



VELDA

My First Case



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Books by Ron Miller

VELDA
THE DREAM MACHINES
SPACE ART
THE HISTORY OF ROCKETS
THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION
THE SUN
MERCURY & PLUTO
THE EARTH & MOON
MARS
VENUS
JUPITER
SATURN
URANUS & NEPTUNE
ASTEROIDS, COMETS & METEORS
EXTRASOLAR PLANETS
THE ELEMENTS
SPECIAL EFFECTS IN THE MOVIES
BRADAMANT: THE IRON TEMPEST
THE BRONWYN TETRALOGY:
PALACES & PRISONS
SILK & STEEL
HEARTS & ARMOR
MERMAIDS & METEORS

With Frederick C. Durant III:
WORLDS BEYOND
THE ART OF CHESLEY BONESTELL

With Pamela Sargent:
FIREBRANDS

With William K. Hartmann:
THE GRAND TOUR
THE HISTORY OF EARTH
CYCLES OF FIRE
IN THE STREAM OF STARS



VELDA

My First Case

IT ALL BEGAN (I KNOW, I KNOW, BUT THERE'S REALLY NO OTHER WAY TO START THIS), WITH A VISIT FROM Maxim Slotnik, of all people. I hadn't seen him in two or three months, not since I left Slotnik's Follies. Not that I didn't like the Follies, which I didn't, or didn't like Slotnik, which I didn't just on principle, I just needed to do something a little more useful with my life than shedding feathers four times a night, not counting weekends, with matinees, when I shed them six times.

God knows I needed a change, and what could possibly have been a greater change for a stripper than to become a private eye?

Although it really didn't have anything to do with my decision (I'll explain what inspired that in just a bit) my dad had been a cop – one of the squarest and straightest-shooting on the force – until he got himself killed. How that happened still isn't very clear – and made no clearer by the DA's office, which to my mind went out of its way to muddy the waters and blacken Dad's name. I won't go into the whole sordid thing here. Just let it go that Dad's benefits were withheld from me, leaving me flat broke. Mom'd died in a freak accident with a donut machine when I was a kid, so I was not only penniless, I was alone. I had to quit business school classes and find any job I could. Any job turned out to be at Saperstein's Talent Agency and Music Publishing Company, where I doubled as receptionist, secretary and general girl Friday. ("Receptionist" and "secretary" sound like similar jobs. I'd rather see a few very different jobs here. e.g. secretary, chauffeur, gopher—Any receptionist or secretary will tell you that they are very different, but in such a small office as Saperstein's they probably were synonymous. Let's go with "receptionist, file clerk and general girl Friday")

I wasn't such a hot typist – I mean, I'd only had one semester in school when Dad died – but I was tall and had legs that went up at least six inches further than most other girls. Maxim Slotnik was a client of Saperstein's. After a few visits, I realized he was coming in mainly to look at my legs. Finally, he offered me a spot in the chorus of Slotnik's Famous Follies. While I'm not exactly voluptuous – built more along the lines of Suzy Parker than Jayne Mansfield, thank God – Max said I had that Something Extra men go for. Personality, I guess. One thing led to another and I eventually graduated to being a headliner. I hated it like anything, and Dad would've killed me if he'd still been around, but it beat fifteen dollars a week from Saperstein's. What else could I have done?

It was near the end of my fifth year at Slotnik's that I noticed the ad for the Hawkshaw Guaranteed Be A Detective Correspondence Course on the inside of a matchbook cover. I sent in my money, got a book in the mail every month, studied like hell, and a year later I've got my ticket.

I live and work out of a fifth-floor cold water flat over a Chinese laundry. The card thumb-tacked over my mailbox downstairs reads: Superior Detective Agency – V. Bellinghausen, prop. And that's where Maxim Slotnik, of all people, showed up. Just my luck getting him for my first client.

I looked at the fat little butterball standing outside my door for a good fifteen seconds—not so surprised to see him as surprised he'd made it up five floors. He was red as a beet and puffing like a steam engine, so I invited him in before he died there in the hallway.

"Jesus, Max, you want some water? You better sit down or something, you don't look so hot."

"Thanks, Velda. My God, did you have to find a place so far above the street?"

"Do you good, Maxim, God knows you need the exercise."

"Exercise, schmexercise. Why don't you come on back to the show, Velda? The girls miss you. The boys miss you. I miss you."

"Gee, I'm sure sorry I'm breaking your heart, Maxim," I said, handing him his water. "You want a Kleenex?"

"I mean, Jesus, Velda, look at this place."

"What's wrong with it?" I asked, hoping he wouldn't start listing its faults, but he did. When he finished I said, "Look, Maxim, I'm sure I appreciate your deep concern for me, but I can't believe you came all the way up here just to say howya doin' Velda. Forgive me if I'm misjudging you."

"Aww, look, Velda, there's no need to talk like that. Haven't I always been square with you?"

"Yeah, sure, sure you have. I got no complaints about you Maxim.. So what're you doing here, if you don't mind getting right to the point."

He started wringing his hands, which I knew meant he was going to talk about something he really wanted to avoid, like turning on the heat in the dressing rooms before Thanksgiving or giving someone a ten-cent raise.

"You remember a girl named Monica? Started a month, maybe two, before you left?"

"Monica? Sure, I think. Cute blonde, eyes like bottle caps?"

He nodded and swallowed.

"Well, what about her? Don't tell me she's your new girlfriend. Jesus, Maxim, she's right off the farm."

"No, Velda. She's dead."

"Dead?"

"Dead."

"Dead how?"

"Murdered, Velda. Someone killed her. The janitor, McWhorter, found her yesterday afternoon in the dressing room. Jesus. Someone'd stabbed her, stabbed her in the heart."

"Good God, why would someone do that?"

"That's why I came to see you, Velda?"

“Pardon?”

“Well, you’re a detective aren’t you?”

“I, well, yeah, but – “

“Look, Velda, this detective thing, you know what I think about it. A private eye? You’re a great showgirl, Velda, a star. What do you want to be a detective for? It’s crazy. But there you are, you got a license and everything and, well, we’re friends, ain’t we, Velda?”

“Yeah, sure, we’re pals, Maxim.”

“Well, you see, Velda, this thing could ruin me. The new DA, he ran on that morals platform, clean up the burlesques he promised, run the strip joints out of town – he’s been trying to close us down for months. This’s all he needs. Murder for God’s sake. Can you imagine what he’s gonna do with the headlines: ‘Naked Teenage Stripper Murdered at Slotnik’s?’ I gotta find out what happened quick, Velda. He’s gonna shut us down any day.”

“Calm down. You’re going to give yourself an embolism.”

“You gotta help me. You know your way around. You know the girls. And, and, well I can trust you, Velda, You’ll keep things quiet.”

“But what do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know...but you gotta clear me of this, Velda. There’s gotta be something.”

Yeah. What’d he expect me to do? But it was my first case, such as it was, and it didn’t seem right to turn it down. Besides, I did owe Maxim. No matter how much I hated to admit it, he was really all right even if he was a slimeball. And I certainly owed the girls something. I had a lot of friends in the show and it’d be awful tough on them if Slotnik’s closed. So I told him sure. I’d get my fingerprint kit and magnifying glass and bloodhound and follow him over to the theater. What the hell, if nothing else I’d be able to pay the rent that month.

It was strange, being back in the theater, knowing I was there as an outsider, no longer part of the show. I’d spent the last five years there, seven days a week, had been gone only a couple of months and everything still felt new. The girls all waved and said, Hi, Velda, howya doin’? but something’d been broken and I wasn’t so sure but that I regretted it more than I thought I would.

Maxim took me down to the dressing room, one of two, which had been off limits since the murder. There was a cop on the door and when he saw us coming he raised his hand to stop us.

“You can’t go in,” he said. “Say! Hi, Velda! I thought you quit this dump.”

“Hi, Buzz. Yeah, I quit all right.”

“Sure gonna miss you. You were the only thing gave this place any class.”

“I want Velda to see the room, officer,” said Maxim.

“Well, I can’t rightly let you do that.”

“It’s in my rights. She’s investigating the mur – the girl’s death. I gotta right to have someone do that.”

“Investigate? What the hell’re you talking about?”

“She’s a detective, a private detective. She’s gotta right to see the room if I want her to.”

“Is this some sort of gag? What’s the deal, Velda?”

“It’s no joke, Buzz, I got my ticket.” I fished my wallet out of my bag and showed him.

“Why don’t you let me take a look? What harm could it do?”

“The body was taken out yesterday. Nothin’ in there but a big bloodstain.”

"I won't touch a thing. Promise. No one'll be the wiser...I'll send you that autographed picture you've always wanted."

"Well, all right. Just don't be too long."

He unlatched the door and I went in, Maxim right on my heels. The room was dark and I flipped the switch, turning on the couple of tin-shaded bare bulbs that hung from the ceiling. There wasn't anything in here I hadn't seen a hundred times. A row of makeup tables—just cheap vanities with big mirrors, rimmed with a couple dozen light bulbs, half of which didn't work. Wooden chairs, a couple wardrobes, clothes racks with costumes hanging from them. Nothing I hadn't seen. The end table was — had been — Monica's. The first thing I saw was that it had no mirror and most of its bulbs were broken. All of her makeup and things were gone, too. I guessed the police had taken it all for evidence. I glanced down at the floor in front of the table and saw the huge dark red stain, as big as a rug. Jesus Christ, someone had died right there and spilled all that blood.

"What happened, Max?"

"McWhorter found her right there. She was already dead. He took one look and called the cops."

"Where's McWhorter now?"

"Where he usually is, I guess, down in the furnace room."

"All right, Max, you go and take some aspirins and try to relax." I tried to sound as confident as I could, which seemed to be enough to calm Max down anyway.

"You all done in there?" Buzz asked from the doorway.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"The show's not been the same since you left, Velda."

"Lots of things haven't been the same since I left, Buzz."

McWhorter had a kind of nest behind the furnace in the sub-basement. I'd never had much to do with him, even though he'd been working in the theater long before Max took it over and Max'd been there for a couple decades. None of the girls ever had anything to do with him, for that matter, mainly because he was more than a little creepy.

For most of us he was just this greasy ball of rags that hovered around in the background making sure the toilets worked and the light bulbs got changed, neither of which happened very often. I tracked him down by following the sniffing sound of his perpetually running nose, which led me to a cozy little den consisting of a table with a hotplate, a chair, a cot and McWhorter, who was sitting on the cot, sniffing and hacking. He had some sort of chronic nasal thing.

"Mr. McWhorter?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm Velda, Velda Bellinghausen."

"I know who you are. You the doll what used to be the headliner. Too skinny I always thought. Don't know what the shows're comin' to, girls got no meat on 'em no more."

"Well, ah, thanks. Look, Mr. McWhorter, if I'm not interrupting anything, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Like what?"

"Well, about the girl who got killed yesterday."

"What about her?"

"Max – Mr. Slotnik told me you found her. The body?"

"So?"

"Well, I was wondering if you could tell me about that."

"Why?"

"Max asked me to help him out. I, ah, I got a private investigator's license, to look into things like this."

"A dick? You a dick? Har."

I wasn't sure what that last sound meant. It might have been a snort of derision; it might have been just some phlegm coming loose from its moorings.

"Is it okay if I ask you about the girl? About finding her?"

"Ain't much to tell. She was layin' there on the floor, dead as mackerel, that's all."

"How'd you know she was dead?"

"How about a hole in the middle of 'er, big enough to stick my hand into, leaking like a plugged toilet? She were dead all right."

"A hole? What kind of a hole, Mr. McWhorter?"

"A hole. Like someone'd stuck an axe in her, for Christ's sake." He made that awful har sound a couple more times. Fumbling under his pillow, he brought out a mason jar, unscrewed the lid and spit what looked like a piece of lung into it. He glanced up at me as he was screwing the lid back on and saw what must have been an expression of disgust on my face. "Waste not want not," he said, shoving the jar back under the pillow.

I didn't know what to say, so I asked: "Didn't you see anyone else?"

"She were there all by herself."

"No one else around? No one else in the basement?"

"Nope. She'd come in early, 'bout half hour or so before the others usually show up. No one there but her."

"Well, I'm sure you didn't kill her, so I suppose there must've been someone else in the building."

"I didn't say no one else in the whole building, I said no one else in the basement. Most of the musicians was in by then and the stage manager and who knows who else. I meant no one else was downstairs, naturally."

"How do you know that?"

"Cause I was fixin' the light over the callboard right by the stairs. No one been up or down the whole time I was there but that girl."

"Monica?"

"If that's the dead'un's name, yup."

"Well, the murderer might have been down there all along, before you showed up."

"Maybe, but what's that to me? I only know what I know and can't say nothin' about anythin' else."

"You didn't hear anything? The dressing room's not far from the bottom of the stairs."

"You mean like screams or somethin'?"

"Whatever."

"No screams or nothin', nothin' at all."

"So how long was it, after Monica went downstairs that you went down?"

"I dunno. Half hour? Mebbe longer? I talked to the boy what brings in the afternoon papers

‘cause I’d asked him to bring me some donuts and I ate a donut but I never was more’n ten feet from the door the whole time.”

“So it was quite a while before you went downstairs? Half an hour at least? Maybe forty-five minutes?”

“I guess – how am I supposed to know? Next time some bimbo decides to get herself knocked off I’ll be sure she lets me know in advance and I’ll check my watch.”

“What’d you do after you found the body?”

“What do you think I did? I got the hell out of there and called the manager. He called the cops and there you are.”

Well, it all beat the hell out of me. I went back upstairs and looked around for someone else to talk to. All I found was Gernly, the stage manager, an octogenarian who must’ve been dug up when they laid the foundation of the building. He’s the only one who would’ve been anywhere near the stairs and back entrance, so if anyone’d seen anything out of the way it would’ve been him.

“Say! Hiya Velda! Good to see ya, kid!”

“Howya been doin’? How’s the psiatica?”

“Aw, it’s okay, I guess. Thanks for sending that ointment, that helped a lot.”

“Glad to hear it. Say, about yesterday...”

“Yeah, wasn’t that somethin’? Awful shame. Sweet little kid she was, you ever know ‘er? What a shame...”

“Yeah. I’d met her a couple of times. She started just before I left, so we never got to do much more than say hello. But she seemed nice.”

“Yeah.”

“Look, you were backstage yesterday afternoon weren’t you?”

“Yup, just where I always am.”

“You see anything funny? Anyone who shouldn’t have been around?”

“Nope. You know no gets in or out of that door without me seein’ ‘em.”

“Didn’t see or hear anything at all?”

“Well, I did hear somethin’ – a kind o’ crash, I guess. Like someone dropped somethin’ heavy – it wasn’t loud, I dint think nothin’ of it. You think it had somethin’ to do with what happened to that poor kid?”

I told him that I hadn’t the slightest idea. By this time most of the girls had arrived for the afternoon matinee so I went back downstairs again and found the other dressing room, where all the girls had to crowd themselves now that the other room had been sealed, more or less, by the cops. Buzz was still there, completely failing in his effort to look disinterested in the flurry of feathers, sequins, and bare skin that bustled around him. I gave him a grin and he blushed like a schoolboy.

I was mobbed as soon as I went into the dressing room (only the headliners rated private rooms ; I’d talk to them next) It was kind of nice to see all my old friends again – well, not that any of them were really friends. There had never been anyone I’d ever felt close to or hung around with outside the theater, but it was hard to work with people for so long without forming some sort of bond, even if it’s that same sort of link that connects survivors of a hotel fire. But what was funny was how they looked. I mean, I’d looked no different the past five years.

Nothing was any cheesier, more tawdry or cheaper than it had ever been. I was suddenly self-conscious about how I was dressed: a grey business suit among g-strings and pasties. It was like I was the one who was naked. Looking at the girls I wondered, did I ever look that tired, hopeless, hard-edged and garish?

Everyone was all agog about the murder, if agog is the word I want. Once they heard what I was doing, they had more questions for me than I had for them. Everyone had known the new girl, Monica, and had liked her, even given her short run with the show. No one knew where she was from exactly—somewhere in the Midwest, they said—but she seemed to be a genuinely sweet kid. Not an enemy in the world. Well, one, evidently.

“Trish’d know something about her,” said Gloria, who was not only one of the dancers but did a pretty neat bit with one of the baggy pants. She had aspirations of being an actress and had a chance of making it. She was a natural comedienne. “Trish and Monica spent a lot of time together.”

Trish – Trish the Dish – was the stripper who’d moved up to take my place. So after chatting a few minutes longer with my old chums, I went down the hall to where there were a half dozen doors marked with glittery cardboard stars. I figured Trish’d be in my old room. I knocked and was rewarded with a “Yeah?”

“Trish? It’s me, Velda.”

The door flew open immediately and I was engulfed in feathers and a couple square yards of bare skin. “Velda! What the hell’re you doing here? Don’t tell me old Maxie’s talked you into coming back.”

“Hell no. I’m just passing through.”

She looked relieved. Trish was a statuesque woman who gave whole new meaning to the adjective. Four fingers taller than my six feet, she had more curves than a bowl of spaghetti. She made me feel dumpy. Worse, she made me feel short and I just hate that.

“Well, it’s great to see you. Come on in and have a drink.”

She shut the door behind me and plopped into an overstuffed chair in the corner. Trish was already dressed for her first show, only a half hour from now. She was wearing no more feathers than would cover a young canary. I took the only other chair, the old kitchen chair that sat in front of her makeup table. I swung it around, straddled the seat and leaned my chin on my crossed arms on the chair back. Trish picked a bottle off the floor beside her and swung it over to me. It was a pretty expensive-looking brandy and for that reason, if for no other, I took a good swig. It wasn’t half bad.

“I suppose you’ve heard the big news,” she said.

“About Monica being killed?”

“Yeah. Ain’t that sumthin’?”

“Got Maxie all in a swivet.”

“Nothin’ makes him more nervous than havin’ cops runnin’ all around the place.”

“He’s worried this’ll give the DA cause to shut the place down.”

“Shit. Wouldn’t it just figger? Finally get myself on the marquee and look what happens. You had all the luck, Velda.”

“Yeah, I sure did.”

“And you’re a what now? A private eye?”

I nodded and showed her my ticket.

“Jesus, don’t that just about beat all. Jesus.” (Reinstated “Jesus” to make sense of referral in her next line)

“Well, that’s why I’m here today, Trish.”

“Because of Jesus?”

“No, because of the murder – Maxie’s asked me to look into it, maybe find something to keep the DA off his back. Trish – the other girls said you and Monica got along.”

“Sure. She was a sweet little kid. Been in the city, I don’t know, maybe a month or two. I showed her the ropes. She was good, really. She had a lotta potential, you know? Worked like a demon. Could dance, even sing a little. Just busted out with personality and, you know, that’s what guys go for. Anyone can go out on a runway and take their clothes off, but personality – that’s what gives you style, gives you class. But I don’t hafta to tell you that, Velda. You and me, we got personality. Monica had personality in spades. And a body to go with it. She was on stage, the other girls might’ve been a row of penguins as far as the audience cared. I could see that Maxie had his eye on her. She wasn’t going to be in the chorus much longer. I guess she’s never going to make it, now, is she?”

“Guess not.”

“What a cryin’ shame.” She took another slug of brandy. “What a lousy racket.”

“Know anything else about her? Did she have any friends, I mean outside the theater? Guys, maybe?”

“I don’t think so. Like I said, she hadn’t been in town all that long. She was pretty focused on her work and didn’t have time for much else. Lotsa wolves sniffing ‘round her, course, but I kept an eye on her. Spent pretty much all her time here so far as I could tell.”

“She had to be sleeping somewhere. You know where she lived?”

“Somewhere in the Village. Found herself a room, I know. You talk to Wobbles yet?”

“Wobbles” Sploon ran the ticket booth. He’d been a boxer once, just after World War I, and had had one concussion too many.

“I will, thanks. Anything else you can think of?”

“Nope. I think she’d run away and dint like talkin’ about home very much. I got the impression she hadn’t been real happy.”

“Well, thanks, Trish.” I gave her one of my cards, which seemed to impress her no end. “It’s been great seeing you. I really wish you all the success in the world, you deserve it.”

“Thanks, Velda. You always were a square shooter.”

Wobbles gave me an address on Bumpass Street, which I thought was funny until I discovered it was pronounced “Bumpus.” Monica’s place was only a few blocks from the city morgue, so I figured I’d stop off there first and see what I could learn.

There was no problem getting in, I just told the cop at the desk I wanted to identify a body and he gave me directions.

“Say,” he said as I turned to go, “Ain’t you Roald’s kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Velda?” he said, giving me a long, appraising look. “You’ve grown up some since I last saw you. What’s it been, five, six years?”

“Yeah, it’s been awhile.”

“Your Dad and all. That was a shame, I can tell you. Lotta the boys still ain’t happy ‘bout

that, you know. There was somethin' damn rotten 'bout that whole deal. I just wanted you t'know ain't all of us turned 'gainst your Dad."

"I know. I really appreciate you saying that. It means a lot."

"You ought to stop by the old precinct more often. You've really grown up."

"Beats shrinking," I said.

There was only a little form to sign down in the morgue. I waited to be called, sitting in a room covered entirely in beige linoleum. There was only one chair and a back issue of Field & Stream, so I browsed through that until someone in a white coat poked his head through the door at the end of the room and said, "Velda Bellinghausen?" as though there was someone else in the room besides me.

I followed the attendant into the next room, this one covered entirely in white tiles, like a subway restroom, except that it smelled like a hospital. In the middle of the room was a little cart with a something on it covered with a dingy white sheet. It was a body. I don't know what I'd been expecting. I know I hadn't really thought this through, but now it hit me. I felt a little funny and wasn't sure if I wanted to go through with it. Like the first time I stripped. The attendant, however, who hadn't been paying me the least bit of attention, made the whole argument moot by whipping off the sheet with the flourish of a magician doing a table trick.

Jesus Christ almighty.

I swallowed hard. There wasn't much for it but to get it over with. Somehow this was made easier by Monica herself, or what remained of her. She didn't look like anything at all – anything living, that is. She could have been a department store mannequin for all I could tell, as white and stiff and with the same blank, flat eyes staring at nothing in particular. All except for the hole, of course. I got as close as I dared and made myself look. She'd been a beautiful girl. She had been strikingly pretty in the cornfed girl-next-door Doris Day mold and even death failed to dim her loveliness. She couldn't have been more than seventeen or eighteen. Who could have brought themselves to destroy something like this?

The wound itself was just a slit, about a half-inch wide and maybe four inches long, directly between her breasts. I wondered what kind of knife could have done something like that. An awful big one I decided.

"What happened to her?" I asked.

"Stabbed's all I know. Ain't been an autopsy yet. The assistant pathologist oughtta be coming back from lunch anytime. You c'n ask him, I guess."

"Can I look at the body more closely?"

"Knock yourself out lady. Don't mind looking at her myself, know what I mean?"

It was the last thing I wanted to do, but I gave Monica a good look-see from her head of curly blonde hair to the soles of her feet. I didn't see much – didn't even know what I was looking for, but I didn't feel as though I could say I'd done a thorough job if I hadn't. Well, there was one thing I noticed, though I kept it to myself.

Fortunately for me, the assistant pathologist was just that moment returning from lunch. I caught him as he was still taking off his coat and asked him about Monica's wound.

"Stab wound," he said. "Went straight through the heart. Killed her instantly."

"Stabbed with what, do you think?"

"The blade or whatever was triangular. That is, the wound tapers from about ten point six

centimeters to a point nearly twelve point seven centimeters in the chest cavity. Sharp as hell, razor-sharp, but I can't think of anything shaped like that, no knife I know of."

What the hell is a centimeter? I wanted to ask, but instead said, "Did anyone, ah, that is, was she..."

"Raped? No. There's no sign of any sexual assault. Someone did assault her, however, though in what way rather puzzles me. See those bruises across her thighs and shins? It looks as though someone swung a two-by-four at her a couple of times, but how, I don't know. Both lines of bruises are perfect horizontal."

I thanked the doctor and beat it the hell out of there. I'd originally planned to go over to Monica's place next but instead I went around the corner to a coffee shop and had a couple cups of hot black java to steady my nerves, and my stomach. Jesus, the jobs some people have.

Monica's room was a bust, so far as I could tell. There was no problem with the landlady. I had a really plausible story all ready which was entirely wasted since she never even asked why I wanted into one of her tenant's rooms. She let me in and left, the door still open, without saying a word. The room itself was about twelve by twelve, a bed in one corner next to the only window, a dresser, a chair and a couple of tables. There was a hot plate on the table and above that a couple of homemade shelves with some cans of soup, beans, condensed milk and spaghetti. There was no sink or bathroom, those were down at the end of the hall. It didn't take more than fifteen minutes to toss the room – there was hardly anything of the girl there. She'd had only enough clothes to fill three of the dresser's five drawers and although I went through everything, it was the usual stuff you'd find in any teenager's dresser, except maybe less of it. The only things on the table were some cheap plates and cups and a set of mismatched utensils. There was a little zippered bag, but this just contained a toothbrush, toothpaste and an assortment other grooming items and cosmetics. I supposed she kept most of her stuff at the theater. There was a plastic bottle of pills, something called Febatol. It had a label from a local pharmacy, so I figured it wasn't anything illegal.

There was a small closet in the corner opposite the bed, but this only held a collection of cheap blouses, skirts, a pair of slacks, a couple of dowdy-looking dresses and a sweater or two. So far the only impression I'd gotten was poverty. I'd be willing to bet she'd arrived with hardly a dime to spare. On a little table beside the bed was a picture frame – the kind that unfolds so you can have two photos in them. One was of a man and woman who looked straight out of a Ma and Pa Kettle movie, the other was the same old couple, this time with a girl who I recognized as Monica age twelve or thirteen and a goofy-looking boy a few years younger. Her brother, I figured.

That was it. I sat on the edge of the bed, astonished at the anonymity of Monica's life. In a week the room would be cleared of her things – given away to some charity or taken by the other tenants more likely. It would be as though she never existed. Rather than depress myself further, I went home and took a long hot shower. Then I made myself some dinner, turned on the radio, and pored through Hawkshaw until I fell asleep.

In the morning I walked a couple of blocks over to Joe's, a diner I'd frequented since my time at Slotnik's. Captain Joe grinned as I came in. Always did. A castoff from the Merchant Marine, he was a hugely powerful man gone to flab. He was behind the counter no matter when I'd wander in, which was as likely to be one o'clock in the morning as noon.

"You look like something a cat coughed up," he said as he placed a mug of black coffee in front of me. "You really ought to get more sleep."

"You think if I do I'd get to be half as gorgeous as you?"

"Worth a shot, I say."

The first cup of Joe's corrosive brew got me seeing in color again and made a dent in the splitting headache I'd woken up with. While I sucked on my second cup and wolfed down a couple of sinkers, I thought about the murder at Slotnik's. Hawkshaw'd been no help at all. According to Volume Four, Advanced Deductive Method, the thing made no sense at all.

The girl had only been in town a month or so, had no enemies. Killed by an assailant no one saw, with a weapon no one could identify. Was it just a random murder committed by some lunatic who just happened to have wandered into the basement dressing rooms? "The Phantom of Slotnik's Follies?"

Sure looked bad for poor old Max. If the DA could link a murder with his usual anti-burlesque campaign, it would be the beginning of the end for all of them, not just Slotnik's. My headache still throbbed. There were few ills that were immune to Joe's coffee. "Say, Joe, you got any aspirins?"

"Naw, sorry. Took the last one an hour ago. Say, if you're going next door, will you pick me up a bottle, too?"

He gave me a dollar to cover both his and mine.

I got a couple of bottles off the shelf and took them to the pharmacist to be rung up. He was just handing me my change when it dawned on me to ask, "What's Febatol for?"

"Anti-seizure medication. Usually for controlling epilepsy."

"You mean that thing that makes people fall on the sidewalk and foam at the mouth?"

He nodded.

I thanked him absently and delivered Joe's aspirin. I couldn't think of anything else to do but go back to the theater and poke around. It would at least look as though I were keeping busy.

Max was even more distraught than when I'd last seen him.

"What's wrong now?" I asked.

"People are starting to quit on me."

"Quitting? Who?"

"McWhorter for starters. Just up and walked out on me, just like that."

"McWhorter? Hardly counts as a 'people.'"

"It's just a start, you'll see. Just handed over his keys and said he wasn't coming back. He's been here nearly thirty years, twenty with me."

"Strange, but I guess after thirty years maybe he just felt like a change of scenery."

"I told him that if he'd give me two weeks' notice to find another man, I'd give him two months' salary, but he turned me down. Said today was his last day and that was that."

"Turned down two month's pay? That hardly sounds likely."

He buried his face in his hands again. "It's all a conspiracy, I tell you. Someone's out to ruin me."

I asked him where McWhorter lived. He told me, wondering why I wanted to know.

"I got a couple more questions for him."

“Well, you’d better catch him soon. I had the distinct impression he was thinking about taking a long vacation.”

I just bet he was.

McWhorter had rooms on the sixth floor of a walk-up tenement next to the elevated. By the time I got up there I was in no particularly good mood. I was glad to hear stirring behind the door in response to my knock. I’d neglected to find out first whether he was even in his place.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me, McWhorter, Velda.”

“Go away.”

“I’ve got something for you.”

“I doubt it.”

“It’s from the DA.”

“Noorvik? What’ve you got to do with Noorvik?”

“Look, if you just want to play twenty questions, I’ve got better things to do. So long. I’ll give your regards to the DA.”

“Hey!”

I didn’t answer.

“Hey!” I could hear him fumbling at the locks and bolts. The door opened a crack, and he got as far as “H – “ before I kicked as hard as I could. The edge of the door hit him square between the eyes. He took two flailing steps backward. I was over him as he hit the floor. I slammed the door behind me. I kicked him in the ribs. He said something pretty rude and tried to move, but found the muzzle of my Dad’s nickel-plated .45 discouraging, especially when he heard the hammer click back.

“Why don’t you just sit right back down,” I said, waving the gun just to see his eyes follow it. He sat as requested and, with the back of his hand, swiped at the blood that dripped from his nose. This smeared a mix of blood and snot. Disgusting. I squatted on my haunches a few feet away.

“You can’t do this,” he said.

“Looks pretty much like I already did.”

“What d’ya want? I ain’t done nothin’.”

“Who said you had? You’re not suffering from a guilty conscience, are you? If so, confession’s good for the soul.”

“I ain’t got nothin’ t’ confess to.”

“Planning a trip?” I asked, gesturing to the open suitcase on the bed behind him, which was filled with what looked like everything he owned, such as it was.

“What’s it t’ you?”

“I want to know what you did when you found Monica’s body.”

“I dint do nothin’. Like I told ya, I called th’ cops. That’s all.” I raised the gun and he flinched.

“All right all right. Jesus, lady, try t’ control yourself.”

“She was dead when you found her, wasn’t she? But not like you told the cops.”

He told me to do something not only rude, but probably physiologically impossible – if physiologically is the word I want. I popped him on the head.

“Jesus, lady, stop that!”

“Look, I’ll tell you what I think you did, and you tell me where I get it wrong? Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“ – you!” I raised the gun and he said, “Yeah, yeah, it sounds like a load of laughs. Sure.”

“You lied to me. You did hear something, something like a crash, and you went down to see what it was. Anyone would have. And you found Monica there, on the floor, stabbed and bleeding.”

“Well, ain’t that pretty much what I’ve been saying all along?”

“I’m not finished yet. What you didn’t bother to tell anyone is that you found the makeup table tipped over on her. She’d had a fit, epilepsy. That’s the disease that makes you fall down on sidewalks – “

“I know what it is.”

“Excellent. She’d had one of these fits and grabbed the table to steady herself, but it fell on top of her. The mirror broke and drove a shard of glass straight into her heart.”

“That’s stupid.”

“No it’s not. It actually happened to someone a long time ago. It was on the radio. You set the table back on its feet, pulled the glass dagger out of her heart, cleaned up the rest of the glass and then called the police. I don’t know when you called the DA, but it must’ve been right after that, huh?”

“ – you! Hey, no!” But it was too late, I cracked him over the head so hard my arm hurt clear to my shoulder. Teach him to use a word like that to a lady.

I hoped I hadn’t killed him, but he was blowing little red bubbles from his nose, so I guessed he was all right.

“I went through his stuff,” I told Max, “and found a whole wad of money. Brand-new bills, all with consecutive serial numbers, so it probably won’t be too hard to find what bank they came from and who withdrew them. I gave just about all of them to a friend of mine on the Graphic –”

“Just about all?”

“Give me a break, Max. Anyway, you remember Chip Finney?”

“Sure, my old publicity man.”

“The same. He’s with the Graphic now, and thinks he can really put the screws to Noorvik with this. I hope so. That hypocritical do-gooder has irked me since the day he took office.”

“I gotta say I’m pretty damned impressed, Velda. I’m sorry I ever said anything about you being a detective.”

“Hell, don’t let it worry you.”

“But how’d you figure it out? I don’t get it.”

“Elementary, my dear Maxie. The missing mirror bothered me from the get-go. I mean, there were no mirrors in her room at all, not even a hand mirror. There must have been one when Monica got there. There’d’ve been hell to pay if she used another girl’s mirror.

“I know she put her makeup on before she died. It was still on her face in the morgue, so she must’ve used her table.

“I have to admit, though, that the mirror was just something that nagged at me until I noticed something glinting in her hair. When I looked closely, I could see they were pieces of broken

glass – little thin curved pieces. Like from light bulbs. They had to've come from the broken bulbs on her vanity. I figured whatever'd broken the bulbs had broken the mirror too – maybe there'd been a struggle? Maybe...but there were those strange bruises across her legs.

"The medical examiner couldn't quite figure those out. Neither could I until I talked to a pharmacist about some pills I saw at Monica's place. Then I remembered this radio show I'd heard a few months ago. This woman had some sort of fainting spell and grabbed at a mirror. It fell over on her and the broken glass cut her throat and killed her.

"I figured something like that happened to Monica. She had one of her fits and somehow tipped her makeup table over onto herself. When everything went crashing down on top of her, the mirror broke and one of the pieces of glass stabbed her. There was no murderer, it was just an accident."

"But when McWhorter found her," Max said, "there was nothing like that. Sure, the mirror was gone like you say, but so what? There was no mess, I mean, other than the girl of course."

"McWhorter lied. He found her lying there with the vanity on top of her and a piece of glass sticking out of her chest. He put the vanity back, picked up the glass and pulled the shard out of her. I found the bloody glass under some newspapers in a box out back. He called the cops, sure, but he called the DA first."

"But why? Why would McWhorter do that? I don't get it."

"He was pissed off because he thought you were going to fire him."

"Fire him? What for? He's been working for me twenty years...Oh...oh, he must've heard I was going to fire McWhirter, the trombonist...Jesus, when he finds out it was all a mistake..."

"Yeah, can you just imagine his chagrin?"