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He felt the bullet and he knew he was dying. But nobody paid any attention . . .

BY ROY CARROLL

RENICK felt the impact of the slug under his left shoulder and staggered back against the department store window. There had been no sound of a shot. Gleaming cars streamed off at the green light

on the corner and one lingered, a black coupé, turned the corner past Renick and braked with a soft squeak.

An old lady, shoved and bumped by rush-hour crowds, paused to stare at him, biting her lip.

Pain came in a hot excruciating wave and he felt warm blood ooze

down his side. He closed his eyes tightly. *What's happened?* he thought. *What's happened to me?*

"Drunk?" somebody said.

"No," the old lady said. "He's sick. Won't someone — ?"

Renick opened his eyes, breathing rapidly, perspiring. He leaned against the plate glass window and tried to speak, but the words coughed in his throat.

A large man shouldered through. "You all right, mister?"

Do I look all right, you fool? Renick thought, shaking his head. *Do something!* Exasperation and pain wrung him back and, chin on chest, he saw the blood-soaked side of his white shirt. It frightened him. His jacket hid the blood from anyone's view.

"He's had a stroke," the old lady said.

"Yes, ma'am," the man said, thrusting at her with his elbow. "I'll take care of him. Run along now, ma'am."

The old lady went away.

"God damn it!" the man said. "Wouldn't you know?"

Renick stared into a pair of frowning blue eyes behind rimless glasses. The man wore a blue suit and stood directly in front of Renick, shielding him.

"My wife will be right along," Renick gasped, doubling up with pain. "Supposed to meet her here."

"Sure," the blue-suited man said. "Take it easy. You don't want to draw a crowd."

Pain sliced down into Renick and he felt the man's fingers clamp on his arm. The lenses on the man's glasses were bright yellow ovals, glaring at him as the evening sun's slant struck them. The man looked as though he never smiled.

"Come on, Renick — over to my car."

"How'd you know my name?" Renick managed. Something about the man was wrong. Numbness settled into him and when he moved, it was as if he were walking on his knees. He put his hand up near his shoulder and the fingers came away sticky with blood. A fresh spasm of bright pain lanced through him. People shoved by and he tried to say something. He choked, coughing.

"Let me help you," the blue-suited man said.

"No," Renick gasped. "Go away!"

But Renick couldn't prevent it. Rigid steel-like fingers clamped on his arms, thrust against his back, and the world of this late sunny afternoon spun and turned black around the edges. The strong hands held him up, forced him around the corner, walked him quickly away from the crowds of people.

"Keep those feet going, Renick!"

"No . . . call cop!"

He made no sense. His words were tongue-filled, remote.

"Be quiet, Mr. Renick. My car's right over here."

He fought with his feet, thrusting against the pavement, but only took shorter, harder steps, almost

running. He quit fighting, abruptly.

"That's better," the man said.

"I'm bleeding," Renick said.
"Get a doctor."

"Sure. I'm *trying* to help you."

Renick looked at the man and felt foolish. "Car?"

"Right there," the man said, pointing at a black coupé.

The man supported him, shoved him. Renick tried to turn toward the car but the man wouldn't let him. They staggered toward an alley and the man forced him inside, breathing heavily.

"There!"

Renick saw the bleak scaled brick wall and the ground was gritty and wet underfoot. No sun reached this spot. He tried hard to think straight, but the world was rapidly going away from him. Why would anybody want to shoot him?

"You simply won't die, will you?" the man said. "I potted you from the car, but I didn't get you right, did I?"

Renick stared. "What?"

"Left the damned gun in the car, too," the man said.

Renick tried to run. The man flung him back against the alley wall. He tried to yell, but there was no sound — only a kind of hoarse moaning and then Renick saw the knife.

"God damn it," the man said. "It was perfect. Silencer and all. Light right, everything — and I had to miss." He struck Renick in the exact spot where he'd been shot.

"Why couldn't you just die so I wouldn't have to take chances?"

Renick watched the man hook the blade of the knife open with his thumbnail. The blade was long, slim, shiny, and Renick bent down and ran hard, blindly. He caught the man in the middle with his head, butting. The man sat down on the alley floor.

Renick staggered, sprawled out on the gritty brick, his hands clawing at the pavement beyond the alley.

The man cursed sharply. "Damn you!"

Renick struggled up, blind with pain, and ran. Something socked into his back. He reeled, fumbling with one hand. It was the knife, stuck into his back. He twisted, running again, and caught the handle and yanked. It came out. It hadn't gone in very deeply, but he felt new hot blood running down his back.

"Renick!"

He whirled, stumbling, and hurled the knife at the man.

A woman screamed on the corner. The blue-suited man stood against the wall just down past the corner, watching.

Renick ran hard, reeling against people. They leaped out of his way. He was by the department store again.

"Help!" he yelled. Something choked him, bubbling thickly in his throat. He swallowed, forcing the hot stuff down. "Laurie!" he called. "Laurie!" calling his wife.

He couldn't see her anywhere. She'd been wearing her red coat and that little red beret he liked so much. He ran up and down the sidewalk in front of the department store, stumbling from side to side and he supposed the man in the blue suit was here someplace. He didn't notice, but he left large wet red footprints and blood was dripping all over the sidewalk.

A woman saw the bloody footprints and screamed. The street began to scream and mill around Renick.

"Help me," he said, bubbling and staggering.

Nobody wanted to help him.

Renick waved his arms weakly, trying to tell them that a man in a blue suit was killing him. He'd been shot and stabbed in the back. He ran at a man and the man ducked away from him.

"Officer!" somebody yelled. "Police!"

It was as if he ran through a bright tunnel, as if the tunnel kept narrowing down, very bright — becoming brighter and brighter all the time. He wasn't even running now, though he thought he was. He just stood there in front of the store, lurching and reeling. Some of the men in the large crowd that had gathered began warily moving toward him, as if he were some wild animal.

Renick couldn't see very well. There was a bright cone and all around the cone was black. The edge

of the black was like fur and beyond that it was dead black. He fumbled along the plate glass window.

"What's the matter, man?" somebody said.

He cursed whoever it was — hopelessly, helplessly.

He stared stupidly at his feet and fell to his knees. His palms pressed flat on the warm pavement. He felt the blood on his back and side and chest and the cone of brightness became still brighter.

"He's bleeding," somebody said.

"Why don't somebody do something?" another said.

"Here's a cop," still another said. "Cripes."

"What's going on here?" an authoritative voice said. "What is this? Come on, now — break it up. Move along!"

Renick saw dark blue pants and heavy-soled shiny black shoes. A wad of gum stuck to the sole of one shoe. A cop.

"Mister — what's happened here?"

The cone of bright white narrowed down and went out, blinding Renick. He slowly straightened, flat on the pavement.

"Dead," the cop said.

The crowd moaned.

Down on the corner, a woman in a red coat and a tiny red beret spoke shortly, rapidly with a blue-suited man. The man nodded, turned away and dog-trotted quickly toward a black coupé. He got in the black coupé and drove off. The woman took a deep breath, looked

both ways before crossing the street toward the department store.

As she pushed through the crowd around the store window, she said, "What's happened? What's happened?"

"Guy dead," somebody said. "Shot."

She glanced back quickly down the street, biting her lip.

Then she managed to shove the rest of the way through the crowd and, without even looking at the body of her husband, because she knew very well it was there, she began to scream.

