell me."

"How long married?"

"Going on seven months."

"She been liberal with him?"

"Liberal as can be expected. Rich, but plenty tightwad, that one."

"What about his background?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, he's only married six-seven months. If it was hard guys he was playing around with before that, they'd know just what a set-up he was for a snatch. Maybe he even blabbed *after* he was married."

"Maybe. We've checked the background, of course. Usual thing for a good-looking kid alone in New York. Ran around a lot. Night club stuff and things. Handsome kid, picked the best-lookers in gals. Nothing special in hard guy friends."

"Nice selection of zeroes we're coming up with, aren't we, Lieutenant? What about that aunt and uncle?"

"Harry Fleetwood was the brother of Florence's father, pappy with all the bucks. Pappy supported him and Aunt Ethel. When Pappy died, he left his all to lady Florence. Florence continued the support, but was somewhat more firm on the purse-strings. You met that Aunt Ethel, huh?"

"Yes."

"Something, eh?"

"Quite."

"Twenty years younger than Uncle Harry, and Harry's fifty-nine."

"She looks older."

"It's the white hair, which she *dyes* that color. Now that's a switch, isn't it? I've heard them go from grey to blonde, but that one's a natural blonde who goes to grey. Quite a dame, Aunt Ethel. Used to be married to a British peer. Gave that up because she thought Harry had the kind of dough the Fleetwood name conjured up. Wound up being a ward of Pappy's. Nice."

I lay back and I said, "Yeah." Then I said, "I'm in it, Louie."

"So?"

"Mind if I stay in it?"

"Real polite. As if I could keep you out." He stood up. "But, at least you remember what too many private eyes forget."

Sweetly I said, "And what's that, Lieutenant?"

"That it's not a solo performance. That we work together."

"Sho nuf, Lieutenant."

"Real spry, for a guy that recently harbored bullets."

"Spry enough to ask a favor."

"Shoot."

"There's a girl by name Trina Greco —"

"Isn't there always?"

"Lives on Christopher Street."

"So?"

"Would you get in touch with her — don't scare her — just get in touch. Tell her where I am, and that I'd like a visitor. Okay?"

"Okay, pal. You'll get your visitor."

I got her the next afternoon, Trina Greco, tall in a green suit shaped to her figure, black hair a shining Italian whirl on her head, black eyes enormous and a little frightened.

"Easy does it," I told her. "A little virus. I'll be out in a few days."

"Reluctant hero."

"There she goes again, my Greek philosopher."

"It's not virus. It's bullets. I inquired, and I was told. Something I can do, Peter?"

"Lots of things you can do, Trina. But for now, just sit down, cross those lovely legs, and prattle. Make with the small talk."

She told me about the ballet rehearsals, she told me about how much she liked me, she told me about the fact that she was in the process of moving to a new apartment and how excited she was about that. I lay back and I looked at her and you could tell that I was sick, because it was soothing. Once I asked her to kiss me, which she did, lightly, and next thing I knew, I was asleep. When I woke up, she was gone.

6.

Anger and well-being seem to run hand in hand, and as your health improves, so your anger mounts. By the time I was out of the hospital, I was as tense as a piano-wire and fit to bust wide open. First visit was to the Reed mansion where the

maid informed me that Mr. and Mrs. Reed weren't home, they were downtown, passports, something like that. I asked her for Uncle Harry's address and she gave it to me.

Uncle Harry lived in an apartment house on Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street and Uncle Harry was wearing a monocle this trip: purple lounging pajamas, purple slippers, purple dressing gown, and a monocle. His greeting was cool. I asked about developments and he said there were none. Then he said, "Anything else?" And he said it curtly.

"How's Mrs. Reed?"

"She's fine."

"How's she taking the loss of all that dough?"

"She hopes it will be recovered. If it isn't —" he shrugged — "then she writes it down as a loss and it's over. She has had losses before."

"And how's Aunt Ethel?"

"Very well. Now . . . is there anything else?"

"Don't you like me, Uncle Harry?"

"I neither like you nor dislike you, Mr. Chambers. You are, I trust, a fine young man. But your calling on me is, in essence, an intrusion. We are not friends, and we have nothing in common. You were hired for a purpose, and you served your purpose. Now . . . is there anything else?"

"Nothing else."

"Then good afternoon, Mr. Chambers."

I went back to the office and sat on my hands. I was wearing a gun now, and turning to look behind me wherever I went. I sat on my hands and waited for a call, but no call came. It burnt me, but there was nothing I could do about it. I'd put in a couple of phone calls to Nickie Darrow but Nickie-boy didn't seem to think I was important enough to call back. I got off my hands and attended to routine but routine was duller than a one-horse race, so I kissed it off. Finally, at six o'clock, I was back at the Reed place on Gramercy Park and this time the maid showed me in. The living room was dimly lit by a couple of lamps and first thing Florence Reed did was raise a finger to her lips; then she pointed. I followed the point to a long lean lad snoozing softly on a couch.

"Abner?" I whispered.

She said, "Yes."

She crooked the finger and I followed her into a smaller room.

"He's napping," she said.

"How is he?"

"Very well."

"How's his throat?"

"Coming along fine. Now, is it anything special, Mr. Chambers? Maid tells me you were here earlier in the afternoon."

"No. Nothing special."

Her thin lips grew thinner. "Uncle tells me that you called on him too. I don't quite understand, Mr. Chambers. Is it something about your fee?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

In a sense, she had me there. I said, "I was just wondering if I could be of any help . . ."

"Help? Oh. Perhaps you don't know. We've been to the police, just as I told you that night. He was returned to us in the morning, and within an hour we were in touch with the police. They say they're working on it, and we're doing our utmost to co-operate. There's just no help needed."

Once more she had me. I said, "I thought perhaps I could be of some assistance."

"None whatever, Mr. Chambers. The matter is in the hands of the proper authorities. I do wish to thank you for not going to the police with your private troubles that night, and if you feel there should be some added recompense for that . . ."

"No ma'am. No added recompense."

Then I was out of there and I knew I wasn't coming back. And I knew if I did come back I'd be thrown the hell out of there. And I knew that even that would be right because I had no business coming back there. So I had dinner in a quiet restaurant and I longed for Trina Greco but I wouldn't call her because I was a target for somebody and there was no sense pulling her in as innocent bystander. I called Nickie Darrow again but he wasn't in. I asked for Johnny Hays but he

wasn't in either. A good deal of hate was being dammed up inside of me and it had no outlet. I went down to Parker and chewed the fat. He didn't have a thing on the Reed snatch, and it was growing stale. It's a big city and there are a lot of crimes and they overlap and Parker was a busy man. So, since it was nighttime, I got on my broom and made for the *Club Trippa*.

I was hardly past the door when I realized I was *persona non grata*. The word was in. The bartender's glare was colder than frigidity in an igloo, and almost at once a bouncer with heft bellied up to me.

Softly he said, "Out."

Petie-boy was innocent-eyed. "But why, sweetie?"

"Because them's orders. And don't call me sweetie."

"You're big, but I got a hunch I can take you."

"Try."

"I would if it made sense, but after I get past you, there'd be too many others."

"Smart. But you wouldn't get past me."

"That's one man's opinion. Can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Who gave the orders?"

"Johnny Hays."

"That little prig?"

"Yeah, that little prig."

"Nickie know about these orders?"

"Look, pal, I only work here. Johnny's one of my bosses. I don't ask my boss no questions. You going

out nice and quiet? It's better for business if you go out nice and quiet. But just between you and me, I wish you wouldn't, because I'd love to shove a fist through you. You're one of them dressed-up wise guys that thinks he's a muscle. Get a little fresh, pal. I would love it."

It didn't make sense, but it's the same old story. Business is business, and in my business, you've got to keep them respecting you or you lose face. I lifted my knee, and his face hung out, and he caught a tennis-racket right, and then a straight left to the point of the chin. It was neat and it was quick and before the commotion even started I was out in the night.

And thereafter I was out many nights, night after night, milking the underworld, trying to coax a tip on the Reed snatch, but it was locked up tight, and nothing wanted to happen. I kept making calls to Nickie Darrow but no call came back to me. I didn't see Trina, I didn't see Johnny, I didn't see Nickie, I didn't see Florence, I didn't see Abner, I didn't see Aunt Ethel, and I didn't see Uncle Harry. I saw Parker, and between the two of us we had accumulated a great big bunch of nothing. The holster I was wearing was growing heavy, and the flesh beneath it was growing red, yet . . . nothing. And then, late one sunny afternoon, I was sitting in the office thinking about my next move, when the next move was made for me. The phone rang and

the husky female voice said, "Mr. Chambers?"

"This is Chambers."

"Good." She spoke quickly. "My name is Sandra Mantell. I live at Fifty-two West Forty-ninth, Apartment Two, downstairs."

"Yes, Miss Mantell?"

"I want to talk to you. Personally."

"I'm a little busy, Miss Mantell."

It wasn't true, but you always say that to a new client. It helps with the fee.

"It's important, Mr. Chambers."

The voice dropped a note. "It's about a kidnapping."

Crinkles commenced on my scalp. "Pardon?" I said.

"The kidnapping of Abner Reed."

I sat bolt upright. "What? What's that?"

"Listen, please. I . . . I'm involved in it. It was my idea, really. I dreamed it up. I was supposed to get a third. One third." The voice got harsh now. "But . . . I'm not getting it. So . . . I want to talk. Understand? I want to talk."

"Yes," I prompted. "Yes, Miss Mantell."

"Look. I want you to make a deal for me. If I spill . . . I want to be able to cop a plea. If I give them the evidence, worst I want is a suspended sentence."

Now I tried the crafty approach. "Why you calling me, Miss Mantell?"

"Because I know you're mixed up in it. Because I want you to feel out

the cops for me. You tell them I'll spill if they guarantee me a plea. I'm ready to talk, Mr. Chambers. Nobody is going to cross me and get away with it . . . oh! . . ."

The raps over the wire were gunshots.

Could have been backfire, could have been explosions, could have been firecrackers — but they weren't — none of that — not with the quick cry from her, and then the sigh, and then the thud of the receiver to the floor. The connection was open but I broke it. I hung up and I ran. Fifty-two West Forty-ninth was near enough to my office and I ran most of the way . . . and then I was there . . . in the presence of death . . . Apartment Two . . . a blonde on the floor with blood on her face . . . and standing above her . . . a sobbing brunette . . . and that one I knew.

Her name was Trina Greco.

"What the hell?" I said. "What's going on here?"

Sobs.

"Trina!"

"Yes?"

"You didn't kill her?"

"No."

I closed the door and I prowled. The receiver was still off the hook, a discordant insistent buzz pouring through it. The blonde was in a sheer housecoat, a tall blonde with a fine figure, shot through the head. A revolver lay near her. I came back to Trina and shook her. I said, "Did you kill her?"

"No."

"Did you call the cops?"

"No."

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here."

"Look. Talk it up. Talk it up fast. We've got to report this. Now come on. Let's have it."

She was trying to pull herself together, but she wasn't too successful. "Let me tell you," she gasped. "Let me tell you what happened . . ."

But then the sobs came again.

I said, "I'll ask questions, and you try to answer them. And get hold of yourself, will you please?"

"Yes. Yes."

"You say you live here. Is this the new apartment you moved to?"

"Yes."

"And this girl. She Sandra Mantell?"

"Yes."

"She live here too?"

"Yes. My room-mate."

"You know her well?"

"I met her a couple of months ago. I was introduced to her."

"By whom?"

"A man. Johnny Hays."

"Johnny Hays, huh? That guy mean anything to you?"

"Nothing. An acquaintance. I went out with him a few times."

"And this Sandra Mantell. Was she a friend of his too?"

"No. She was a friend of a friend of his. Nick Darrow."

"How well do you know this Nick Darrow?"

"I don't know him at all."

"You mean you just met a girl, and you became room-mates?"

"No. She lived in Jersey. She was a dancer, working in Union City."

"Doing what?"

"A burlesque turn. But she was a trained ballet dancer. We were short a girl for our show, and I brought her in, and she qualified. We became better acquainted, and she suggested taking this apartment."

"How'd you get along?"

"I didn't like her. She was tough, hard, unpleasant. I told her I was going to move out after the first month, for which my rent was paid."

"How'd she take that?"

"She said she didn't care. She said if things worked out for her, she'd be living in a penthouse, and very soon."

"Yet she attended rehearsals as a ballet dancer?"

"Attended them faithfully. She wanted that, terribly. I think she was trying to prove something to herself. She made much more money in burlesque. She did a specialty."

I went away from her and looked over the apartment. It was clean, neat and nicely furnished. When I came back, I said, "Okay. I think you're in shape now. I want to know what happened here, and I want it coherent."

She wiped her palms with a handkerchief and laid it away. She said, "We'd both been at rehearsal. She said she had a date, and a very important one, a business date."

"Did she say where?"

"At a restaurant. She didn't tell me which restaurant. She said she was going to talk business. She said she was going to give somebody a last chance to make her rich. That's what she said."

"Where'd you go?"

"I went to a movie."

"Then?"

"I came home. As I entered the hallway, I heard the shots. Our door opened and a man came running out. We collided, and that's when the gun dropped to the floor."

"What gun?"

"The gun right there." She pointed at it, on the floor.

"Wait a minute," I said. "If you and the guy collided in the hall, what's the gun doing here?"

"Well, when I looked in here, and I saw her, like that, I went to her, saw she was dead. Then I went back into the hall for the gun. I remembered about not touching things . . . fingerprints. I kicked it . . . with my foot . . . kicked it along until I worked it into the apartment."

"Good enough. Now, what did the guy look like?"

"I don't know."

"Honey, you just told me you collided with him, out there in the hallway. You must have seen what he looked like."

"No. Remember I was coming in from a sunny street into a dim hallway. And he was running. And we collided. And then he ran out. I just have no idea what he looked like."

"Okay," I said. "That's it. Now we go call cops."

"Can't we call from here?"

"I don't want to touch that receiver. You're supposed to leave things as close to what they were as is possible. Sometimes it helps. Come on."

On the way to a phone booth, I asked her for a favor. I asked her to tell her story exactly as she told it to me, but to leave out one thing. Nickie Darrow. Not to mention him. That's all. Nothing else. Just omit Nickie Darrow.

"Why?" she said.

"It's a personal thing, my little Greek philosopher. I've been trying to get through to him, and this gives me a wedge. Don't worry. You won't be breaking any law, and if there's any trouble, I'll take full responsibility."

She was hesitant but she was cooperative. "All right, if you say so, Peter."

"I say so."

I called down to Headquarters and then we went back to the apartment and pretty soon there were cops, lots of cops, tons of cops, and they were in the charge of Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, and Parker was in a gruff mood. "Never fails, does it? How come whenever there's a corpse . . . there's you?"

"It's mixed up with the other thing, Lieutenant?"

"What other thing?"

"The Abner Reed snatch."

"You kiddin'?"

You straighten him out on current events, from the phone call in your office from Sandra Mantell to right now (omitting friend Darrow) and now his mood is ameliorated and he's on your side again. "Go home, Pete. Go home and stay home."

"Why?"

"Because you're a good kid."

"That's why you want me to go home?"

"Listen. For once will you listen? There's nothing you can do here, and there may be a lot I can do. But I'll come up and see you, Pete, as soon as I can get loose from all of this. You've played ball with me — I'll play ball with you. I'll come up and see you and we'll kick it around some more. Okay?"

"About Trina Greco, Lieutenant."

"Yes?"

"She's a friend of mine."

"So?"

"Treat her nice."

"Okay. She's a friend of yours. I'll treat her nice. Now, will you please go home?"

7.

So you go home. You're a good little boy and you've listened to Papa. You sit around like an old lady with lumbago . . . but you sit. You do some home cooking, and some home eating, and some home drinking . . . but you sit. You get sick and tired of sitting . . . but you sit. Day melts into night, and

night is getting wearisome, and you're still sitting. Finally, at twelve-thirty in the morning, Parker shows up, perspired and tired-looking.

"Hi," he said. "How you doing?"

"Been sitting. Been sitting real good. How *you* doing?"

"Pretty bad."

I went to the liquor cabinet. "A bit of the potables, Lieutenant?"

"Thanks. I can use a drink."

He used a couple.

I said, "Let's get down to cases, Lieutenant."

"That's my boy. Always in there pitching."

"Cases, Lieutenant."

"Well, sir, that gun on the floor was the murder gun. And we were able to garner a gorgeous set of fingerprints off it. Only prints on it, as a matter of fact. Gun's an old one. Couldn't do any tracing from the serial number. Dead end on that phase."

"How much luck do you want, pal? Gorgeous fingerprints, you said."

"There's a catch."

"As my Greek philosopher would say — isn't there always?"

"Who's your Greek philosopher?"

"Skip it. Where's the catch?"

"Gorgeous set of prints, but they match nothing we've got on file. And don't match anything out of Washington either. Where's that leave us?"

"Way out in left field on a rainy day, and there is no ball game."

"Very aptly put, me lad. I'll have another drink."

I served him another drink. I said, "You check her friends?"

"I've got forty men working on this. We've checked everybody that's ever had the remotest connection with her. No prints fit the prints on that gun."

"You couldn't know *everybody* . . . that had the *remotest* connection."

"We're only human, pal. We've run down every single possible lead, and we're no place. We've got fingerprints, but they match nothing. Stinks pretty good, eh, pal?"

My conscience reared up on its hind legs and pawed at me. Nickie Darrow was a careful guy and he rarely left traces of his friendships. Casually I said, "You guys got Nickie Darrow's prints on file?"

"Nickie Darrow? He got any connection with this?"

"I'm not saying he has, Lieutenant. Let's say I got a personal hate for the guy, and I'm trying to implicate him. All I'm asking — have you got his prints on file?"

"You bet we have."

"Then routine would have put him on the spot if the prints on the gun were his."

"Definitely."

"Okay, Lieutenant. Don't glare at me like that. You get anything special on that Sandra Mantell?"

"Nothing, except she was a looker with a real upholstered torso. Knew a lot of the best people, and a lot of the worst. A burlesque dancer, and a top-notcher. Used to live in New

York, then moved to Jersey when she got work permanent in Union City. Played in New York though, and played plenty. There's a lot we don't know about her, that's for sure, and there's a lot of people that knew her that we don't know a thing about." He stood up and sighed. "But we keep plugging. We're cops and we keep plugging. We're not brilliant private eyes that sneak around, and fast-talk all the girls, and slug a few people, and come up with all the right answers. We're only cops, and we plug, and a good deal of the time we solve our cases. Without fanfare, and without getting paid by publishers and TV sponsors to tell our stories. Good night, sonny. I'm tired. I'm going to sleep. You ought to do the same."

8.

You close the door behind him and you hit the horn. You dial the *Club Trippa*, and you ask for Nick Darrow, and they ask who's calling, and you tell them, and you get the same old answer: not in. This time you leave a message. You say that Sandra Mantell has been murdered, and that you've been investigating it, and that you left out the name of Nickie Darrow when you made your report to the police. You say you'll be home the rest of the night and you give them your phone number. Then you hang up and make yourself some frozen blintzes out of the freezer, with sugar and sour cream, a dish you learned from

one of Lindy's chefs, and you're in the midst of enjoying it, when the phone tinkles, and guess who . . . ?

Nickie Darrow's voice, over the phone, was smoother than my sour cream. "How are you, Pete? Where you been keeping yourself? My club too lowdown for a high-hat guy like yourself?"

"Been busy, Nickie. Haven't had time for night clubs. Haven't even had time to call you on the phone, a nice old friend like you."

"You really ought to call sometime."

"Yeah, I really ought."

"Why don't you drop in tonight, Pete? You free tonight?"

"Matter of fact, I am. It's a good night for slumming. Thanks for the invitation, Nickie."

"Come up to the office, Pete. Say . . . two o'clock, eh? Love to see you. How's two o'clock? I'll clear the decks for you, pal."

"Two o'clock. That's fine."

"See you, pal."

I showered and dressed and looked at the gun and holster and decided to leave them behind. You could get killed like that, but Nickie wasn't one to molest people, not when he's invited them. The people might leave word as to where they were going and then Nickie would be involved, and Nickie was averse to being involved. In anything. Nickie had said two o'clock, so you were there at one-thirty, just for the hell of it.

The word was in again. In reverse.

The bartender winked and waved and said, "Long time no see."

The bouncer with the belly said, "How are you, Mr. Chambers?"

I patted the belly and I said, "What the hell. Business is business. No hard feelings?"

"Not me, Mr. Chambers. I work for a living. I dish it out, and I take it. I got no complaints. How's for a handshake?"

"Why not, pal?"

We shook and he squeezed my hand and then he said softly, "Tell you this, pal, off the record. When I got business, I bring it to you. And so do my friends. You're a quick one, and I like a quick one. And you don't take no guff, and I like a guy don't take no guff."

"Thanks, sweetie."

He grinned a grin that was more gum than teeth. "Don't mention it, sweetie."

I went upstairs. Bonnie Laurie was on again and the customers' eyes were riveted. I repeated my dimness-and-periphery bit, and I opened the door to Nickie Darrow's office. I was early. Nickie Darrow wasn't there. But the room wasn't empty. Aunt Ethel came toward me, swaying slightly. Ethel Fleetwood, in a tight black off-the-shoulder gown that emphasized every curve and protuberance of her hour-glass figure, and let me state, once and for all, Aunt Ethel had what it takes, and more. Haul off that Bonnie Laurie, haul her off that floor, and substitute Aunt Ethel, and the cus-

tomers' eyes would remain just as riveted. Aunt Ethel leaned on me, and I enjoyed every inch of her. She said, "You too? I might have known."

"Living it up, Aunt Ethel?"

"That Nick Darrow. He's a terrible man. No compassion, no soul, nothing. Want to kiss me now, honey? You're the cutest."

"Take a rain-check, Auntie-love."

"I'm in the mood." She wasn't drunk, but her eyes had more glare than a windshield on a desert.

Then the door opened and Nick Darrow came in. Quietly he said, "What the hell is going on here?"

Nick Darrow always spoke quietly. He was, as always, perfectly dressed. He was tall and lean and broad-shouldered. His hair was black, faintly tinged with grey at the temples. He had blue eyes rimmed within long black lashes. He was always serene, always composed, but always, a muscle in his jaw kept jumping. He said, "Mrs. Fleetwood, I've told you time and again — stay out of here."

"I'm with a party, dearie, outside."

"Then stay with your party."

"Nickie dear, all I want is a small favor."

"No favors from me, Mrs. Fleetwood. Now . . . out. Or I'll have you thrown out."

I clucked my tongue at him. "Is that the way to talk to a lady, Nickie dear?"

"Look, Petie dear. You keep your nose out of my affairs." He went to

her and took her arm. "Out. You're a gorgeous dame, but out. Go join your party."

"Will you help me, Nickie?"

"You mean you can't find your way?"

"That's not what I mean, Nickie."

His voice roughened. "Out, Mrs. Fleetwood." He opened the door, gently shoved her through, closed the door, and locked it. Then he turned to me. "You know what she wants?"

"I've got my figure."

"Horse. Nose-candy. Heroin."

"Well, for Horse, she's come to the horse's mouth."

"Very funny, and very stupid. I run a night club here, period. Sit down, eyeball. We got talking to do."

I sat.

He sat.

He said, "Where's it tickling you, pal?"

"That kind of tickling, Nickie, I almost *died* laughing."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He sounded convincing. I said, "You on my back, Nickie?"

"Like how?"

"Somebody's been blowing spitballs at me, Nickie. Any idea who?"

"No. Period."

"Know a girl by name Trina Greco?"

"I've heard the name."

"Got any interest?"

"I've never even seen her."

"Has Johnny Hays ever seen her?"

"Yes. He's seen her."

"It's beginning to add up, Nickie."

"*What's* beginning to add up?"

"Listen. Your Johnny button-holed me a time back, while I was out with this Greco, and he told me to lay off that, and he told it to me — as a message from you."

Darrow stood up and walked. "That ain't the first time, the little punk. When he wants to scare a guy off . . . on his personal business . . . he uses my name. This on the level?"

"You ever know me not to be?"

"Okay. Thanks. That little punk is scratched from here on in. I'll put him to work in a tank town. Don't worry no more about Johnny Hays."

"I never was worried about Johnny Hays. I was worried about you. That boy wouldn't do any serious shooting unless you knew about it, would he, Nickie?"

"No."

"Then who the hell's on my back, and why?"

He walked some more, then he turned to me and smiled. "You got your headaches, kid, and I got mine. Let's get to Sandra Mantell. I hear you covered up for me, and I checked that, and you did. Thanks."

"You mixed up in a snatch, Nickie?"

"No."

"Abner Reed?"

"He get heisted?"

"Yes."

"I know him. Been a customer

here. Married money-bags. She's been a customer here. So's her aunt and uncle."

"Big heist, Nickie. This is off the record."

"How much?"

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand. Big ones."

The corners of his mouth turned down and his head nodded. "Big enough. I should have heard something. I didn't. Was it paid?"

"All of it."

"You sure?"

"I paid it."

Now his glance held admiration. "You're a hip guy. You're always in on the big action. You have a piece?"

"I had nothing. But your Sandra thought she did."

"What are you talking about?"

I told him. I told him a good deal of it. I stressed her phone call, and I brought it up to date.

He was very serious when he said, "Look, kid, for guys like me, the snatch racket is out. There are easier ways to turn a buck. Plus I had nothing to do with that Sandra Mantell killing. On that, I'm on your side. You covered for me, and I appreciate it, but it was a cover I didn't want. After your call, I went down to Headquarters. Guy by the name of Parker is in charge, but he'd gone home. I talked to a Captain Weaver. I offered full co-operation. That's that, and you can check it. On that Johnny Hays bit, I'll take care of that. Now . . . is there anything else you want?"

"No, sir, Nickie, don't want a thing."

"Fine. Now go on outside and enjoy yourself. It's on the house."

"Thanks, Nickie. For tonight, I'll pass."

9.

I went home and I went to sleep. I had my usual nightmares, but they didn't waken me. I slept through most of the day. I heard the phone ring in my dreams, many times, but I let it ring. I stayed with my nightmares. When I awoke at four in the afternoon, I was cradled in perspiration. I bathed and I had breakfast and I read a book. A mystery. I hate them. But I stayed in. I didn't want to go to the office. I wanted a clean day. One clean day. I didn't want to mix in filth, and thievery, and murder. I wanted to be a small boy, and I wanted to believe that all men are good and all women are pure. I have those moments — even as you — and I wanted to live in my preposterous illusions for one solitary day. But the phone rang and I couldn't resist it and I was glad because it was Trina.

"How are you?" she said.

"Just dandy."

"What's the matter?"

"Why? Why should anything be the matter?"

"You sound . . . somehow . . . like a little boy."

"That's bad?"

"I like it."

"I'm thrilled. To the marrow."

"Now you don't sound like a little boy any more."

"Look. Let's get off that pitch. You're my Greek philosopher, and I love you, but —"

"Wanna go to a show tonight?"

"With you?"

"Yes."

"I'd love it."

"My coach gave me a couple of tickets to *Dead Of Night*."

"A mystery?"

"Yes. I'm crazy about them. Aren't you?"

"Just love 'em to extinction. But they frighten me. Will you hold my hand?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"And no Greek philosophy?"

"I'll just hold your hand."

"You talked yourself into an escort, plus dinner. Do I call for you, or do you call for me?"

"I moved out, Peter. I couldn't stand it there. I'm at a hotel. It's barren, dreadful."

"Okay. You call for me. We'll have cocktails here, dinner out, your play, and after that . . . you're the boss."

"What time?"

"Suppose you be here at seven."

"Let me think." There was a pause. "I've one hour of rehearsal, and then . . . okay, fine. I'll see you at seven."

But she saw me at six. She came to me breathless and excited, and I had to restrain myself from kissing

her. She had a little black book in her hand. She said, "I think . . . I think this might be important."

"What is it?"

"A little black book."

"Well, thanks. I wouldn't have known that. Unless I was blind. Yours?"

"No."

"Whose?"

"Sandra Mantell's."

"What are you talking about?"

"It was in my bag, in my locker, at rehearsal hall. It was a bag I don't use much. She must have put it into my bag, at our apartment, by mistake. And I took it to rehearsal hall. And I hadn't looked into it . . . until today."

"Gimme," I said.

But all my anticipatory tremors went for nothing. There wasn't a name in that book that meant a thing to me. I said, "You stay here, honey. Make yourself a couple of drinks, and get real high for Peter."

"Where you going?"

"Downtown to friend Parker. This little book doesn't mean a thing to me, but it might to him. Enjoy. I'll be back in time for dinner."

I took a cab downtown to Headquarters, and the elevator took me up to Parker's floor, and I was excited, so I barged in without knocking, but Parker had company. Company was a tall guy, with a bruiser's shoulders, a dancer's figure, and an angel's face — Abner Reed. I started backing out, when Parker called:

"Come in, come in, Peter."

When Parker's busy and he's that congenial, watch yourself, but it turns out, this time, he means it.

"You know Abner Reed, don't you, Pete?"

"Yes. Saw him once, when he was asleep. How do you do?"

Reed nodded.

"This is Peter Chambers," Parker said.

Reed said, "How do?"

Parker said, "Mr. Reed is going to Europe. He and Mrs. Reed. Going away for a year's stay. Making a ship tonight, at eight o'clock. Dropped in for a last goodbye. What brings *you*, Pete?"

I showed him. "Wouldn't be legit without a little black book."

"Black book?"

"It belonged to Sandra Mantell."

"*Mantell?*"

"Yes. Seems she slipped it into her room-mate's bag, by mistake. Room-mate took bag to rehearsal hall, and didn't look into it until today. Today, she did. There are names in it, which don't mean a thing to me, put they might to you. So grab a look, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant grabbed.

I turned to Reed. "You've heard about Miss Mantell?"

"Yes."

"Mixed up with your kidnaping."

"Yes, so the Lieutenant told me."

Suddenly I couldn't hear too well. I said, "Pardon?"

"Yes," he said. "So the Lieutenant told me."

I tightened my face at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"What's the matter with you?"

"Little hard of hearing."

"I said, 'So the Lieutenant told me.'"

I'd heard about as much as I wanted to hear. I jumped him. I didn't wait. He was big, and I wanted the first punch, and I got the first punch, but he took it standing up, and then he let loose a few of his own. From the corner of my eye, I saw Parker jump up, and I heard him roar: "Here. Stop it. Break it up. What the hell is going on here?"

By then we were mixing it like a couple of wild preliminary pugs. I slipped by a couple of lefts, but he punched too hard on one of them, and he was wide open, and I was in perfect position, and I came up with one off the floor, with all of my weight behind it, and it caught him clean on the button. His feet left the floor going up, and his head caught a corner of Parker's desk coming down, and he went into a deep freeze, and he was going to stay frozen until someone warmed him up.

"Man, you're nuts," Parker roared. "This time, you've really gone and done it."

"Precise moment," I said.

"That's assault and battery, and this guy's important. You've popped your cork this trip, fella."

"Precise moment," I said.

Parker bent to him. "Here. Help me get him up. You've flipped your wig, pal."

"Stay away from him, Louie."

Parker peered up at me. "What are you talking about?"

"Precise moment," I said.

"What the hell is this mumble you've gone into?"

"Greek philosophy. I'll come to it. In due time."

"What'll you come to first?"

"A couple of answers to a lot of questions that you and I have been throwing about, Lieutenant."

He straightened up. "Like which?"

"Like . . . why I was shot *at* in that graveyard . . . and shot *up* in my apartment. Like . . . why Sandra Mantell was killed. Like . . . why she called me in the first place. Like . . . why that gun had fingerprints . . ."

"Okay. Okay. One at a time." Parker had lost interest in the stiffened Abner Reed.

"Let's take the last one first, Lieutenant. Fingerprints on a gun. A guy dropping it when he collides with a dame. Does that sound like a professional?"

"No."

"If it rules out a professional . . . what does it rule in?"

"An amateur."

"Very good, Lieutenant?"

"So . . . ?"

"Let's do it right side up now. Here's a guy, Abner Reed — married himself a large hunk of dough — but he can't reach too much of it . . . because she's . . . frugal, that's the word . . . frugal."

"So . . . ?"

"So . . . on the suggestion of a friend of his — Miss Sandra Mantell — and you'll find, I'm sure, with a good deal of digging — that those two had a close *sub rosa* association —"

"Never mind what I'll find out. Let's get this over with first."

"On her suggestion — for a hunk of the proceeds — they figured out a beauty. *The guy would kidnap himself*. Remember Uncle Harry? The first call? Whom did he talk to? Abner Reed, nobody else. Remember the wife, Florence Reed? Whom did she talk to the next morning? Abner Reed, nobody else."

It was beginning to come to Parker. "Yeah," he said, "Yeah . . ."

"He knew his wife. He knew how much in love she was. He knew she'd pay, and play ball. *Which she did*."

"Which explains the shooting at the cemetery too."

"Of course. He played it alone. And I had heard his voice. I was a loose remnant. So he brought a gun with him. Knock me off, and it's all clear. He missed, so he tried again, at my apartment, and that time, he almost made it."

"Yeah," Parker said. "And then, when he had this appointment with Sandra, and he wouldn't pay . . ."

"She called me, and she knew *whom* to call, because she was in it from the beginning, and they had picked me. She called me . . ."

"But he'd followed her home, and when he heard what she was up to, he finished her off. Cleared the

last loose remnant."

I shook it off. "Precise moment," I said.

"What the devil is this 'precise moment' pitch you're on?"

"A fragment of time in connection with a fragment of space . . . creates the precise moment."

Parker scratched a stubby finger against his crew-cut. "How's that?"

"I came here with the little black book. It undoubtedly contains nothing more than the names of her boy-friends, but that doesn't matter now. I came at that fragment of time that Abner Reed was here, occupying this fragment of space."

"Meaning?"

"If both wouldn't have coincided, perfectly, this guy'd be off for a year in Europe, and by then, that voice would no longer be fresh in my memory, and your Abner Reed snatch would have gone down in the books as another unsolved crime. Ecstatic and catastrophic."

"Wha' . . . ? What's that last?"

"From my Greek philosopher. Ecstatic for us, catastrophic for him. Bye, now. I've got a date."

"That good, huh? Who's the date?"

"The Greek philosopher."

His forehead creased into many wrinkles. "Greek philosopher? Not you. You're a guy for dames."

"Bye, Lieutenant."

As I went for the door, and he bent to the stricken Abner Reed, I could hear him mumble: "Oh, that Peter Chambers, go figure that guy, unpredictable Peter . . ."

MUGGED AND PRINTED

MICKEY SPILLANE isn't satisfied with being the creator of Mike Hammer and the top-selling writer in the world today. He's been



branching out, as moviegoers throughout the world know. Not only have two pictures based on his famous novels *I, The Jury* and *The Long Wait* been released nationally, but he's also made his acting debut in the new *Ring Of Fear*. His

latest story for *Manhunt*, *The Pickpocket*, is something of a departure, too. Instead of featuring Mike Hammer, this story stars a new character Spillane has developed: Willie, the reformed pickpocket. We think you'll like him as much as any other Spillane character.

HENRY KANE, whose new complete novel, *Precise Moment*, is featured in this issue, is the famous creator of Peter Chambers. As an ex-



lawyer, Kane's had to do a lot of work with the police and with private eyes, and it's rumored that Chambers may be a composite portrait of several private detectives now operating. In addition to his many appearances in *Manhunt*, Chambers has been fea-

tured in the widely popular novels including *Armchair In Hell*, *Report For A Corpse*, *Halo For Nobody* and others.

HAL ELLSON, author of the best-selling *Duke*, returns this month with the tough and surprising *Six Fingers*. ♦ EVAN HUNTER's novel, *The Blackboard Jungle*, which is being made into an M-G-M movie, will soon be on sale in bookstores. While waiting for the book, take a look at Hunter's *The Scarlet King*. ♦ RICHARD S. PRATHER's newest Shell Scott novel is called *Always Leave 'Em Dying*. His newest Shell Scott short story is called *Crime Of Passion*, in this issue. ♦ RICHARD DEMING's Manville Moon appears in the new Rinehart book, *Whistle Past The Graveyard*. You can also meet Moon in *Death Sentence*, a startling new short story in this issue. ♦ JONATHAN CRAIG is back with another fine and authentic documentary this month. Craig's latest is called *The Purple Collar*. ♦ HAROLD Q. MASUR returns to *Manhunt* with a surprising new story, *Dead Issue*.

CRAIG RICE, the only woman to appear in this all-star issue of *Manhunt*, is also the only detective-story writer ever to appear on the cover of *Time Magazine*,



an honor usually reserved for Presidents, world-famous scientists, and the like. She's the creator of John J. Malone, the lawyer-detective who's appeared in *Having Wonderful Crime*, *Eight Faces At Three*, *The Wrong Murder* (followed, logically enough, by *The Right Murder*), *The Fourth Postman* and other books. Malone's also been featured on radio, TV and the movies and, of course, in many issues of *Manhunt* — though possibly never to such good effect as in the current *Flowers To The Fair*.

FRANK KANE, a familiar figure to *Manhunt* readers, is the author of many novels featuring his tough and knowledgeable private eye, Johnny Liddell. The books in which Liddell's appeared include *Green Light For Death*, *Slay Ride*, *Poisons Unknown* and his latest, *Grave Danger*. Kane's authentic local color, his grasp of police technique and all the important details of homicide investigation, have combined with his writing ability to make such stories as *Big Steal* favorites with readers and critics.

