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MYSTERY

MAGAZINE



THE TONGUELESS HORROR

MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTE

by **WYATT BLASSINGAME**

OTHER TERROR TALES BY

HUGH B. CAVE

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

WILLIAM B. RAINEY

AND OTHER FAMOUS AUTHORS

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Volume Five

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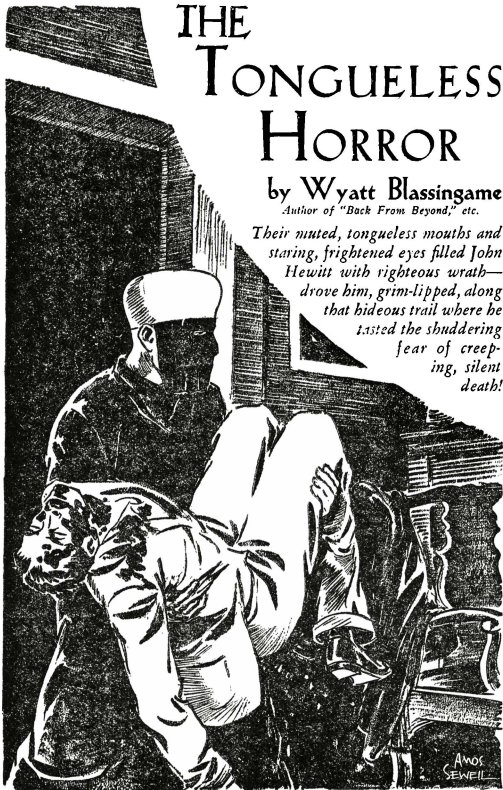
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THE TONGUELESS HORROR

by Wyatt Blassingame

Author of "Back From Beyond," etc.

*Their muted, tongueless mouths and
staring, frightened eyes filled John
Hewitt with righteous wrath—
drove him, grim-lipped, along
that hideous trail where he
tasted the shuddering
fear of creep-
ing, silent
death!*



COMPLETE
HORROR-MYSTERY
NOVELETTE

JOHN HEWITT stepped from the door of the Little Italy cafe and stood flat-footed on the sidewalk before it, facing into the wind. Cold gripped the drab houses along First Avenue, the dirty deserted street. Hewitt looked with squinted gray eyes, his square, plain face expressionless.

The door of the cafe swung open again and Ed Ginnis, Hewitt's partner, came out. Without pausing Ginnis crossed the sidewalk toward the police coupe. Hewitt watched the short, heavily-built Irishman, and frowned. The two detectives had been detailed together a week before; neither had been pleased.

Hewitt started toward the coupe, stopped short. Thinned by the whipping wind, a distant shout cracked at his ears. Ginnis took his foot from the runningboard, turned his heavy-jawed face toward the waving man who stood before an alley mouth, half a block away. Ginnis called to his partner, "What you reckon he wants?"

Hewitt squinted. It was a cloudy, gray afternoon with paper and dust swirling in the wind. "It's Father Mottole," he said.

The man at the alley mouth waved his arms and shouted. Fear made his voice strident. "Come here! Quick!"

Hewitt ducked his wide shoulders, began to run. As he ran, he put his right hand to his hip, felt his service revolver



jar in its holster. Behind him he heard Ginnis' pounding footsteps.

Father Mottole was a small, slender Italian with soft black eyes and hair gray about the temples. He was not a priest, but was known affectionately in the Italian quarter as "Father" because of the innumerable charities which he financed and supervised.

His kindly, thin face was drawn now and his lips jerked spasmodically. He stared at Hewitt with round, frightened eyes then pointed into the alley with a trembling forefinger. "In there," he said. "It's in there!"

Hewitt stared into the alley. Brick walls on each side shaded the dirty pavement, made the place chill and gloomy. Orange peels and tin cans littered the concrete. Occasional barrels were piled with trash.

"It's in there," Mottole said again. His voice was a hoarse whisper.

Ginnis had stopped beside the Italian. "Okay, it's in there. But what the hell is it?"

"The child." Mottole pushed the words out with stiff lips. "I—" He stopped abruptly. Hewitt's broad shoulders tensed forward; his head twisted to one side, listening. And what he heard made him insensible to the chill of the wind.

From the gloom of the alley had come a low whimpering moan; a sobbing, choked noise like that of a tongueless beast. The moan crept through the murk of the alley, slid into the whipping wind, and faded.

Hewitt lunged forward. His hard heels thudded on the concrete, jarring flat sound against the narrow walls. Behind him he heard Ginnis, the frightened muttering of Mottole repeating a prayer in Italian.

A barrel, filled with trash and with the top hoop pulled loose, was on the right of the alley. As Hewitt went toward it a new odor smeared through the stink of

the garbage—a sweet and curiously sickening odor. Hewitt heard the whimpering wordless moan again as he reached the barrel. Then he stopped short, his eyes straining from their sockets.

Behind the barrel a child lay on her back. Her thin dress was ripped and torn, showing dark splotches in a dozen places, cold blue flesh in others. But it was the sight of the child's face—or of what had been her face—that made John Hewitt feel suddenly sick, that kept his big hands stiff in front of him as if frozen.

There was little blood on the child, though a black puddle was clotted beneath her head. The mouth was open and the lower lip split in three places, sagged back to show small white teeth. Strips had been cut from the cheeks, exposing raw gums. The eyes rolled white in lidless sockets. Each gash was edged with blood, as though something had been used to stop the bleeding excepting for the chin and lower lip. They were black with clotted blood and from the bottom of the gash in the left cheek a dark stream had poured to the pavement.

MUSCLES stiff, Hewitt knelt beside the child and started to move his shaking hands toward her shoulders. Then he stopped abruptly. His breath whistled, in chill horror through his set teeth.

Ginnis' emotionless voice jarred his ears. "What the hell's happened to the kid?"

Hewitt did not move. He knelt forward, his hands almost touching the child's shoulders, his eyes riveted on the open mouth, and when he spoke his voice sounded flat and dead. "Her tongue's been cut out!" he said. "That's why she moaned, instead of crying."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Ginnis said, and broke off abruptly. Hewitt heard the sound of his shoes shuffling on the con-

crete. "Where'd Father Mottole go?" Ginnis demanded.

Hewitt got to his feet without taking his eyes from the child. Evidently she had fainted some time ago, moaned unconsciously. "I don't know," Hewitt said. "I thought he followed you down the alley."

"I thought so too, but—" Ginnis stopped. From the First Avenue sidewalk came the sound of running feet. They turned into the alley. Hewitt looked up, saw Mottole racing toward them, his long black overcoat open and flapping about his legs, arms swinging awkwardly. Then, a short distance from the detectives he stopped and stood panting, speechless.

The softness had gone from his eyes, leaving them hard and black. His face was set, though his lips still jerked spasmodically. "I called a police ambulance from the cafe," he panted. "I didn't tell anybody else there about—" He stopped, his eyes avoiding the horror on the ground. Slowly he began to pull off his overcoat. He handed it to Hewitt, and said, "Wrap the child in this. I—I can't."

Hewitt spread the coat on the pavement beside the girl, picked her up gently and placed her on it. She moaned as he touched her, and through his gloves he could feel the little body stiff and cold. He was tucking the sides about her when Ginnis snapped, "Well, Mottole, what were you doing in this alley? How in hell did you happen to find her?"

Hewitt got to his feet, noticed that there was blood on the forefinger of his left glove. He raised his eyes, looked at the other two men. Mottole's face was drawn and gray, but his lips had stopped twitching. "I wasn't in the alley," Mottole said. "I was passing on the sidewalk and heard—heard it. I thought perhaps it was a cat, freezing. When I came to see I found—that." He said the last word flatly.

Wind whistled, rustling paper and swirling dust and filth of the alley. A tin can, wind-driven, clanked over the pavement and into the brick wall. John Hewitt shivered inside his thick coat. Mottole's lips were blue with cold. There came the wail of a police siren on the wind. Then both wind and siren died abruptly, and the three men stood silent, staring at one another.

Mottole moved slow eyes to the bundle at his feet, crossed himself. But there was nothing religious in the harsh clack of his words.

"She was Pete Datoni's step-child, Maria. Datoni doesn't have much money, and he never spent what he had on Maria. She played about the streets here in rags." His words grew slower, each one falling like a heavy stone. "She must have been playing along the street when someone lured her into the alley—" He stopped, his thin hands clenched hard before him.

The wail of the ambulance siren grew suddenly loud. Tires screamed on pavement. Men pounded down the alley carrying a stretcher. Hewitt said, facing Ginnis, "You go to the hospital with the child, then take Father Mottole to the station-house." He moved his head toward the Italian. "You say she was Pete Datoni's child. Where does he live?" Somebody had to tell the father. But Hewitt didn't relish the job.

"810 Tenth Street."

Hewitt nodded glumly and walked along the alley toward First Avenue.

Behind him he heard the low exclamation of horror of the ambulance men, the tongueless moan of the mutilated child.

NUMBER 810 Tenth Street was a squat, brick house, crouched like a hunchback, close beside the walk. The right wing of the house protruded slightly forward to shelter the low steps running up to the front door. John Hewitt

went up the steps, struck the door with his gloved knuckles.

The door swung open. Hewitt stepped inside, shoulders hunched against the cold. The man pushed the door closed behind him and Hewitt turned in the gloom of the unlighted corridor to stare at a short, squarely-built Italian. The man looked curiously like the house in which he lived. Hewitt asked, "Pete Datoni?"

The man grunted assent. Hewitt flipped his coat to show the detective's badge. Datoni's eyes blinked nervously; his thick-knuckled fingers quivered in front of him. "What happened?" he asked. "Something to—my Maria?"

Hewitt went suddenly tense. His square face snapped forward. "Why?" he barked. "What do you think has happened?"

Datoni backed away, his face showing pale in the darkness. Then suddenly he was close to the detective, his big hands clutching at Hewitt's coat. "Tell me!" he said hoarsely. "Is it something to my Maria? I tried—I tried to protect her."

Hewitt looked into the man's grief-stricken face, thinking, "It's going to be harder to tell than I thought." Aloud he said, "What do you mean, you tried to protect her? Protect her from what?"

Datoni loosened Hewitt's coat. His face was pale, but composed. "I knew it," he said. He paused, added, "Come in here, and I will tell you. I—I am glad you have come."

He took two steps down the hall, turned right. Hewitt followed him into a sparsely furnished living room. There were three windows, one on a side. Near the wall was a sofa. Datoni gestured toward one of the three chairs in the room, dropped into another.

For a moment Datoni sat in the semi-darkness, head bowed, shoulders drooping. When he looked up his face was hard, determined. He began to speak slowly.

"I have been warned not to tell the police. They said I would be murdered if I did. But"—his voice went high and his hands began to shake—"I don't care! If something has happened to my Maria, I will tell the police—everything!"

Hewitt fumbled off his glove, pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it. Briefly he told of finding the child. When he had finished, Datoni sat clutching the arms of his chair, his knuckles bone white. "They said they would kill her," he said slowly. "I got my money from the bank to give them. It was all I had. I only had four hundred dollars. They wanted five thousand dollars and so they did that to—to my Maria. Now they will kill me!" His voice jumped high, cracked. "But I will tell! I will tell the police! Then let them kill me."

Hewitt leaned toward Datoni, eyes fastened on him. He said, "They won't kill you. Don't worry—we'll take care of that. Tell me who threatened the little girl."

Slowly Datoni shook his head. His jaw was shut hard, but his face was pale, hopeless. "A police guard will not help. There is no help. This—this thing—it is not human!"

A CHILL feeling of something unearthly, supernatural crept through John Hewitt. He leaned toward Datoni, eyes searching the man's face. "What do you mean?"

Datoni rubbed his fingers across his pale cheek. He looked at Hewitt for a moment, and an almost pathetic hope crept into his face. He said, "You—the police, I will tell. You will watch me." Then his voice broke again. "But I don't care. If it will help my little Maria they can kill me!"

"It came two days ago," Datoni went on. "There was a slow knocking on the back door. When I went, no one was

there. Nothing but a paper. It said that I should get \$5,000 and hold it for— for — There wasn't any name signed, just two bloody marks that looked like knife blades or scissors. It said that if I didn't get the money it, the thing, would get my Maria. I did not have the money. I got all I had to give them, but somehow they knew I did not have enough. And so" His head fell on his chest.

Hewitt said, his lips curled thin and hard, "Have you got the note?"

Datoni looked at Hewitt's set, determined face. He seemed to hesitate. Then he said, "Yes. I will get them." He stood up.

Hewitt said, "Them? You've had another?"

"It came this morning. It was like the other. The knocking and nobody there." Datoni went through the door. Hewitt could hear his shoes scuff along the bare hallway.

Three minutes later he came back into the room. The pieces of paper crinkled as Hewitt opened one. Crude, scrawling writing said:

It is too late to save your daughter, because you did not get enough money. Get \$5,000—or you will be next. It is death to tell the police.

Below were two blood-colored, V-shaped marks. It looked as if the blades of a pair of scissors had been dipped in blood and held against the paper. The first warning was signed in the same way.

Hewitt folded the papers, stuffed them in his coat pocket. "I'll find the murderer, I'll—" He stopped short.

From the rear of the house came an ominous, dull knocking. Something was beating in heavy monotones against the back door.

Hewitt's eyes jumped to Datoni. The man had dropped into his chair. His face was livid, half-turned toward the sound

of the knocking. His fingers gripped the arms of the chair until his shoulders quivered.

"It's—it's the thing!" he whispered.

John Hewitt surged to his feet. His right hand jumped to his hip, came back holding the .38 police special. "Stay here!" he snapped. Stiff-kneed, on the balls of his feet, he swung out of the room, down the hallway toward the rear.

The knocking continued, a muffled, heavy beating.

The hall ended in a small, dark kitchen. Across the kitchen was the back door. As Hewitt stepped into the room the knocking thudded loud—and suddenly quit.

Hewitt hurled himself at the door, ripped it open, gun ready. Cold wind swept over a small, trash-littered yard, over bare steps, and moaned through the doorway. The steps and yard were empty.

For twenty seconds Hewitt stood motionless, his knuckles white about the pistol butt. He shook his head. It was impossible for a human to have knocked on that door, and vanished in the half second it had taken him to cross the kitchen. Yet someone, or some *thing*, had knocked and disappeared.

The gun still in his hand, Hewitt went down the steps and across the yard to the right. At the corner of the house he stopped. There were a half dozen scraggly rose bushes, bare of leaves. Beyond the rose bushes was the front sidewalk. He turned, crossed to the other side of the house. Here a high brick wall shut the place in. In the house beyond the wall Hewitt heard a baby crying. Shaking his head, Hewitt thrust the gun into the holster, turned back toward the kitchen.

Half up the steps he halted. Just inside the door was a white square of paper. He stooped, picked it up, and cursed softly. Above the bloody V of the forked knives was scrawled:

Get out of this and stay out!

ABRUPTLY the note crushed under Hewitt's thick fingers. For a moment he frowned as he wondered how any human being could have known so quickly that he was here. Then he remembered the department coupe parked in front, and a thin smile curled his lips. So this thing that made the mark of the bloody scissors would frighten him out, would it? He stalked into the house, jabbing the note into his pocket.

As he started up the hall he saw the dark blur of Datoni. The man was crouched against the front door, making little whimpering sounds of fear. Hewitt started toward him and Datoni straightened, his eyes dark in his bloodless face. Hewitt asked, "You got a telephone?"

"Yes. But what—what was there?" Datoni moved down the hall three steps, switched on the lights.

Hewitt said, "Nothing. Just a note for me." He saw the telephone on a small table, picked it up and dialed headquarters, and asked that a detective be sent to guard Datoni. For a moment he listened, then said, "Right. I'll go over." He hung up and turned to Datoni.

"There'll be a detective here in five minutes. Then I'm going to the emergency hospital. They've found another little girl. Her tongue's been cut out and they say she can't move for some reason. Can't budge a finger. She may be connected with this. You stay here and don't go out of the house."

Fear rode high in Datoni's face, but the Italian was fighting for self-control. He said, almost to himself, "I told the police. But I am not afraid. I am not afraid!"

Hewitt heard the car stop in front a few minutes later, and opened the front door for Detective Sam Englehart. Englehart was a gaunt tall man whose bony face terminated in a wide lantern jaw.

Briefly Hewitt outlined what had happened. Then he opened the front door and stepped out. A cold wind whipped about him.

An arc light to his right threw a dull glow along the dirty street as he stepped to his coupe parked against the curb. He slid under the steering wheel and something pricked his right leg.

He sat perfectly still on the seat for a moment, his eyebrows drawn together in puzzlement. Slowly he moved his right hand along the seat to where the thing had pricked his leg. His fingers touched something small and cylindrical. For thirty seconds John Hewitt sat without moving, frozen by abject terror. Horror such as he had never known flooded his body. He knew what the thing beneath his hand was even before he snapped on the dash-light.

Strapped to the seat with black adhesive, the point raised so that it had jabbed his leg when he slid inside, was a hypodermic. The plunger was strapped to the seat and the bowl was still more than half full of a murky green liquid.

With numbed shaking fingers, Hewitt pulled the adhesive loose, picked up the hypodermic. Very little of the fluid could have entered his body. There had been no pain except for that first tiny prick. He bent his right knee, swung the leg. Nothing seemed wrong with it—yet.

He said half aloud, "I wonder if . . ." Then he stopped, and wiped the heel of his hand along his sweat-damp brow. "It can't be! I—I didn't get much!" Still holding the hypodermic, he kicked the motor into action.

JOHAN HEWITT walked slowly from the hospital toward his parked coupe. His friend, Dr. Frank Sidney, would analyze the hypodermic contents. He had gone into another wing of the building to look at the second injured child. "The

daughter of Anthony Lavelli, 1212 Second Avenue," the nurse had said.

Hewitt's face was grim as he thought of the little girl. She had lain flat on her back, her eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling. There had been a slight stain of blood about her mouth but there had been no other mark on the stiff, rigid, little body. "Her—her tongue's been cut out," the nurse had gasped. "But there's something else wrong, too. The doctors don't know what. She hasn't budged since she came here. She's paralyzed, and yet her heart's beating and her eyes reflect, but the lids won't work."

Hewitt thought of the child, and of her open eyes showing that the brain behind them was active. She knew she was maimed, knew she was dying, but she was unable to move one finger, one eyelid.

"Worse than death!" he muttered. "A living, creeping, conscious death! He stepped to the curb, pulled open the door of the coupe, stepped toward the running board.

He heard the clack of leather on steel. He staggered, flung his arms against the car, caught his balance. And then his breath froze in his body as the terrifying realization swept over him.

His right foot had struck the running board, but his foot had not felt the impact!

His lips apart, Hewitt looked down at his foot. He stomped it heavily on the pavement. The shoe thudded and Hewitt felt the jar in his leg.

But his foot had never known it touched the ground. His right foot was dead!

For a full minute Hewitt stood there, body bent, looking at his foot. Horribly clear he saw again the girl on the hospital cot, her eyes open, her face rigid, her body utterly paralyzed.

Slowly he straightened. He whispered, "It can't be! Not—not totally. I only got a drop or two. It can't—" with his

right hand he struck the spot on his hip where the needle had entered. The flesh was firm, alive. He tried the foot again. And again there was no feeling.

He climbed into the coupe. His mind refused to accept what had happened, struggled to find some way around the evidence. He leaned over again and tapped the foot with his fingers. He might as well have tapped the gear lever.

Fifteen minutes later he swung the coupe toward the curb, pulled the dead weight of his foot from the floor boards, pushed it against the brake. The car stopped with a jerk. He sat still then, looking at the home of the child who now lay at the emergency hospital, living, but dead.

The house was a large, square building, the top barely visible over the high brick wall that cut it off from the sidewalk. There was a wooden gate in the middle of the wall. Hewitt smiled grimly as he looked at it. Evidently Lazelli had money.

Hewitt slapped his right ankle twice with his palm. Then his mouth was a gray gash in a colorless face. The ankle was numb.

THE wall offered protection from the wind as Hewitt limped through the gate and stood inside. It was dark and he could not see much. The front of the house, where lights showed from four windows, was about sixty feet away. The brick wall closed the house in on all four sides, but left ample lawns. To his right Hewitt could see the naked limbs of a maple tree. In front of him a concrete walk led to a small fountain, circled it, and went on to the steps of the house.

Hewitt's shoes clopped unevenly as he went forward.

The front door was massive with a heavy brass knocker. Hewitt lifted the knocker, rapped. Waiting, he heard a truck lumbering down Second Avenue.

The door swung open and light spilled out across the porch. A girl was holding the door and Hewitt stood, mouth half open, staring at her. She was slender and tall with jet black hair that went in little lapping curls back from a broad, pale forehead. Her face was in shadow, but Hewitt could see its perfect oval outline, the soft curve that was her mouth and the dark pools that were her eyes.

Hewitt bowed slightly, said, "Is Mr. Lazelli here?" He fingered his lapel, showing the badge.

The girl said, "Yes. Come in." She opened the door wider and Hewitt stepped over the sill. He swung his left foot first, then pulled the right, a dead weight, carefully after. The girl closed the door, looked at Hewitt, and asked, "You come to see father about. . . ." She stopped, biting her lower lip with small, white teeth. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. ". . . About sister?" She finished. "Yes."

The girl turned, took four steps down the hall, knocked on a closed door on her left. A man's voice asked curtly. "What is it?"

The girl pushed the door open. "Here's another detective, father," she announced and stepped back as John Hewitt walked past her into the room.

The room was poorly, barely furnished. A massive chandelier, holding only one small bulb, hung in the middle. Directly under the light was a desk and behind that a small swivel chair. Two straight chairs were drawn up in front of the desk. In them Ginnis and Father Mottole twisted around to face Hewitt as he entered the room.

Ginnis said, "Well, here you are. One by one we all get here. Me first; then Father Mottole; now you."

Hewitt didn't answer. He stood flat-footed looking at the man behind the desk. Often he had heard of Anthony

Lazelli, but this was the first time he had seen the man. Reported to be one of the wealthiest Italians in the city, Lazelli was also a mystery. He seldom went outside of his walled garden, and he had the name of being a miser. Glancing at the bare floor, the frayed curtains, Hewitt had a hunch that the gossip was probably correct.

Lazelli did not get out of his chair. He leaned stooped shoulders forward, put his hands on the desk. His head was too big for his body and sat on the end of a long, scrawny neck. It was almost bald with occasional, glossy black hairs which lay flat against his skull. His mouth was pinched and dark; his eyes narrow, intense, almost mad.

The detective balanced on his right foot. He had the odd sensation that he was swinging in the air, not touching the floor at all. He swung his left leg forward, pulled his right one after it and stood with the fingers of his gloved hands on Lazelli's desk. "I'm John Hewitt," he said. "Your daughter was the—second child to be injured today, and—"

Lazelli said angrily, "I know that."

Hewitt's lips twitched in surprise. He remembered that this man had not visited the hospital to see his daughter. Now he seemed more annoyed than grieved. Hewitt remembered the grief and the terror-stricken face of Datoni, and anger made his voice brittle. "What else do you know? Who did this?"

Light flashed in Lazelli's black eyes. One corner of his pinched mouth quivered. He said, "I don't know. How should I?"

Ginnis said, "That's his story and he's sticking to it."

FATHER MOTTOLE pointed a slim finger toward Lazelli and said softly, "There's no way you should know who injured the child. But you should go see

her in the hospital. You should make some provision for her care. There are specialists who. . ."

Lazelli struck the desk with clenched fists. He shouted. "Get out of here! Don't come to my home telling me what to do! All of you! Get out!"

Hewitt's broad shoulders swayed toward Lazelli. His face was rock-hard, all sympathy for the man gone. "You may not know who did it," he growled. "But you damn well know why. How much money did those bloody scissors ask for?"

Ginnis slammed to his feet, snarling, "Bloody what?"

Lazelli squirmed in his chair, eyes darting furtively around the room. Hewitt said, "All right. How much?"

Lazelli slumped in his chair, said, "They wanted \$50,000."

Ginnis asked, "What the devil are you talking about?"

"Some extortionist who signs himself with a pair of bloody scissors or some such thing wrote Datoni asking for money. Datoni didn't have it, so they got his kid," Hewitt said. "Same thing here."

"Maybe Datoni didn't," Ginnis said, almost under his breath. Then in a rush he added, "But this guy's got plenty." He whirled on Lazelli. "Why the hell didn't you pay? Don't you care what happens to your kids?"

Lazelli sat staring at his feet. In the light of the one globe his bald head looked like a fortune teller's crystal. He said sullenly, "They wanted \$50,000. I couldn't pay that much. I would have paid something, but I couldn't pay that much."

"Why didn't you tell them you couldn't pay so much?" Father Mottole asked quietly. He had folded his thin hands on the desk in front of him. "How much did you offer to pay?"

Lazelli said, "Nothing. I didn't know how to get in touch with them. They just—just left the notes."

Hewitt asked, "Have you had another, since the warning about Maria?"

"No. But I won't pay! I won't!" He sprang to his feet. His fists shook in front of him and his eyes flamed evilly. "They may kill me, but I'm not afraid. Not afraid of things I can't see! I won't pay. I—" He screamed shrilly.

John Hewitt saw the paper fluttering over his head the second Lazelli screamed. It came floating down, tilting from side to side in the still air. The paper seemed to have dropped *through* the ceiling, yet there had been no sound.

It came down between the four motionless men, flattened out on the desk top, slid to a stop. For three full seconds the men stared, still and silent. Ginnis muttered, "Well, I'll be damned!" Hewitt stood, breathing heavily through his nostrils. Without moving he read the crudely printed message below the marks made by a pair of bloody scissors:

\$100,000 or your daughter Rose at midnight!

A long while the four men stood motionless, staring at the note.

Hewitt's brain was racing. Why had Ginnis jumped with alarm at mention of the bloody scissors? What did he know about them? And Father Mottole—why was he always on hand? Abruptly he remembered Datoni, wondered if anything had happened there since he left.

Hewitt's hand clenched hard. Death, like a strangling vine, was creeping up his leg.

Hewitt turned toward Ginnis, and said, tightly, "You stay here and look after this man. I'm going to check on Datoni now. I'll be back by midnight to help if anything happens."

Ginnis sneered. "Hell, nothin's going to happen here. Nothing would have happened"—he flung contemptuous eyes toward Lazelli—"if that buzzard thought more of his kids than his money."

With awkward, clumping steps, like a man with a new wooden leg, Hewitt pulled open the door, and stepping out into the hall, closed the door behind him.

As the door shut, Hewitt bent sharply, tapped his right calf with his finger tips. It had no feeling, and when he tried to wiggle the foot it was as if he had tried, by sitting and thinking, to move a wall. He struck his leg higher up. It was dead to the knee.

Hewitt didn't have time to be afraid. He had to work quickly now. In another four or five hours, perhaps, he would be like the child in the hospital, motionless, dead, except for a brain that functioned and eyes that stared fixedly. But wouldn't die; he hadn't got much of the fluid. Surely this paralysis would stop at the knee. If it didn't. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Bullet Proof Death

HEWITT turned still in the hallway and saw Rose Lazelli standing in a darkened doorway across from him. He stepped toward her unsteadily. She looked down at his foot; her eyebrows arched as she opened her mouth to speak. Hewitt shook his head, said, "It's nothing." He stopped close to her and looked down into eyes that were like pools of black shadows. She had been crying.

Hewitt said, "Has your father been in the house all day?"

The girl nodded. "He shuts himself up in the back. I never see him."

"Who else has been here this afternoon? In the room where they are now?"

The girl dabbed at her eyes with a small handkerchief. Even crying and grief-stricken he noticed the girl's soft beauty, the full curve of her lips, the outline of her slender body beneath the clinging dress . . . She crumpled the handkerchief

in her hand and said, "Nobody except the detective who's in there now. He was there for a while before father came from the back of the house. Then, fifteen minutes ago, Father Mottole came. In the afternoon there was a pedler, trying to sell father some silks. But he didn't stay long. Father wouldn't talk to him. They were lovely things, and I—wanted—" She tried to smile, but her lips quivered. "What—what have they done to sister? I'm so frightened!"

Hewitt moved one big hand toward the girl and stopped abruptly. That living death had threatened to strike this girl at midnight. For a sickening moment Hewitt visioned her face, ripped and mangled as that of little Maria had been.

Hewitt looked at his wrist watch. 9:15. There was no need of telling the girl about the note now. He said, "There's nothing for you to worry about. I don't know how badly hurt your little sister is, but I'll find out and let you know."

The girl's hands caught Hewitt's arm. "Thank you," she said.

John Hewitt turned on the heel that had no feeling and went toward the door, and dragged himself toward the car.

At a corner drug store Hewitt stopped the coupe and went inside. His knee was stiff, dead now, and he had to walk by swinging his leg from the hip. He went inside a telephone booth, dialed the news room of the *Star*, and asked for Ralph Gill.

When he heard the reporter's voice Hewitt said, "Ralph, go through your files, find out everything you can about Pete Datoni." He spelled the name out. "Then check up on Anthony Lazelli, Ed Ginnis, and Father Mottole. Get in touch with Dr. Sidney at the Emergency Hospital, tell him I said give you the story because I don't have time. But don't break it until I let you know. I'll call you back in a little while." He hung up, called

the Emergency Hospital, learned that Dr. Sidney was still in the laboratory, and asked about the girl.

"Her heart beats and respiration are both growing slower," the nurse said. "The doctors don't have much hope for her."

Hewitt said, "Thank you," and heard the nurse hang up. So, it was death at the end. Total paralysis, and then death. Hewitt rubbed the fingers of his hand through his hair. "It's got my knee," he said aloud, "but it'll stop there. It must stop there! But whether it gets me or not, I'll get it." He pushed the door of the telephone booth open and swayed outside.

A soda jerker glimpsed Hewitt's face. He stared after the detective, unconscious that the carbonated water had filled the glass and was running over.

IT WAS difficult driving with his right leg stretched stiffly in front of him, but the traffic was light along Second Avenue. He turned east to First, and just outside of Datoni's home he cut the switch and braked the car to a halt with his left foot.

John Hewitt slipped from the coupe, and hobbled toward the squat, hunch-backed house. He went up the three brick steps, left foot first, dragging his right leg afterward, and knocked on the door.

No sound came from the inside of the house.

Why didn't Englehart open the door? He knocked again. The wind whipped away the sound, and the house was as still as if he had knocked on the door of a tomb.

Hewitt twisted the knob. The door swung open. He stepped through into a dark, silent hallway. Behind him gray light seeped through the half-open door; ahead blackness crouched like a hunted animal.

Hewitt's hand moved toward his hip and came back clenching the revolver. He moved sideways, pushed his back against the wall. He called, "Englehart! Hey Sam!" His voice rumbled down the narrow hallway, and died.

The light switch, he remembered, was near the door of the living room. He shifted his gun to his left hand, put his right hand against the wall, started toward the switch. His left foot struck the floor with a dull thud. His right shoe scraped as he dragged it forward. He swung his left foot ahead. It struck something—something soft.

Hewitt staggered, tried to jerk his right foot forward. He clawed at the wall with his right hand, swayed, pitched headlong. He struck lying across a human body.

He writhed away from the body, jerking up his gun. There was no sound excepting the echo of his movement. Tensely he pushed his right hand along the floor, touched the body and moved along an arm to the face. He jerked back his hand, gasping so that the sound stirred in the dark hallway. The man's face was a mass of blood.

John Hewitt almost screamed aloud. Every muscle in his body was taut as a bow string and his teeth scraped together.

"God!" he whispered. The darkness soaked up the word.

Hewitt put both hands on the chest of the man lying there. He drew his left leg under his body, straightened his arms, managed to get on his feet. He fumbled for the light switch and snapped it on.

In the white flood of light Hewitt saw the body of the detective, Englehart. He lay on his back, the eyes wide open and staring. The half-open mouth was a pool of blood and Hewitt knew instinctively the tongue had been cut away. There was no sign of disorder in the hall; only the body of Englehart, stark and horrible.

With stiff fingers Hewitt found the

light switch of the living room and clicked it. Light jumped into the room. John Hewitt gasped.

Flat on the floor, head near the chair in which he had sat earlier, was Pete Datoni. A little splotch of blood showed above the man's temple. His eyes were shut and his arms outflung. Hewitt went with swaying steps toward him, tried to kneel. His right knee wouldn't bend. Hewitt clutched his thigh and then the last vestige of color drained from his face. Three inches above the knee his leg was dead, unfeeling.

Hewitt put his gun in its holster, slipped to a sitting position beside Datoni. He looked at the blood-stained bump above Datoni's ear, then found the faint flutter of pulse in the man's wrist. Hewitt began to chafe the Italian's wrists.

Datoni's eyes had been open a half minute before they began to focus. He looked around dazedly, saw Hewitt and sat up. "What—what was it?" he gasped weakly.

Hewitt said, "You tell me. I came in and found you here. Englehart's in the hall—dead."

Datoni shook his head dazedly. Fear, hatred, terror, leaped into his face at once. His voice was husky. "I was sitting here. Something knocked on the door and the detective went. I heard him say, 'Hello!' Then he screamed. And . . ." Again Datoni rubbed a shaking hand across his eyes.

"And then?" Hewitt prompted.

"I jumped up and saw a man in the door—a short, thickset man. His coat lapel was turned up and there was a detective's badge on it. Then he jumped at me, and—I don't remember what happened. It couldn't have been long ago. He must have heard you, and ran."

Hewitt drew a long breath through clenched teeth. Ed Ginnis and Sam Englehart had known each other, though

there had been no friendship between them. The man Datoni had seen fitted Ginnis' description. But why had Ginnis come here? Hewitt let the air from his lungs slowly.

He clutched the arm of Datoni's chair and pulled himself erect. Then half-way up he paused, muscles stiffening. The slow, heavy pounding sounded once more on the back door.

SNARLING, Hewitt jerked his gun from the holster, started in a staggering, rolling run for the kitchen. Twice he tripped, caromed against the wall, but caught himself and kept going. He snapped open the kitchen door and almost fell down the low back steps.

Out in the dingy back yard a white paper, caught by the wind, skidded like a ghost. Hewitt stood still, muscles jerking, eyes big in their sockets.

The yard was empty!

Hewitt went toward the right corner of the house. He moved awkwardly, but the gun in his hand was steady. Once before he had heard this knocking, and had come to find nobody. And again there was—nothing. He should have known that, as on the other occasion, he would find nothing.

He cursed softly as he stepped around the corner of the house and saw the twisted, deformed shadows of the dwarfed rose bushes, the grayness beyond them that was First Avenue.

And then the Thing swept at him!

There was no time to see distinctly, even if the darkness had not muffled his sight. There was a sweep of purplish robes, the dull gleam of a monstrous, oversized head, long black hands, and the glint of a hypodermic.

Hewitt leaped sideways. Something touched his coat, and cloth ripped. He tried to jerk his dead leg under him, failed, and pitched into a rose bush.

Thorns tore at his trousers, jabbed his flesh.

He rolled to his back, saw the monster whirl and dive toward him. Hewitt's gun roared.

The Thing stopped in its dive, staggered. The revolver jumped in Hewitt's hand, crashed again. The creature wavered, whirled abruptly, and raced toward the back of the house.

Hewitt cursed hollowly. What living thing, human or animal, could carry two .38 slugs in its chest and run at that speed? Hewitt writhed to the side of the house, pawed against it, got to his feet.

The Thing had disappeared around the rear of the building. Hewitt started after it. His dead leg hit a rose bush and he fell again. His forehead struck against the brick wall of the house. Lights burst in the darkness. He half rolled, struck the soft dirt on his side, twitched—and lay still.

John Hewitt blinked, pushed his hand against the red mist of pain before his eyes and fought his way back to consciousness. He struggled to a sitting position, tried to get up, by climbing to the side of the house. His head whirled dizzily.

Looking down, he saw his right leg stiff in front of him, his left leg slightly bent. Remembrance flooded his mind. He rolled over, put his hands flat on the ground, pulled his left leg under him, straightened his arms. Twice he fell back. Then, holding against the wall, he got to his feet. He took one step toward the back of the house, stopped, and looked at his watch. It was 11:45!

In just fifteen minutes this fiend would call at the home of Anthony Lavelli. Lavelli would not pay, and . . .

Hewitt choked as he thought of the girl with her dark eyes raised toward his, her hand soft on his arm. He started a

stumbling run toward the sidewalk. No time now to go looking for Datoni.

As he stumbled along Hewitt beat his hand against his right leg. It was dead almost to the hip. He had to fight the sluggish muscles into movement.

Panting, he crawled into the department coupe, dragging his stiff right leg over the seat, leaving the door swinging. With his left foot he kicked the starter, worked the clutch. He used the hand accelerator.

The coupe raced along First Avenue, skidded into Tenth Street, screamed into First. Hewitt's hands clenched hard on the wheel. He, John Hewitt, what good would he be to protect the girl? The death that crawled up his leg had almost reached his hip. When it did he would be unable to move, except by crawling, pulling himself by his hands. How long would he be able to do that?

The coupe rocked to a halt before the brick wall that enclosed Lazelli's home. Hewitt slipped out, balanced carefully, started toward the house.

HE circled the fountain, went up the walk toward the steps, his eyes jumping about the dark lawn. Not a shadow moved in the stillness. There was no sound except for the lugubrious moan of the wind, the creaking of the bare, wind stripped limbs of the maple tree.

Without pausing to knock, Hewitt pushed open the front door and stumbled into the dimly lighted hallway. He swung the door shut.

It was then he saw the girl, standing in the door of the room where her father had been earlier. Her eyes were wide with fear. She sighed, "Oh! It's you!" and some of the terror went out of her face.

Hewitt was breathing hard. He followed her into a side room.

"Where's your father?"

"He—he's not here. They all left just after you did." Her dark, troubled eyes moved toward Hewitt's leg, his trousers torn by the rose bushes, back to the bruise on his forehead. "You've been hurt!"

Hewitt said, "Nothing bad." He bent his left arm, looked at the wrist watch. It was 11:55. He snapped, "Quick! Call the police. Tell them to send a whole squad. And get 'em here quick!"

The girl's face blanched as she came closer to him, her lips half parted, her eyes round. "I can't call them. We've no phone."

Hewitt said, "Good God!" His hand snaked to his hip, stopped and dropped limply at his side. The gun was gone! He had left it where he had fallen. "It doesn't matter," he muttered. "I shot him before. He must have worn a steel vest. Damn those soft nosed bullets."

Rose Lavelli caught his coat with quivering fingers. "What do you mean?"

Hewitt gripped her shoulders, twisted her toward the door. "Get out of the house quick! Call the cops and send them here." He pushed her toward the door.

The girl swayed under his hands, but her feet did not move. "Tell me," she said. "What is it?"

Hewitt swore. "The Thing that got your sister is coming here, now. It's already got me. I can't live. I'll wait for it here. You go—quick!"

The girl put her hands to his coat again. She whispered, "No. I don't want to leave you. Let's both. . ."

"We can't!" Hewitt barked. "I can hardly move." His breathing was hard, tense. "You go now—while there's time!"

Her hands tightened on his coat. "But you . . . you . . ." She stopped abruptly. Terror had returned to her eyes; her hands still clutched Hewitt's coat.

Something scraped along the floor at the rear of the house. There was an un-

steady thumping. The sound moved toward the front. *Thump—thump—thump!* It was as if a man walked slowly, dragging a heavy load.

Hewitt heard the girl's wrenched gasp. Her hands seemed frozen to his coat and under them he heard the heavy pounding of his heart.

Thump! Thump! The beating, dragging sound of the steps came on. The girl turned, as though drawn by a magnet, to face the door.

The sound approached the door and paused. For one long, deathly second silence hung like a poised, menacing weight above the room. Then the sound scraped forward, closer.

The girl screamed a half strangled cry, and cowered back. Air whistled from Hewitt's lungs. In the door stood the creature which had attacked him. And in the creature's arms, the face a mass of blood, was the body of Ed Ginnis!

At the door the man dropped Ginnis. The detective hit the floor on his back, lay still. The impact jarred fresh blood from his mouth to well across his cheek and puddle on the floor.

THE man stood near Ginnis' stiff body. In the dim light that came from the heavy chandelier over his head Hewitt could see that the man wore a black cloth mask in which slits had been cut for eyes. The bald, egg-shaped head was a helmet with a few painted black lines for hair. Then Hewitt saw the man's hands. Horror and revelation leaped to his eyes.

The hands were large, with blunt, strong fingers and over them thin, flesh-colored gloves had been pulled. On the inside of the first two fingers of the right hand razor-sharp knives of steel were fastened. Hewitt understood now the mystery of the tongueless bodies. . . .

The man stepped farther into the room, and the girl shrank close beside Hewitt.

The man looked at her, snarled into his mask, "Where is Lazelli?"

The girl said, "I—I don't know."

Fire glinted in the black eyes behind the mask. The thick fingers dived into a pocket of the robe, came back holding a large hypodermic. A muffled voice snarled, "Where's the money? I told him I'd be here at midnight."

The girl slid along the desk toward Hewitt. Panic leapt from her large dark eyes. Hewitt felt the soft touch of her shoulder. She looked up at him, then toward the masked figure. "I—I don't know," she whimpered. "He didn't leave any with me."

The gloved hands went stiff and hard. An insane light came in the man's eyes as a snarling, wordless sound came from his throat. "All right," he said. "When I finish tonight he'll come across—if he has another chance. I—" The man pushed the hypodermic in front of him, took one step toward the girl.

Rose Lazelli caught Hewitt's left arm in both of hers. She screamed; a choked, terrified cry. Hewitt put his right hand on her arm. He said, "Quiet," and edging his body a foot from the desk, pushed the girl behind him. He told her, still looking at the masked man, "You keep behind me. When I get my hands on him, you run—out of the house, out of the grounds. Shout for help. . . ."

The girl's hands tightened on Hewitt's arm. "I—I don't want to run—to leave you!" Her voice was a whisper.

The figure chuckled. He took one step closer to Hewitt, stopped and drew a revolver with his left hand. He chuckled again. "But you will not get your hands on me, my friend. And after you are dead. . . ."

The man gestured with the muzzle of the gun. "Do you get out of the way," he said flatly, "and let me get at the girl; or do I shoot you first?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Strikes Home

JOHAN HEWITT could feel the soft touch of the girl's body, hear her rapid breathing behind him. Muscles bulged like frozen ropes along his jaw. One bullet from the masked man's revolver—just one—and the girl would be in the grasp of those cruel knife-blades. . . . There was little chance that the sound of the shot would bring help.

One sharp jab of that glittering needle into the girl's white flesh, only a second to pry open her red mouth, to clip with those steel-lined, scissor-like fingers.

The gun muzzle centered on Hewitt's belly. "If you are going to move," the man said, "move now."

Hewitt leaned his wide shoulders forward, estimated the distance between them. Not more than ten feet, but with one leg at dead anchor. . . .

Hewitt said, "All right—shoot. The cops will—" He broke off short.

A heavy pounding sounded on the front door. The noise boomed through the still house.

Startled, the masked man jerked back. Hewitt grinned and leaned forward, eyes on the gun in the man's hand. "The cops," he said. "I telephoned them to come here at midnight. Now go ahead and shoot—and then try to get out."

He was praying, inside, that his bluff would work.

The gun wavered in the other's hand. Eyes were red fires behind the mask. The masked man sneered, "It's a stall; it's not the cops. It's—"

Again the front door shook under the knocking, harder this time. The sound rolled into the room where three persons stood waiting for death.

Hewitt said, "It is the cops, you fool!"

Dancing fire hardened in the other's eyes. He shifted his hand along the re-

volver, caught it by the barrel. He said huskily, "I've never failed, and I won't fail now. You'll die, anyway. And I'll get the girl too!"

He took one step toward John Hewitt, drawing back the gun to smash it against the detective's temple.

Slow, heavy knocks beat on the front door. Beat monotonously, endlessly.

The murderer took another step forward. The dull light from the one small bulb in the chandelier gleamed on the hypodermic needle in his left hand.

Hewitt tried to swing forward to meet the man—to give the girl a chance to run. He put his weight on his left leg, tried to move the right one.

It was dead to the hip!

The man laughed—a creeping, ghoul-ish sound. He swung the revolver back so that the butt was close to his temple and stepped in to smash it against John Hewitt's head.

Behind him, Hewitt heard the girl gasp sharply. Then Hewitt saw his chance. He flung his arms above his head, and his fingers clutched the chandelier. He kicked his left foot back against the desk, shoved forward. His left leg doubled under him, straightened in one smashing drive.

The masked man saw the foot driving at his face and brought the gun-butt down. Hewitt felt sharp pain flare through his leg. The foot crashed into the man's face, hurling him backward. Hewitt's fingers slipped on the chandelier and his body plunged. His head struck the floor and the room whirled dizzily.

DULL aching throbs beat through John Hewitt's left leg, but he was dimly conscious of cool hands on his face, of a warm, stirring perfume in his nostrils. Through his whole body a slow pounding ache beat sickeningly.

Conscious, Hewitt knew that he still

lay where he had fallen, that he had not been out more than five or ten seconds. Rose Lavelli knelt beside him, her hands cool against his face, her dark eyes anxious.

Hewitt tried to rise, but his right leg lay stiff. He snapped, "What—what about that killer?" He tried again to get up. Hot pain flamed through his left leg.

The girl looked beyond Hewitt, then back to the detective's drawn face. "He fell on his hypodermic," she said. "He hasn't moved since."

Again the knocking jarred through the house. "Is it really the police?" the girl asked. Her fingers moved softly across Hewitt's forehead. She slipped her left arm under his shoulders, helped him to a sitting position, let him lean against the desk.

Hewitt said, "I don't think so. Go see."

The girl went out of the room. Hewitt looked across the bare floor at the sprawled man who had made the mark of the bloody scissors.

His right hand was under his hip. His masked head lay twisted to one side. Hewitt laughed harshly, without humor. "Well," he said aloud. "We killed each other. But you went first."

Steps sounded in the hall and he looked toward the door. Dr. Frank Sidney came into the room. He had a black physician's bag in his right hand. Behind him came Rose Lavelli.

"Thank God I found you!" Sidney panted. "Can you still move?"

Hewitt said, "A little, but my right leg's dead."

Sidney flung his bag on the desk above Hewitt's head, talked as he fumbled in it. "I found what was in that green fluid—by luck, mainly. Deadly as hell," he said cheerfully, "a poison only recently discovered, and based in tetra-ethyl lead. I happened to have been doing some research

on it at the hospital lately, but we never knew what effect it would have on a human being before. There's an antidote, all right, if you get it in time."

Sidney, a hypodermic in his hand, knelt beside Hewitt, jerked up the detective's left trouser leg. Hewitt winced. Sidney said, "Something hit you an awful wallop on the leg; may have broken it." He jabbed the needle into the flesh.

Rose Lavelli stood behind the doctor, watching every move. When the doctor had made an injection in each leg, Hewitt said, "This lady's the sister of the little girl at the hospital. How's the youngster?"

Sidney grinned. "Doing splendidly," he said. "I gave her an antidote before I left." He turned, looked at the masked body sprawled on the floor. "Who's this?"

Hewitt said, "He's the man that's been spreading the green fluid, and he's got a dose in himself. . . . His name is Pete Datoni."

Sidney knelt beside the body, rolled it over. He opened the shirt, grunted. "A steel vest," he said. "And with two big dents in it." He picked up the man's wrist, stripped back the glove, felt the pulse. "Dead already," he muttered. "Got too big a dose."

Sidney stripped the mask from the man's face, and Datoni's swarthy head bumped on the floor. Sidney said, holding the mask in his hands, "Well, I'll be damned! Datoni—why, it was his little girl who was tortured! You don't mean . . .?"

Hewitt grunted. "The first child we found was his step-child. Datoni doesn't have any money, but he said the extortionist asked him for five thousand dollars. Nobody would try to get money from a man who didn't have it. And there was a lot of knocking on his door with nobody there. That was an electric

bell on the chair arm. I rang it by mistake, but didn't realize it until too late. Besides, I don't think even he would have tried to keep this date at exactly the right time if he had known cops might be waiting for him. And he was the only suspect who didn't know that both Ginnis and I had seen his note saying he'd come at midnight. He must have come here earlier, disguised as a peddler, and stuck the note to the ceiling. Impressive—but he didn't know that we'd be here when it fell. That flair of his for being impressive is what got him in trouble.

"After I left here Ginnis most likely decided he'd find out what he could from Datoni, and went over. I stopped on the way and Ginnis got there first. He may have stumbled on something, or Datoni may have been afraid he wouldn't leave in time for him to pay his midnight call. So the Italian stuck him full of that fluid, as he did Sam Englehart. He had just done it when I came in, so he knocked himself on the head, waiting for a chance to get me. He almost did."

The full lips of the girl trembled slightly. "When you came in I was afraid you had been—seriously hurt."

Looking at the perfect oval of the girl's face Hewitt said, "Doc, how long before I'll be up and around?"

"Not long, unless your left leg is broken. I'll take you to the hospital, make an X-ray."

The girl flushed under Hewitt's steady gaze. Looking at her, Hewitt said, "I can't have a broken leg. There are things I want to be doing."

The girl looked up, smiled. "If your leg is broken," she said, "may I come and see you in the hospital, do something to repay what you've done for me?"

Hewitt caught a slow breath. "Doc," he asked, "can you break my leg?"