## Death with Father

Damon Knight

CHAPTER ONE

You Should Live So Long!

“YOU,” said old Jenkins, “are an anachronism. An anachronism,” Jenkins repeated, folding his hands across the curved handle of his umbrella. “It’s a nice word. I like it. It means you should have died a long time ago—like the dinosaurs or the cave-men.”

Puddy looked at him suspiciously across the desk, his dark face screwed up in an angry scowl. He got up slowly.

“Now, listen, Pop—” he began.

The fat man stared at old Jenkins. He’s making up his mind, Jenkins thought, whether to roar like a lion or laugh like a jackass. He doesn’t know quite how to take me yet. But he. isn’t as slow as he looks. If he decides I’m dangerous, he’ll move fast enough.

Puddy laughed. “Cave-man, ha?” he said. “That’s what she used to call me.” He sat down again, grinning as if he’d had the last word.

Jenkins felt a little sick inside. She was Bess Miller, the girl who had been engaged to his son, Paul—the girl who had married this fat frog instead, and then died—so suddenly.

Cave-man, he thought. Anacronism. Murderer. Thank God, there are only a few of you left.

He said, “Paul was killed in Germany, you know. He never knew about Bess. If he had known, though, he would have wanted to ask some questions. So I’m asking them for him.” He stood up. “I don’t think you took very good care of Bess, Mr. Puddy.”

Puddy scowled again. “Listen,” he said, “she got pneumonia, and nobody can say any different. She had the best damn doctors—”

“According to the papers,” Jenkins said softly, “she didn’t have any doctors at all—until she was dying.”

“The papers got it wrong,” said Puddy. “That’s all. They got it wrong.”

“They often do,” Jenkins agreed. “You wouldn’t, perhaps, remember the name of the doctor she had at first?”

Puddy’s slack jaw closed tight.

“No, I suppose not,” Jenkins said. He started toward the door, then paused. “Mind if I look around the house?”

Puddy shrugged. “Can I stop you? It ain’t mine—she left it to your kid. I moved my stuff out yesterday.”

Jenkins nodded. “I don’t think I’d care to live there, though,” he said, “any more than you would.” He smiled gently and went out.

He walked past the door that said, “General Enterprises, Robert A. Puddy, Pres.” down the stairs and into the street. The fresh air felt pretty good.

He walked along briskly, swinging his umbrella—an erect, silver-haired figure in a black overcoat that somehow looked as if it had swallow-tails.

Ahead of him, the street narrowed and became lined with trees, a little pathetic in their nakedness, but with promise in them, too. Like children, he thought. But children grew up, changed. . . .

At the fourth block, he turned into another tree-lined avenue. As soon as he saw the house, he knew it must be the one. It was small, painted light gray, with the husks of vines climbing over it. Easy enough to imagine it the way it had looked when Paul had bought it and given the deed to Bess. A dream cottage. A murder house.

He used the key he had gotten that morning from the bank and went in. The living room was deserted, half the furniture gone. Dust and darkness were everywhere. Nothing in the kitchen but a stained sink, empty shelves.

This bedroom must be where she had died—this friendly bed, a four-poster; lavender sheets, rich bedspread. Empty mules under it. The house was filled with a sense of departure, of the intangible remnants of someone who was never coming back.

He shook his head and went back to the living room. Nothing but stillborn memories here. No answers. He looked out at the empty street . . . no, not quite empty. Down the street, in the gathering shadows, a man was standing with his back against a hedge. A man with a pale blur of face, a black mustache; he was staring toward the house.

Jenkins stood still a moment, then went into the dining room and turned on the lights. He turned on the lights in the kitchen and on the back porch, then turned them off again. He waited a few minutes, then did the same thing once more. The dining-room lights stayed on—as though two people who had come in the back way were in there talking and making plans.

He slid out the back door, feeling his breath harsh in his throat, and crouched behind the bulk of a lilac bush, waiting.

His joints were stiffening when he heard the rustle—a tiny sound, made by a shadow that slid through a gap in the hedge. The man moved toward the lighted dining-room windows, staying clear of the thin strips of light on the lawn.

Jenkins followed, moving with agonized caution. He lifted his umbrella by the shaft. The heavy handle swung, darted downward; When it struck the man’s head, it made a sound like a dropped shoe.

JENKINS hooked the umbrella over his arm, stooped and grasped the man’s coat collar with both hands. Panting, he dragged him around to the back door and into the house. I’m almost seventy, he thought. You can do the damndest things when you have to!

He tied the man’s hands and feet with clothesline, then went through his pockets. There was an automatic in a shoulder holster, and another in a coat pocket. A letter, in feminine handwriting, was addressed, “Mr. Everett Harmon,” but it began, “Dear Blackie—” There was a snapshot of two men of about the same height, both dressed in dark clothes, their arms around each other’s shoulders. One of them was Blackie, but Jenkins couldn’t decide which.

He filled a glass with water and splashed it in the man’s face.

Blackie looked up, blinking dazedly, a wizened, sunken-eyed man with harsh lines in his cheeks. The mustache, Jenkins saw, almost covered the thin white line of jagged scar. The man’s jaw dropped when he saw Jenkins, and his eyes were wild with disbelief.

Jenkins swung his umbrella gently. “What do you know?” he asked.

“Say, listen, who do you—”

Jenkins hit him in the teeth with the umbrella-handle, not gently. Spitting blood, the man started again, “What’s the idea? I didn’t do nothing—” Jenkins hit him again, high on the cheek; then on the chin.

“I’m not fooling,” he said. “What do you know?”

There was pain in the man’s eyes. He said sullenly, “About what?”

Steeling himself, Jenkins hit him once more. Then he took a dog-eared newspaper clipping from his wallet, held it out where the man could see it. “Start with that,” he said.

The man’s eyes moved slowly, following the lines of type. Jenkins knew it by heart.

Police today are investigating the death of Bess Miller Puddy, three months’ bride of Robert A. Puddy, 50 N. Washoe St. According to Puddy, his wife died of pneumonia, contracted a week ago when she accidentally fell into the North River at Peale St.

As far as police can ascertain, no doctor attended Mrs. Puddy until yesterday, when her husband returned from a business trip. The case is being probed to determine whether any negligence was involved.

Mrs. Puddy was formerly engaged to Paul Jenkins, the Army sergeant who, earlier this month, was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The man finished, and Jenkins took the clipping away. He raised his umbrella. “It wasn’t pneumonia,” he said grimly. “What was it, and who helped Puddy do it to her?” Blackie hesitated. Jenkins hit him again. “Puddy did it,” said Blackie, gasping. “He dunked her in the river, where it’d look like an accident and he’d have witnesses. Then he took her home . . . went out of town to get an alibi. The boys kept . . . soaking sheets in cold water—wrapping ’em around her. At that, it took her a week to croak. Puddy was sore.”

Jenkins hit him, putting a little more force than he intended behind the blow. “Keep on talking,” he said. “The less you leave out, the longer it will be before I hit you again.”

Blackie’s mouth was puffed and bleeding, his nose bloody. “I dunno why he did it,” he said painfully. “She got wild when she heard about your kid getting killed—said she was going to leave Puddy and make a stink. But that didn’t bother him any. Said . . . he’d keep her no matter what she wanted. But she found out somethin’—I dunno what.”

Jenkins raised the umbrella.

“I dunno! Look . . . tell you who did it, besides Puddy. It was Ed Farber and the Knife, Chet Morgan. They got Puddy’s Filipino to swear to the cops that he was in the house with her an’ she wouldn’t let him call no doctor, but the Filipino don’t know nothing. He wasn’t there, Puddy got him out of town while they did it.”

“Talk some more,” said Jenkins. “What could she have found out that would have made Puddy kill her? Was it about Paul?”

“Geez, Puddy’ll strangle me if he finds out I told you this much.”

That was a lie, Jenkins knew. The man was talking so freely only because he knew, or thought he knew, that Jenkins wouldn’t be around long enough to be dangerous. . . . If he so much as waved pencil and paper at him, Blackie would shut up like a clam.

“Whom did she see just before he decided to kill her? Whom did she talk to?”

“Just Ed and the Knife and me was around, mostly. Maybe Cowboy Stevens once in a while. He makes collections for Puddy. But he ain’t been around for a couple months or so.”

“Tell me about Cowboy,” said Jenkins, swinging the umbrella. “All about him.”

“He’s six-foot,” Blackie started off, “yellow hair, got buck teeth an’ a hook nose and he’s kinda bald in back. He wears bright-colored shirts. He come to Puddy from someplace out West, that’s why we call him Cowboy. He—he—likes to play pool, an’ poker, an’ . . . get drunk on tequila. He—”

“That’s enough,” said Jenkins. The look of relief on Blackie’s face was comical, but Jenkins didn’t feel like laughing. He bent down and loosened the ropes. He took the cartridges out of Blackie’s guns and handed them to him. “You can go,” he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Alias Father Christmas

BLACKIE got to his feet, reeling a little. He hesitated, looked at the umbrella in Jenkins’ hand, then turned. At the door he faced around, eyes venomous. “I’ll see you later on, Grandpa,” he said, and staggered out. From the window, Jenkins watched him past each street lamp, until he vanished at the intersection two blocks up.

Jenkins turned off the lights and went out, locking the door behind him. He hailed a cab at the next corner and told the driver to cruise down Main Street.

When they got to the building where Puddy had his office, Blackie was just turning in to the doorway. Jenkins told the cabman to park across the street. Puddy’s office was on the second floor, just over the entrance. Jenkins sat patiently and watched the windows.

Snow began to fall, sifting down lightly across the shadowed gray front of the building. Jenkins waited quietly, warm and dry in the darkness of the cab.

The office lights flicked out. Jenkins leaned forward, straining his eyes to see through the snow. “Get ready to pull out,” he told the driver.

“Sure, Pop.”

Jenkins grinned. That’s my only asset, he thought wryly. Everybody thinks I’m too old to be any use.

Puddy, Blackie and another man came out of the doorway, shoulders hunched, walking fast. They turned south, and Jenkins spoke to the driver. The cab pulled out from the curb and rolled slowly down the street after the trio.

Peering ahead, Jenkins saw Puddy and the other two stop at the corner. A moment later, a gray sedan turned into Main and pulled up beside them. The men got in and the sedan started off the way Jenkins’ cab had come.

“Make a U-turn,” said Jenkins. “Quick!”

“That’s against the law here, mister.” Jenkins shoved a ten-dollar bill at him.

The man hesitated a moment, then swung the car around in a tight turn. “You don’t need that,” he said, and headed after the gray sedan.

Jenkins looked at him for the first time. The man’s square face, in the rear-view mirror, was set, tight-mouthed. For a moment he was puzzled and wary.

“Do you know whom we’re tailing?” he asked.

“Sure,” said the man, biting off the words, “Puddy. He’s a—”

Jenkins glanced ahead. They were keeping their distance behind the gray sedan. “What did he do to you?” he asked gently.

“My sister,” said the man briefly.

Jenkins nodded and looked at the card tacked up behind the front seat. It read “John Neff.”

“It looks as though we’re allies, Johnny.”

Neff’s shoulders were stolid. “You won’t get nothing on him.”

The gray car turned right at Washoe Street, and they followed. “Park here,” said Jenkins. “They’re going to stop.”

They watched as the gray car coasted slowly by the house where Bess Miller had died, then pulled into the curb. One man got out, walked back and disappeared around the corner of the dark house.

Neff twisted around in the seat. “How do you call ’em so good, Pop? You a mindreader?”

Jenkins kept his eyes on the house. “No,” he said, “but I used to do a little hunting when I was younger. I think I understand animals pretty well, especially scavengers.”

The man reappeared from the other side of the house and walked back to the car. The car pulled out, and after a few seconds, Neff followed again.

“They wanted some information,” said Jenkins,” but there’s nobody home to give it to them. Now they’re going to play safe—they’re going to kill a man.”

The taxi slowed, then speeded up jerkily. “I don’t get it,” said Neff finally, “but I’ll play along.”

“It isn’t going to be a picnic,” said Jenkins.

Neff looked at him in the mirror and grinned. “You,” he said, “wouldn’t kid me, would you, Pop?”

The gray car turned at the next corner and headed south again. Neff kept it in sight.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t want to get nosey,” he said, “but who they gonna kill? And what are you gonna do about it an old man your age?”

“Do you know a man called Cowboy Stevens?”

“Yeah . . . Seen him around, but not lately.”

“One more question,” said Jenkins. “Did you ever seen him with Paul Jenkins?”

“Why, yeah—lots o’ times. Wait a minute.” Neff stiffened. “I thought there was somethin’—You any relative of Paul’s?”

Jenkins told him.

“Yeah . . . That explains a lot of things,” Neff said. “You figure Cowboy knows something about that, huh?”

“It looks like it,” said Jenkins. “Our only hope is that he isn’t where they think he is. If he is, he hasn’t got a chance. I’m gambling that Cowboy is a little smarter than that. Cross your fingers, Johnny.”

The car ahead stopped momentarily in front of a hotel while a bulky figure got out.

“Puddy,” said Jenkins, “wouldn’t be in on the kill, naturally. That leaves three or four, depending on how many were in the car to begin with.”

“There was only one guy in the front seat,” said Neff. “I saw when they passed us.”

“Three, then. That’s one point in our favor. If there were four, they might split up.”

“Yeah . . . None of those hoods are going to go gunning for Cowboy by theirselves. You got a head on you, Pop.”

“So far,” said Jenkins grimly.

THEY were coming to an area of dingy rooming houses, dotted with the occasional incongruous neon of a bar or dance-hall. Farther ahead gleamed the clustered lights of a main drag.

“The South End,” said Neff. “It’s the right place for Cowboy, all right—a tough neighborhood. Cops don’t come down here much. Look, they’re turning off.”

Jenkins seized the door-handle. “Let me off at the corner,” he said, “then park and meet me.” He stumbled out as the cab slowed, waved his arms wildly for balance. He got to the corner in time to see the three men go up stairs of a house halfway down the block.

Neff came up a minute later. “Spot ’em, boss?”

Jenkins’ heart was pounding. “Listen, Johnny,” he said. “Stay here and be ready to tail them again if they bring Cowboy out and put him in the car. Otherwise, follow me, but not too closely. Got it?”

Neff nodded and melted back against the building.

Jenkins turned his coat collar up and walked down to a point opposite the house the three men had entered. There was a tattered drunk sleeping it off in a nearby doorway. Jenkins joined him.

A few minutes later the three men came out alone. They clustered for a moment on the sidewalk, then started walking rapidly down the street. Jenkins let them get nearly to the comer before he got up and followed.

They turned at the corner, heading for the main drag two blocks down. There were more people on the street now that the snow had stopped and Jenkins was able to keep himself out of sight.

The three came to a halt when they reached the thoroughfare. Jenkins edged up closer, afraid of losing them in the gathering crowd. But they stayed put, talking together, and he had time to catch Neff’s eye and motion him over.

The street, as far as he could see in either direction, was lined with bars, enamel-fronted beaneries and cheap movie houses. “It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack,” he murmured to Neff. “They obviously expect Cowboy to be out drinking in one of these bars, but there’s no telling which. Now listen—we’re going to have to split up in a minute. Do you know a place where we can meet near here?”

“Sure,” said Neff. “How about the Claridge, three blocks south of here. But what—”

“Good. If you find Cowboy, take him there immediately. Register under the name of Jones. If I see you, I’ll follow, but in case—”

He tensed, looking over Neff’s shoulder. The three men were crossing the street, heading west. “This is it. They’re trying the west side first. Come on, Johnny.”

“Hey. Shouldn’t we go east?”

“No! We’ve got to cover the same territory they do, but faster. Come on; you take this side of the street, I’ll take the other.”

The three men turned in at the first bar from the corner. Jenkins led the cabman past another, stopped in front of the third. “Okay, Johnny, start there. Good luck.” He crossed the street swiftly and walked into a bar.

The search was complicated by bad lighting, a thundering juke box, and a restless crowd of unshaven men, but Jenkins made sure: There was no one in the place who could possibly be Cowboy Stevens.

He tried another bar, with the same result. Another, and another. That ended the block.

The next place was not as crowded as the others, but there were tables in the rear, fairly well filled. Jenkins made a casual circuit of the room, then stopped at the bar and ordered whiskey. He motioned the bartender closer as the man poured his drink. “Listen,” he said, “have you seen Cowboy around?”

The man was big and beefy, and his eyes were automatically suspicious. “I dunno who you’re talkin’ about,” he said.

“I’m a friend of his,” said Jenkins, and pushed a wadded bill across the counter.

The barman’s hand closed over the bill and went on smoothly to pick up an empty glass. “You mean Cowboy Stevens?” he said. “Sure he was in about a hour ago. What you want him for?”

“I bear a message from his poor old mother,” said Jenkins. “Which way did he go when he left?”

The barman shrugged. “I only know about ’em when they’re in here. Where they go from here, that’s their business.”

Still, it was something, Jenkins reflected as he went out. Cowboy had been here an hour ago. If he could find another place where he had been half an hour ago. . . .

“Yeah,” said the barman two blocks farther on, “Cowboy was in here—only left about twenty minutes ago. What did you say your name was?”

“Father Christmas,” Jenkins told him. He poured his drink into a spittoon and walked out.

He looked back, calculating swiftly. It had taken Cowboy approximately forty minutes to get through two blocks of bars, counting the ones he must have visited on Neff’s side of the street. At this moment, then, if he’d continued his pub-crawl at the same speed, Cowboy must be about one block farther down.

He waited a moment longer, hoping to see Neff, but he was nowhere in sight. Two of Puddy’s men, however, were.

They were crossing the street a bare two hundred feet behind him—Blackie and another man. Jenkins’ temples pounded. Two of them. That meant only one thing: somewhere along the line Puddy’s three killers had found a fourth to help them; they had split up, two by two.

This pair was working both sides of the street. The other two, then, might have gone back to try the east end, or else . . .

Jenkins suddenly felt chilled through, in spite of his heavy overcoat and the whiskey he had drunk. He turned and hurried up the street, coat-tails flapping.

If they were ahead of him—!

He passed four bars with only a glance inside, and entered one a little less than a block from the one he had visited last Cowboy was not there, and the bartender could tell him nothing.

He wondered what Neff was doing. If it were only that he’d been unlucky enough to miss him each time he looked—if the man were still covering his side of the street—

He couldn’t wait to find out. He crossed over and hurried into the bar opposite, waited impatiently while the bartender served another customer, then motioned him over. “Have you seen Cowboy?”

The man looked at him curiously. “Sure—you just missed ‘im. He went home not more’n five minutes ago.”

Jenkins swore and ran for the exit.

Five minutes . . . He couldn’t have got more than a block or so in that time, drunk as he probably was. The quickest way to follow would be down the street to the east, but that way lay danger. He might run into Puddy’s men. Better go the other way and try to head him off.

Jenkins turned the comer and started down the almost-deserted street. He tried to hurry, but his knees began to pain him excruciatingly; in spite of himself, he had to slow down. He looked around for a cab, but there was none. If only Neff—

He turned left, made another painful block, then glanced down the dim canyon of the street. The sidewalks were emptying fast, and the sky was a shade lighter. With a start, he realized that it must be almost morning. Down the street to his right, only one figure was visible under the street-lamps: a tall man, bare head gleaming yellow, staggering. . . .

SOMEWHERE, Jenkins found the strength to break into a half-run. He caught up with the man near the end of the block, grabbed his arm.

Vacant pale-blue eyes stared back at him. Under the beaked nose, a long-toothed mouth hung open. The man’s unbuttoned overcoat showed a flaming red and blue shirt, half open over a hairy chest.

“Cowboy Stevens?” Jenkins gasped.

A block away, a car shifted into second, gears stuttering. It backfired sharply and then purred off into the night.

Cowboy lurched forward, goggling at something invisible a few inches above Jenkins’ shoulder. His feet tripped him and he slumped forward, twisting as he fell. One limp hand tapped Jenkins lightly in passing.

He rolled a little, then lay still on his back, the overcoat flared out around him, one foot dangling in the gutter. The red shirt was becoming slowly, wetly, redder. Cowboy wasn’t going to answer any questions.

A knife had done it. Jenkins made sure of that, then forced himself to quiet the panic within him. He looked around. There was still no one in sight. He bent over the sprawled body, deliberately slowing his movements. If he kept his head, he told himself, he could do it all in thirty seconds—there was plenty of time . . .

Nothing in the overcoat pockets. Nothing in the jacket, although the inside pocket sagged as if it had been stuffed with papers. In the trousers, nothing but keys, a pack of cigarettes and some small change. That was all.

He found a bulge near the top of the trousers—something was stuffed into the watch-pocket. He pulled out a tiny booklet and put it away with the rest. Hopeful, he tried the linings, the cuffs, but they were empty.

He straightened up and walked across the street as fast as he dared. His footsteps, crunching loudly in the snow, were the only sound. He rounded the corner. No one approached, and there was no shout behind him.

He found the Hotel Claridge without having to ask directions of anyone—a narrow, dingy-fronted structure on a side street He walked up to the lobby on the second floor.

The desk clerk was dozing behind a single unshaded bulb. Jenkins woke him up and asked, “Has Mr. Jones registered yet?”

“Fellow named John Jones registered this evening,” said the man sleepily. “Room 109. That the one?”

Jenkins managed to smile. “I’m his father,” he said. Have you got an adjoining room?”

The clerk gave him Room 110 and showed him the way down the dark hall. Jenkins rapped on the door of Neff’s room.

Neff opened the door a cautious crack, then flung it wide. “Geez, am I glad to see you!” he said. “I didn’t know what’d happened! All of a sudden Puddy’s boys was all over the place, an’ you was nowheres in sight. Did you—”

Jenkins collapsed into the single worn armchair. “I found Cowboy,” he said, “but they got to him first. He’s dead.”

“Geez, that’s tough,” said Neff. He sat down on the bed. “What you gonna do now?”

“I don’t know,” said Jenkins wearily. He started to get up to take his overcoat off, but it seemed too much of an effort. He sank back, feeling a dull lassitude creep up over him. “I had one thin wedge into Puddy’s defenses . . . that’s all . . . and now it’s gone. They were too fast for me, Johnny. . . .” He sighed. “Maybe Paul was right about me, at that.”

“Paul?” said Neff, from somewhere off in the distance. “What did he say about you to make you talk like that?”

“It’s a long story,” said Jenkins. He had a feeling that he hadn’t spoken loudly enough to be heard, and he tried to say it over again, but he couldn’t. He was dimly conscious that Neff was bending over him; he felt careful hands helping him off with his coat; and then there was nothing . . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Look at the Slayer, Please

HE DREAMED about Paul. They were standing in Jenkins’ big study, rigid with anger, both of them, and Paul was just back from college, dressed in sport jacket and sweater instead of a uniform. His young-old face, bronzed over the high cheekbones, was staring at Jenkins with a kind of helpless defiance.

Jenkins said, “Young rascal . . . do as I tell you.”

Paul said, “. . . dried up. You’re no good for anything any more. You hate to see anybody else doing anything you can’t do.”

Paul said: “You’re no good for anything any more!”

Letters, sifting down over his desk. “Dear Sir: . . . He is now living in the cheapest part of this city and is looking for work but without success. As instructed, our operative approached him posing as a private philanthropist, and offered him . . . He threw our operative down the stairs . . . enclosed, bill for damages.”

“. . . has made the acquaintance of a man called ‘Cowboy’ Stevens real, name William Stevenson . . . bad reputation but no arrest record . . . your son is now working in a gambling casino owned by Robert Puddy. . . .”

“. . . has apparently formed an attachment for a young woman named Bess Miller who sings in a night club, the Silver Cup, owned by Puddy . . . Our operatives report that Puddy is also interested in the girl, but she prefers your son. . . .”

“Dear Father: I guess it will surprise you to hear from me, especially when you see the return address on this letter. . . . maybe I was as mule-headed as you were—got myself into a bad crowd, I can see that now—but it doesn’t make much difference . . . we’re being shipped out before long and I probably won’t see you for—The only thing is, I’m worried about Bess, my girl . . . know she still loves me, but she’s written me some funny letters . . . if anything happens, Dad, I’m counting on you to look after her. . . .”

Look after her, look after her, look after her, look after her.

If anything happens—

“WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON, SGT. PAUL JENKINS . . .”

And a picture of Bess, out of a newspaper, sweet, clear-eyed, smiling at him. He was trying to go and see her, but he knew that when he got there she would be dead. He hurried, hurried, pushing the distance out of the way, but it was too late, and it would always be too late, for ever and ever too late . . .

Neff was shaking him. Sunlight was streaming into the room. “It’s five o’clock in the afternoon,” Neff said. “You better get up, boss.”

Jenkins sat up, his head clearing slowly. He was in bed. “Where did you sleep?” he said fuzzily.

“Next door. I found the key in your hand—figured we better swap rooms. You was out on your feet.”

“Yes . . . Thanks, Johnny,” he sighed. He got up and started to dress.

Neff had a paper, and read to him while he brushed his teeth. ‘The body of a blond-haired man about 33 was found on Meeker street near South avenue early this morning. The man, tentatively identified as William “Cowboy” Stevens, had been stabbed to death, with robbery as the apparent motive.’

“They’re not sure who he is,” said Jenkins, putting a blade in the razor Neff had brought him. “There wasn’t any identification in his pockets when I found him—” Suddenly he remembered. He put down the razor and went over to where his jacket hung on a chair-back. He pulled things out of the pocket.

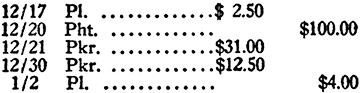
“This was all that was left,” he said. “Keys, cigarettes—” He looked at the little booklet. “And this.” It was a memorandum book, the kind given away by banks and business firms.

The entries began on the second page.

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“Methodical,” said Jenkins. “He kept a record of what he won and lost at poker and pool.”

There were more on the next page:



“P-h-t, one hundred dollars,” said Jenkins. “What kind of a game is that? There used to be a game called Faro—no, that couldn’t be it.” He stared at it. Pht. What vowel was left out? Phat. Phet. Phit. Phot. Photo!

Neff was looking at him. “What is it, boss?”

Jenkins sat down, thinking furiously. He waved his hand at the cabman. “Wait a minute, Johnny . . .”

There might have been a easier way to do it, if he hadn’t slept so long. . . . But there was no use going back to Cowboy’s room now; Puddy’s men had undoubtedly been there and gone long ago, and by this time there might even be a police guard over the place. He couldn’t risk that.

Jenkins stood up. “Come on, Johnny. Let’s have dinner. I’ll tell you about it while we eat.”

THEY checked out and went down the street, heading for a little Italian place that Neff knew. Jenkins stopped in front of a five-and-dime. “I’ve got a couple of things to buy. Johnny. It’ll only take a minute to get them.”

They walked in and Jenkins wandered around until he found the picture counter. He picked out an 8 x 10 photograph, then walked over to the stationery counter and bought envelopes—one to fit the picture, and a packet of small ones.

Out on the street, Jenkins took the cheap frame off the photograph, tossed it into a waste can, and slipped the picture into the large envelope. Neff was goggling.

“I’ll explain later, Johnny,” Jenkins told him. “It would take too long. Now, where’s that Italian place of yours?”

When they had ordered, he said, “Be patient a while longer, Johnny, and answer a couple of questions for me. First, where is the central police station?”

Neff gestured. “Up at Main and Clark, about fifteen blocks from here. Why—you ain’t going to the bulls, are you?”

Jenkins smiled. “I am, but I don’t think I’ll get there. Where’s your cab now?”

Neff looked bewildered. “I parked it a couple blocks down the street. The company garage is all the way up to the other end of town, so I called in last night an’ told ’em I’d had a breakdown out in the sticks and wouldn’t be able to get back till I had repairs made.”

“Good. Now listen carefully—when we leave here I want you to make a phone call to Puddy. Try his office, then the Silver Cup, or wherever else you think he might be. When you get him, here’s what you say: ‘This is a friend, Puddy. Jenkins has just had a certain photograph enlarged, and he’s on his way to the bulls with it. If—’ ”

“Wait a minute!” Neff exploded. “What you want to do, put your head in a rope? Those guys play for keeps, boss!”

“Here’s the ravioli,” said Jenkins. “Ahh, that looks good. And a glass of beer, please waiter.”

“Make it two,” said Neff. “Listen, boss are you crazy?”

“Eat your ravioli,” Jenkins told him, “it’s delicious. No, I’m perfectly sane. You didn’t let me finish. Tell Puddy, ‘If you can make a traffic jam in front of your place in about—fifteen minutes, you’ll get him.’ Now I’ll tell you the whole thing all over, and you repeat it after me.”

Neff did as he was told, but his face was long and dubious.

“Believe me, Johnny, this is the only way it can be,” Jenkins said. He took out his checkbook, and holding it below the table where Neff couldn’t see it, he wrote a check for five-hundred dollars, slipped it into one of the envelopes he had bought, and sealed it.

He handed the envelope across to Neff. “I can’t explain any more now, Johnny—you wouldn’t believe me, anyway. But when I come back, if I do, I’ll tell you anything you want to know. If I don’t, this will explain it. Don’t open it till later, please.”

Neff took it, opened his mouth, then closed it again and tackled his ravioli glumly. When they had finished, Jenkins paid the check and led him over to the phone booth in the rear. “Sure you’ve got it?” he asked.

Neff nodded and shut the door. Watching, Jenkins saw him dial a number, speak briefly, then hang up and try another.

The cabman hung up and came out. “He’s at the Silver Cup,” he said. “Now what?”

“Now,” said Jenkins, “we march.”

They picked up Neff’s cab and rolled northward along Main in the late-afternoon sunlight. The air was fresh, but warmer than yesterday; Jenkins kept the window down, enjoying it.

They passed Puddy’s office building and then, two blocks farther on, Jenkins spotted a white canopy with the words “Silver Cup”. As he watched, a delivery truck pulled out from the curb, straight into the path of a blue sedan going the other way. Brakes squealed. The two cars met with a tinny clangor that echoed and re-echoed from the buildings. Traffic began to pile up.

“Good timing,” said Jenkins. “Pull up as close as you can, Johnny.” Neff obeyed in silence.

HORNS were blaring, and crowds were gathering on both sides of the street. Up ahead, the driver of the truck had stepped out and was shouting angrily at the owner of the car he had hit. The next minute, the two were enthusiastically slugging each other.

A police whistle shrilled somewhere, but no bluecoats appeared. The crowd was pressing closer, watching the fight—all but half a dozen men who were picking their way singly among the jammed cars, looking carefully into each. Jenkins recognized Blackie, and one of the other men who had been with him last night.

“Here it comes,” he said to Neff. “Don’t try to interfere, or even notice, no matter what happens.”

He was surprised to find that his hands were trembling.

One of the men came alongside, peered in, then turned calmly and motioned to the others. Two of them came swiftly over, followed by the rest. The first man opened the door. He had a swarthy, pimpled face and an engaging smile.

He was very smooth about it. He said, “Why, hello, Mr. Martin. We been waitin’ for you.” He reached in and pulled Jenkins out, fast enough to give him no chance to yell, but not roughly. Still smiling, he brought up a fist to Jenkins’ belly.

Hands gripped Jenkins’ elbows from behind, holding him up unobtrusively. Half-dazed with pain, he glimpsed one of the men handing money to Neff. Then he was being hustled across the street and up over the curb. Someone took the envelope and his umbrella away. Someone else kept up a casual stream of conversation.

“Yes, I know you’re anxious to meet Blodgett, Mr. Martin. I’m sure you’ll find that we all see eye to eye on this matter. Now if you’ll just step in here—”

The door opened and they went through in a body, Jenkins in the middle. The man who had been talking stopped and began to whistle softly. Somebody said, “Lock the door, Rusty.”

The place was dark and empty, echoing. They went through a short entrance hall, then down two steps into a large room scattered with the vague whiteness of tablecloths. Past the silent bandstand they walked, through a door at the far end of the room and up a narrow flight of stairs.

Blackie was in the lead. He opened the door and said, “Got him, boss!”

Puddy’s voice answered, “Okay, bring him in. You and Knife and Ed—the rest can go back to work.”

Jenkins was shoved into the room, and the three men followed—Blackie, the swarthy man, and a thin, sharp-jawed individual. The door shut behind them.

The room was big and ornate, with black walnut furniture and heavy wine-red drapes. Standing in the middle of the gray carpet, his back to a polished desk, was Puddy.

The fat man smiled icily. “Hello, Jenkins.” Jenkins was still trying to quiet the sickening waves of pain that boiled up from his stomach. He said nothing.

“You know what your trouble is?” said Puddy. “You’re nosey.” He turned to Blackie and the other two. “Tie him up, Ed. That the picture, Knife? Gimme it.”

The sharp-featured man pushed Jenkins into a straight chair and began trussing him up. Puddy walked back toward his desk, tearing open the envelope. He pulled the photograph out two inches, stared at it, then whipped it out the rest of the way. His eyes popped, and his lips moved silently.

“What’s the matter, boss?” asked the swarthy Knife.

“Matter!” whispered Puddy. He strode back across the room, stomach wobbling. He threw the picture at Knife and Blackie. “Look at that!” he said. “Linda Darnell!”

He stopped in front of Jenkins. “What are you trying to pull?” he demanded furiously.

“Where’s the picture you got from Cowboy?” Blackie looked up from the photograph. “How do we know he’s got it?” he asked, “Maybe that call was a phoney, boss.”

“It was,” said Jenkins. The four of them stared at him.

Jenkins said, “Cowboy was dead when I got to him—your work, Knife. That phonecall was made by a friend of mine.”

Puddy walked away a few steps, turned around and came back. “I don’t get it,” he said. “I think you’re lying.”

“What was in that picture, anyway?” Ed asked. “All you told us was—”

“Shut up!” said Puddy. “Let me think.”

“Cowboy paid a hundred dollars for the picture,” said Jenkins. “He probably put it in a safe-deposit box. He was going to use it to blackmail—somebody.”

Blackie came forward, carrying Jenkins’ umbrella. His eyes were hard and bright. “Let me handle him, boss,” he said. “I’ll make him talk sense.”

JENKINS tensed himself. He knew what Blackie had in mind, and Blackie wouldn’t have forgotten any of the places he’d been hit, either; the bruises were still there to remind him.

He’d have to sit and take it—if he could take it—because there was still a vital part of the puzzle that he didn’t know.

Agony exploded on his cheekbone, rocking his head aside, lancing down through his cheek and jaw. He clenched his hands, pushed at the floor with his toes. . . . Blackie swung the umbrella again—Chin . . . Mouth . . . Nose. The pain was a blanket in front of his eyes, opening up raggedly, then closing again each time Blackie struck.

It stopped, finally. Puddy’s voice was saying, “. . . easy. Don’t want him to kick off. You, can you hear me? Where’s that picture?”

Jenkins blinked dazedly. Blackie, in front of him, was two Blackies standing side by side. . . . Reminded him of something. What?

The snapshot. That was it—the snapshot in Blackie’s wallet. It all added up: the hundred-dollar picture, Blackie’s double who was nowhere around—and Puddy, the anachronism. If he could only put them together right . . .

He forced himself to see straight. He said to Blackie, “Remember your brother?”

Blackie looked startled. “What do you know about my brother?”

“I know,” said Jenkins, “who killed him!”

Nobody laughed. Blackie went on staring at him. Knife looked nervous. Ed’s expression was unreadable. Puddy scowled ferociously. “Hit him again!”

“Wait a minute, boss,” said Blackie. “This might be somethin’.” . . . Talk fast, Grandpa.”

“If he’s going to talk, said Puddy, “let him talk about that picture!”

“I’ll talk,” said Jenkins, “about both things.” He licked his lips, found the salt taste of blood, running in channels, that had not been there before. He started slowly, choosing his words carefully. If I don’t do it right, he thought, one of them is sure to kill me before I can finish. Lord, give me strength. . . .

“Somebody wanted to get rid of your brother,” he said. “You thought it was some rival mobster, didn’t you, Blackie? But it wasn’t.”

They were looking at each other—Blackie and Knife bewildered, Puddy angry, Ed wary. For the moment, they were all willing for him to go on.

“Puddy—” The fat man stiffened, and one bloated hand went to his lapel. “—saw his chance to get Bess Miller for himself. Just before my son Paul left to join the Army, he got him drunk, or doped him, and faked a picture to prove that he’d killed your brother. With that as a club, he forced Bess to marry him.

“But Cowboy talked too much. He got drunk, probably, and let it slip out to Bess how she’d been tricked. That’s why Puddy had to kill her. And that’s why Cowboy hasn’t been around lately—Puddy was angry at him. Not angry enough to kick him off the payroll, apparently, though, otherwise Cowboy would have used that picture. As it was, he probably figured that he was getting paid for doing nothing, and he might as well wait.”

“All right, wise guy,” said Ed. “if you know so much, what was in that picture?”

“I was waiting for somebody to ask that,” Jenkins said. “Puddy—”

“Okay, okay,” said Puddy, waving his hand impatiently, “he’s shot off his mouth enough. He hasn’t got the picture, anybody can see that. Take him down the back way, boys.”

“Wait a minute, Puddy,” said Ed. “We want to hear the man talk.”

Puddy’s hand went to his lapel again. Ed fingered his necktie. They stared at each other. Puddy’s face went livid, then flushed. “Okay!” he shouted. “Waste your time, if you want to.”

Knife moved back a little, hands in his pockets. Silently, the others followed suit.

“Puddy,” said Jenkins carefully, “never lets a chance go by to get a hold on one of his men. You remember, Puddy, I told you you were an anachronism? Well, that was a favorite tactic of the feudal barons—that and the double-cross. Keep your men as dependent upon you as you can, and when their usefulness is over, kill them.”

“Listen,” said Puddy rapidly, “don’t pay any attention to that old crackpot. Don’t you see what he’s trying to do?”

“Shut up,” said Ed, “for just another minute. Jenkins—for the last time, what was in that picture?”

Jenkins was trembling. “The original photograph,” he said, “gave Puddy ideas. So he brought the cameraman back and hid him behind a drape or something again after the fake killing, when he hired you and Knife to do a real job!”

KNIFE shouted, “That’s a lie! I didn’t have nothing to do with it!” He pulled a gleaming blade from somewhere and whipped his arm back.

Jenkins shoved desperately at the floor and toppled backwards with a crash. A whisper of steel went over his head into the wall.

Ed and Puddy crouched and drew their guns almost simultaneously. Flame leaped out between them.

Blackie stood with legs apart, not trying to take cover. He had a gun in each hand, firing half-blindly. He was mouthing over and over, “You killed him! You killed him!”

The firing stopped. Over by the corner of the desk, Puddy raised himself slightly, moved an inch or two, and then flopped back, blood pouring from his mouth.

Ed was lying face-downward; Knife was sprawled on his back. Neither moved.

Blackie had a knife in his chest, just below the collarbone. He didn’t seem to know it. He turned around slowly, his eyes dull. He saw Knife’s body, raised his gun, and fired another slug into it. He pressed the trigger again, but it only clicked. It was the same with the other gun.

He dropped both of them and staggered to the door. Jenkins heard him on the stairs—clumping down the first few steps, falling the rest of the way.

Then there was the sound of a lot of people rushing up the stairway—Jenkins thought, I was afraid of that. I can’t handle a dozen!

The door sprang open, and blue-coated men streamed in. Jenkins blinked at them. Oh, no, he thought, not the Marines!

Neff sorted himself out of the scramble and leaped over to Jenkins. “Geez, you’re not dead!” he said. “Not even a scratch on you—except your face. How the hell did you do it, boss? What’re you, Superman?” He lifted Jenkins upright and started working on the rope.

“What the blue blazes goes on here?” asked a police sergeant. “Who are you? Who killed all these rats?”

Jenkins explained. It took time, but he did it. “They all had one weakness,” he said, among other things. “They were operating under a system of conduct that’s no good any more. It should have gone out with bows and arrows. I worked on that, and I was lucky.”

Afterwards, he went downstairs with the policemen, Neff helping him. Out on the street, with the cool air blowing across his battered face, he paused and looked up for a moment at the night sky.

“Was that all right, Paul?” he asked.