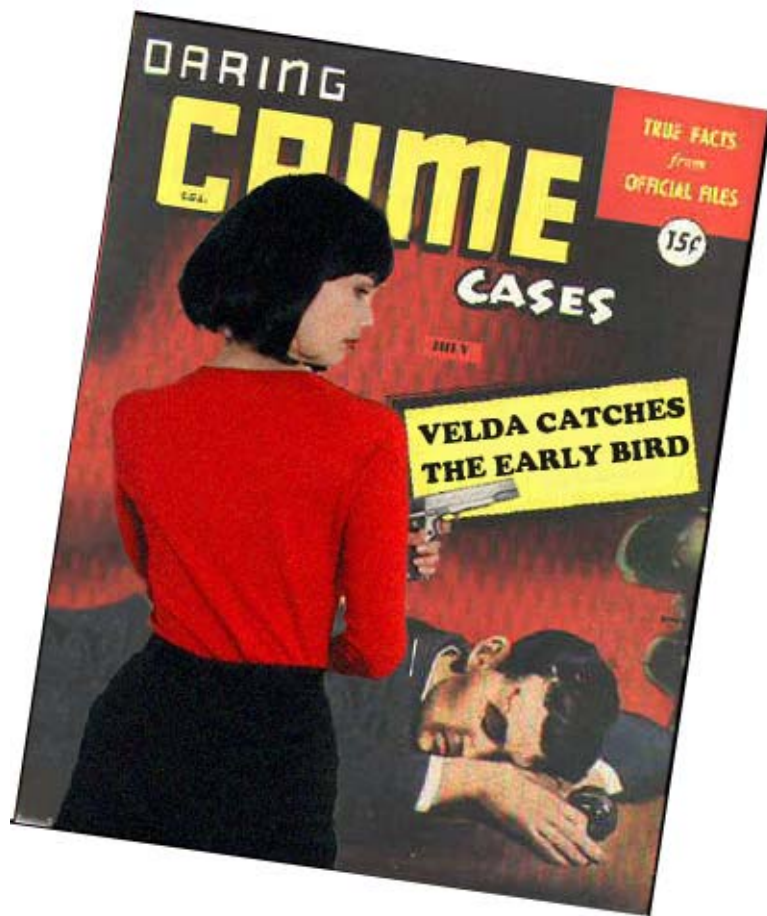




VELDA

The Early Bird



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VELDA

The Early Bird

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT I HATE BEING AWAKENED BEFORE DAWN JUST BECAUSE SOMEONE'S GONE and gotten themselves murdered. There I was halfway across the room to see who was banging at the door of my apartment before I really knew what I was doing and thinking that if I'd been more awake I would have just rolled over in bed and ignored the noise, which would have been the right thing to do. But it was too late. Like I said, I was halfway to the door already.

I took a look through the peephole and thought, *What the hell?* I recognized the person standing there, all right. It was the manager of a place kitty-corner across the street the sign on which says "Hotel" but I and everyone else knows is really just a high-grade flophouse. I thought *What the hell?* not so much because of *who* it was but because of *when* it was, which was four o'clock in the morning. *Who* was the manager, an effete little gink named Fletzle, had regular hours, showing up at nine and being out of the hotel at six sharp every day and not there at all on weekends, leaving the running of the place all the rest of the time to his desk clerks. What he was doing outside my apartment at this hour was completely beyond me but, and I don't think I was doing him any discredit, I didn't think it had anything to do with romance.

I unlatched the door and opened it—maybe a little too abruptly since Fletzle jumped backward a good yard, like a startled fawn. At least I'd like to think it wasn't because I looked that bad in the mornings.

"Yeah?"

"Miss—Miss Bellinghausen?" He said, wiping his forehead with an embroidered hanky. I didn't blame him for looking a little nervous—I know I probably wasn't looking my best and, besides, I topped him by a good ten inches. It was summer and I like to sleep in the raw so he was probably lucky that as groggy as I'd been I'd thought to grab my kimono on the way out of the bedroom. I might have given him a heart attack. As it was, I gave him my steeliest glare just to see him cringe, which he did quite satisfyingly.

"Yeah?" I repeated.

"Ah—you're the—ah—detective?"

"That's what it says on my license."

"You, ah, you were the one who, ah, helped out on that, um, unfortunate, ah, incident a few months ago. I, ah, I, ah, I believe, um, that I need your—ah—help again."

“At, ah, this hour?”

“I, ah, realize it’s early . . .”

“Are you, ah, sure?”

“. . . but you come, ah, highly recommended.” To which I said, “Oh, by whom?” and he answered, “By someone who, ah, prefers to remain unnamed but said to remind you of, ah, The Case of the Intelligent Autoclave,” to which there was little I could say than to swallow hard and ask, “Just what is your problem?”

“Well, there’s been a—a death over in the hotel. Someone’s, ah, died.”

“So? It happens all the time, even to the best of us. What’s it to me?”

“Well, there are, ah, considerations.”

“Like what? A contest to see who can spread the news through the neighborhood first? Why haven’t you called an ambulance? For that matter, why haven’t you called the police? You’re going to get into trouble if you don’t.”

“I—I will. I mean, I’ll call them. As soon as I get back. I—you see, the person who found the body is, ah, a friend of mine—”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, the police—well, they make certain assumptions about, ah, certain people, you know. They jump to conclusions and—I—I wanted someone to take a look first. I mean, if she just died, that’d be one thing, but . . . but I’m afraid she may have been killed. If that’s the case, then—”

“I think I get you. Look. You go on back over and I’ll be there as soon’s I get dressed. You can call the cops then. Then we’ll see what we can see while we’re waiting for them to show up.”

I shut the door on him and went back to the bedroom to pull on my jeans, sweatshirt and Keds. It only took three minutes, and less than five minutes had passed before I stepped into the lobby where Fletzle was dancing around like a kid who had to go real bad.

“You need to use the bathroom?” I asked.

“No—no,” he replied, looking at me strangely. “I guess I should call the police now, shouldn’t I?”

“Yup. They’ll be in no hurry, though, this time of night in this neighborhood. We’ve probably got a good twenty-thirty minutes.”

We went in and took the elevator to the fourth floor. Waiting in the hall was a slender young man, wringing his hands like a silent movie heroine. I figured two things right away: that this was the manager’s “friend” and that the room he was fidgeting in front of was the room in which maybe a murder had taken place. I certainly hoped one hadn’t.

“Leslie—ah, Mr. Feen, this is Miss Bellinghausen. She’s the detective I told you about. She’s been kind enough to come over to see if she can help us. Miss Bellinghausen, this is Mr. Feen, the, ah, gentleman I told you about.”

“Mr. Feen,” I said, as I took his rather damp paw in my hand. I was afraid to shake it, fearing that pieces might start falling off him. He seemed a little fragile right then and was probably not much less fragile under the best of circumstances. “I take it the, ah, body’s in that room?”

All Fletzle could do was nod while his friend’s eyes got even more fish-like. I turned the

knob, found the door unlocked and went in. The room was dark, the only light being what spilled in from the hallway. It was enough.

The room was small and square, with just one window overlooking the street. The shade was drawn. There wasn't much furniture, just a washstand, an old chair and a bed. There were women's clothes draped over the back of the chair. On the washstand was a basin and pitcher. On the bed was the body of a young woman. *Jesus*.

She was the first dead body I'd ever seen (though not the last, God knows) and I don't know what I'd expected. Well, not really the first dead body. I'd been to my mom's funeral and my dad's, so I'd seen them, of course, but they were all tidily laid out in their caskets and as a testament to the skill of the undertaker didn't look any more like real human beings than department store mannequins. What lay on the bed was considerably different and I wanted more than anything to leave the room before I either puked or passed out, neither of which I wanted to do in front of Fletzle and his fluttery pal, but I really couldn't see anything that I could do other than choke back the bile and get on with it like the hard-boiled sleuth I was supposed to be.

The girl was young, maybe five or six years younger than me, maybe in her early twenties. She had once been a very pretty brunette, but I had to use my imagination since her appearance was not in the least improved by the thick, black tongue that protruded between her teeth and the bulging, sightless eyes. I couldn't see her neck because a towel was knotted tightly around it.

Well, it was murder all right. Fletzle'd be thrilled to hear that.

The towel was the only thing she was wearing. Otherwise, she was nude, her legs together, her arms laying neatly by her sides.

"Did either of you touch the body?" I asked the boys, who were still hovering in the open doorway.

"Good God, no!" they said in unison, shaken at the mere idea of anything so *dreadful*. "Nothing in the room was touched, let alone—*that*."

I looked more closely at the body. There didn't seem to be any marks of violence anywhere, but what did I know? I reached out and gingerly felt the towel. It was wet.

"This one of the hotel's towels?"

"I suppose so."

"When did she register?"

"I don't know—you'll have to ask Jimmy, the day clerk."

"Well, it's murder all right. Nothing much you can do about that."

"Oh my *God*!" Fletzle cried, shoving his knuckles into his mouth while his pal turned the color of cream cheese. "Miss Bellinghausen! You *must* help us. You *know* how the police are, what they will *think* . . . Leslie . . ."

"Yeah, I know how they think. You really had nothing to do with this?"

"Of *course* not! I—I couldn't have!"

"Of course not."

I heard a couple of car doors slam in the street below, went to the window and peeked past the edge of the blind. There was a patrol car parked below and a couple of heavy-looking cops were crossing the sidewalk, heading for the entrance. I turned back to the manager and told him to get downstairs and meet the cops.

“Hold on just second,” I said, stopping him. “How’s a hundred bucks sound for my services, plus any expenses?”

He nodded absently, which was good enough for me, and I let him go.

I figured I only had a couple more minutes, so I looked more closely around the room. Beneath the chair I found a shabby handbag. I dumped the contents on the floor. It was just the usual stuff. Lipstick, compact, mirror, hairpins and comb. No money. Nothing, either, to identify the girl: no driver’s license, bills, letters or cards. I scooped everything up and was shoving it all back in the bag when I saw a piece of cardboard stuck in the bottom. I pulled it out. It was an identification check—number 1506—from Luffman’s Shoe Repair. That’s over on Palimble Street, just a few blocks from the hotel. I stuck it in my pocket and was just replacing the bag when I heard footsteps coming down the hall. Since it sounded like a couple of oxen, I figured the cops had finally arrived.

I was on my feet and standing by the open door when they arrived. I recognized both of them, a couple of second-string homicide detectives named Bill Swortle and Fred McForley. They’d worked with my dad before he’d been killed. They were tough, none too bright, and while they were honest enough in their own lights, their world view was strictly black and white. My dad hadn’t thought too much of either of them and I didn’t much like them, either.

“Good morning, Bill, Freddy.”

“Velda? Jesus, what’re *you* doin’ here? You don’t live in this dump do you?”

“God forbid. No—I live in the dump across the street. Fletzle called me over.”

“Probably first time he ever called a girl in his life.” Bill laughed himself silly at his partner’s wit.

“What’d he want *you* for? Couldn’t’ve have been for any of the obvious reasons.”

“He didn’t know what else to do after he found the body.”

“Well, hell, you call the *cops*, that’s what anyone’d do.”

“That’s pretty much what I told him.”

“That the stiff over there on the bed.”

“Yup.”

McForley said he’d better take a look at her and went on into the room. I heard him whistle. “Not so bad if you can get past the face.”

“Jesus, Fred—” I protested.

“Hey, just making an observation, for Christ’s sake.”

“Anyone touch anything?” Swortle asked.

“Not so far as I know,” I lied. “I just got here myself.”

He turned to Fletzle and Feen, who were huddled together against the far wall of the corridor. “Either of you two birds touch anything?”

“Goodness *no!*” bleated Feen, putting the fingertips of his right hand to his mouth. I wish he hadn’t said and done that because I could see a malicious grin spread itself across Bill’s face.

“Which a you girls found the broad?”

“I—I did, officer,” said Feen.

“Yeah? And how’d you happen to do that? You usually visit girls in their hotel rooms at four in the morning?”

“Oh my God, *no . . .*” he gasped, immediately realizing that he’d replied much too vehemently and absolutely with the wrong inflection.

"Then what *were* you doin' in there, huh? What were you after?"

"Nothing, officer! Nothing! I—I thought I'd heard something . . . something had wakened me, someone crying out, I thought. I listened and heard a kind of muffled scream and, and then a loud thump. I—I—it frightened me. But then I remembered I'd seen a young girl move in this—yesterday morning, so I thought maybe something'd happened to her. Just then, I heard the door of the room next to mine—her room, this one—open and close and then someone running down the hall. I was sure something was wrong then, so I—I went out to the hall. There was no one there, so I knocked on her door. There was no answer, but the door wasn't latched, either, and swung open when I touched it. I asked, 'Is there anything wrong?', but there wasn't any answer. I—I looked in, and as I was about to ask again if anything was wrong, I—I—I saw her, there, on the bed, just like, like she is now. Oh, it was just too, too awful."

"Oh yeah? Hey, Fred, you hear Nellie's story here?"

"Yeah, I heard it."

"Ever hear anything like it?"

"Not outside the comic books."

I could see where this was headed, so I took Fletzle aside and asked him *sotto voce*, if *sotto voce* means what I think it does, "Where's Jimmy, your day clerk, live?"

"He—he has a room, I think, a couple of blocks from here, on Clobble Street. I can get the address for you."

"Look," I went on, drawing him out into the hallway, "I'm going to try to do what I can for you for no other reason than that those two oafs have already made up their minds, such as they are, about your friend. Don't worry about it. If he didn't have anything to do with the murder the worst he has to look forward to is a pretty miserable few hours. I don't think they'll hurt him—at least not right away, at any rate, and maybe I'll dig something up before then."

"Oh, my goodness, I certainly *hope* so. Poor Leslie . . ."

I knew I had plenty of time since the two homicide dicks'd probably hang around until the ME arrived. I doubted if they'd be asking either Fleen or Fletzle any questions. What for? They figured they already had the perpetrator. They would more likely pass the time making life utterly miserable for the poor bastard.

I found the rooming house on Clobble. It was only about four thirty or so and the place was as dead as, well, as the kid back in the hotel. The front door had neither lock nor buzzer, so there was nothing to keep me from going on up to the fifth floor, that small convenience totally spoiled by the lack of an elevator. By the time I got to the door of 512, I was panting like a steam engine, which was lousy since the place stank of stale cabbage and urine. I knocked and, as I'd half expected, there was no answer since anyone in their right mind would be sound asleep. So I just started pounding on the door, not stopping until I finally heard someone saying, "For Christ's sake, Jesus, what the hell . . . ?" and the sound of a latch and chain being undone. "Who the hell is it?"

"It's the tall, gorgeous brunette you ordered."

"What th' . . . ?"

The door opened an inch and I shouldered my way through it. The room I found myself in was even shabbier than the one in Fletzle's hotel and was rivaled only by the shabbiness of the little man who stood just inside the door, blinking at me in disbelief and rubbing his shoulder where the door had

slammed into it. I sympathized with him: I was pretty sure it had not been in this decade that a woman had last been in the room with him and certainly not a six-foot stripper late of Slotzky's Follies. Even at my worst I'm sure I exceeded even his most wishful fantasies. At least that seemed to be what was going through his mind. He must be wondering, I thought, if he is still asleep. It was some seconds before he stopped gulping like a grouper and managed to say something.

"What . . .?"

"Shut up—I've only got a few minutes. You were on the graveyard shift at the hotel yesterday morning?"

"Huh? Yeah, but . . ."

"You remember anyone checking in, in particular a young girl, brunette, about twenty-twenty-five years old?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"When'd she arrive?"

"Ah, uh, about one, one-thirty, I guess. But . . ."

"One-thirty this morning?"

"Uh huh."

"She alone?"

"Nah. There was a guy with her. Tall, good-lookin' fella 'bout her age."

"He the one who registered?"

"Yeah."

"Remember the name?"

"Hell no. But I personally took them to the room myself. The guy was dressed good and had a solid gold watch. I figgered he'd be good for a tip, but I didn't get nothin', the cheap bastard."

"You see either of them after that?"

"No—yeah. The fella come down about an hour later, maybe a little more. Asked where he could get some food. I told 'im Nick's, down at the end of the block, was the only place open that early. He went out and that was the last I saw of 'im."

"He didn't come back?"

"Not while I was at the desk."

"The girl never came down?"

"Nope."

"Okay. That's about it then. Thanks." I turned to leave and was halfway out the door before the situation finally caught up with the guy's brain. He reached for my elbow and I turned before he could touch me.

"You got something else to say?"

He just gulped a few more times.

"Why don't you go on back to bed? A little sleep'll do you a power of good."

"Yeah . . ."

"Pleasant dreams, Jimmy." I blew him a kiss and shut the door behind me.

I trotted back to the hotel where I found a distraught Fletzle waiting for me in the lobby. The cops had arrested Leslie, he told me tearfully, and had just left with him. In *handcuffs*, the awful brutes!

“What’d they do after I left?”

“Nothing. They just kept badgering poor Leslie—Mr. Feen. They wouldn’t let up and when he finally couldn’t take it any more and just broke down, they laughed and arrested him. Oh, this is just too, *too* awful!”

“Well, for God’s sake, let’s don’t hang him yet. You got the register around here somewhere? I’d like to see it.”

He snuffled and led me to the desk, where he pulled out a large, flat black book and turned it around to face me. I opened it and looked at the most recent registrations.

“Anyone check in this morning?”

“Not that I know of.”

The last name in the book was that of George Smith, of Saginaw, Michigan. The clerk had filled in the time after the date: 1:15 am. That must’ve been them. I showed Fletzle the entry.

“Looks like a phony name to me,” I said. “What do you think? Is there any such place as Saginaw, Michigan?”

“How would I know?”

“Well, I just figured you’d have had some experience with, well, guests who preferred remaining, ah, anonymous.”

“I don’t run *that* sort of place!”

“Oh yeah? Who’re you kidding? It practically looks like a morgue upstairs.”

“What an *awful* thing to say!” He started whimpering again so I gave him a Kleenex.

“I haven’t the slightest doubt that the girl was strangled just after she went upstairs and undressed for bed. What time did Jimmy go off duty?”

“Oh, ah, about three o’clock, if his relief was on time.”

“Who would that’ve been?”

“Sylvester’s our morning clerk. He would’ve been on duty from three, but he wanted a couple of hours off so the janitor, Mr. Filbert, is filling in until he gets here.”

“And when’s that supposed to be?”

“What time is it now? Nearly five-thirty? He just wanted time to take his mother to the station. She was catching the four-forty to Buffalo so he ought to be here any minute, I should think.”

About then a big van pulled up outside. It was the ME and his boys, finally, come to examine the body and remove it. Behind them came a tall, gangling man about sixty years old. He spotted Fletzle and me and came over to where we were standing.

“Jesus, boss, what the hell’s going on?”

“Someone was killed—*murdered*—upstairs.”

“No kidding?” He gave a long, low whistle. “Whaddaya know about that?”

“It was the couple who moved into room four twenty-two,” I said. “The girl’s the one who got killed. You see either of them after you came on duty?”

“Wouldn’t have known ‘em if I did. People come and go out of the place all day. Don’t know what room they belong to ‘less they tell me.”

“Did the room get any calls, deliveries, anything like that?”

“Nope . . . no, wait a minute. Around three or four a young fellow come in asking for four thirty-two. I told him there wasn’t no such room—they only go up to twenty-five each floor—and then he

asked if someone named George Smith was registered. I checked and saw there was, but told him I wasn't 'lowed to give out the room numbers of the guests."

"What did he do?"

"Came back a while later. This time he brought a note and asked me to take it up to the room. I said I couldn't do that right then, there bein' no one but me to watch the desk, but I could take it up later, but that didn't suit him so he tore the note up and left."

"Did he come back again."

"Nope. That was the last time I saw him."

"What'd this bird look like?"

"Young feller, tall as you, I guess, dark hair and eyes. Nothin' too special. Had on a cap and trench coat and was smokin' a cigarette the whole time. Can't put my finger on it, but I figgered he was a stranger to the city. Somethin' 'bout th' way he talked, I guessed."

I went back to my place, threw myself into bed for an hour, woke up feeling even worse than before, took a shower, got dressed again, went down the block to Joe's for my usual coffee and donuts and then walked over to Plimble Street, where I figured Luffman's Shoe Repair would be open. It turned out to be a small, one-man operation, a hole in the wall that smelled pleasantly of leather and polish. An incredibly old man wobbled to his feet when he saw me come in, wiped his hands on his apron, squinted at me with nearsighted eyes and asked what he could do for me. It was nice for a change to hear that question asked without a hint of innuendo. I handed him the check I'd taken from the dead girl's purse.

"Ah! Miss Glumbo! I just finished them last night. They're right here."

He rummaged around on a shelf and brought down a brown paper bag and handed it to me. Inside was a pair of cheap loafers. Stapled to the bag was a receipt. I paid for the shoes, which wouldn't have fit me even if I cut my toes off, more's the pity, and left the shop. As soon as I was outside, I pulled the receipt off the bag and looked at it. As I'd thought, the girl's name and address were written on it: Anne Glumbo, 906 ½ St. Wladimir St. #4. That was just a couple of blocks away, I was pleased to see.

At 906 ½ St. Wladimir St. #4, a Mrs. Glumbo, who I assumed was the girl's mother, answered my knock. She looked like a nice old lady, so I wasn't sure exactly what to say to her.

"You have a daughter named Anne?" I asked and the old lady suddenly looked worried.

"Is something wrong? Has something happened to her?"

"I was just wondering where she might be."

"She—she didn't come home last night. I've been awfully worried. Do you know where she is? Is there something wrong?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out, Mrs. Glumbo. I—ah—owe her some money I borrowed a couple a weeks ago. I was just wondering where she might've gotten to. When did you last see her?"

"Yesterday, around noon, when she left the house. Do you have any idea where she might be? This is very unlike her. I'm terribly worried."

"I—I'm sure everything's all right. I think the best thing for you to do if you're really worried is call the police. It certainly can't do any harm. Ask for, uh, Lieutenant Holmes. He's a friend of mine. I'm sure he'll be glad to help you."

I got out of there as fast as I could after that. I strolled around the neighborhood for a while, chatting with people on the street, and learned that Anne was twenty-five years old, unemployed and unmarried, and generally well-liked. She was quiet, modest, unassuming, generous, fun-loving . . . the more I heard the rottener it seemed that she'd died the way she did. Just to keep her human, she did have one fault: the questionable habit of liking to hang around the taverns, having a few drinks and getting chatty with strange men. Maybe she wasn't the nice girl everyone thought she was.

Well, that was something anyway. It wasn't too soon for lunch—given how early I'd gotten up—so I stopped in the first place I came to, ordered a ham sandwich and asked about Anne like I'd done everywhere else that morning. The guy behind the counter knew her by sight, but couldn't tell me anything new about her. It took a few more stops, but I eventually picked up her trail. The bartender at the Goose & Hammer remembered that Anne'd stopped in about three o'clock the day before. She'd been with a boy about her age, but he'd never seen him before. His description was vague, but it sounded to me more like the fellow who'd tried so hard to get to Anne's hotel room than the guy she'd checked in with. They'd hung around for the better part of an hour and then left. Nope, never showed up again, either.

From the Goose & Hammer, the trail was dead easy to follow, leading pretty much in a straight line from one bar and tavern to the next. The last place I located them was O'Corkle's, where they'd showed up about seven that evening. They'd been drinking beer—which they'd apparently been doing all afternoon—but didn't seem to be drunk. The barkeep remembered them well and thought they seemed pretty chummy. I'll just bet they were.

But from O'Corkle's the trail went cold.

Still, from the descriptions I'd heard in the half dozen places they'd been, I'd put together a fairly detailed picture of Anne's companion. He was tall, young, good-looking, wore a cap he rarely removed and chain-smoked. Everyone took him for a stranger to the city, though few could put their finger on just why they thought this was so. Maybe it was the way he dressed, which everyone thought made him look pretty much like a bumpkin.

I walked back to the hotel.

Why, I wondered, had the girl been killed? There wasn't a penny in her purse, so maybe it could've been robbery—but what thief would then strangle her with a wet towel? Was it a sex crime? There wasn't a mark on her nor any sign of a struggle in the room—and I'd be willing to bet that the medical examiner would find her unviolated. It was too brutal, all out of scale. It had to have been for some other reason, but who could figure out what goes on in the mind of a killer? Not me, thank God.

As I approached the hotel, I noticed a cab parked not far from the entrance. A man I took to be the driver was fussing around on the sidewalk, pacing back and forth and wringing his hands like an expectant father. He kept looking up at the hotel and I figured he was trying to come to some decision. I walked up to him and said, "Something wrong, mister?" He jumped as though I'd goosed him.

"What?what?what?" he blurted all in one word, sounding like a duck.

"Know something about what went on in there yesterday?"

"No—well, I, uh, ah—"

"Look, it's okay—you can talk to me. I'm working on the case." I flashed my badge too fast for him to tell what it really was. "You know something that can help?"

"You're—you're a cop?"

“No, I’m someone who just likes standing around all day asking people personal questions.”

“Sorry—it’s just that I don’t like having much to do with the cops, no offense, you understand?”

“Sure. I get used to it.”

“There was a girl murdered in there yesterday, wasn’t there?”

“Sure was.”

“I saw her picture in the paper. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was her.”

“You knew the girl?”

“Never saw her before in my life. She rode in my hack yesterday. Her and two guys. Picked ‘em up in front of Riley’s and took ‘em up to Harlem, place called Snooky’s.”

He told me he’d picked up the trio around midnight. He didn’t think they were drunk, though they all seemed to be pretty damn friendly with one another. The girl and one of the men sat in back while the other, a quiet fellow in an old trench coat and cap who chain-smoked during the whole ride, sat in front with the driver. I asked him if he had any idea who they were or if he’d ever seen them before and he said, no, they were complete strangers to him.

“Well, no—I take that back,” he added. “The guy in back, I seen him around somewhere before.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Tall fellow, young, good-lookin’, a lot better-dressed than the other gink. I know I seen ‘im around, just can’t figger out where exactly.”

Sounded to me like the man who took Anne to the room. I asked him who paid for the trip and he said the well-dressed guy did.

“And the other guy, he didn’t say anything at all?”

“Not a word. Just sat there and smoked the whole time.”

“They didn’t talk? No one mentioned any names?”

“Nope.”

“But you say you’ve seen the tall one—the well-dressed one—around?”

“Yeah, somewhere, but I couldn’t tell you where.”

“Think he lives or works around here?”

“Maybe. I ain’t got a clue.”

I saw a bulky, blue-serge-clad figure come down the front steps of the hotel.

“Why don’t you go to that nice man over there and tell him your story? Sure help him out a lot. Tell him Miss Bellinghausen sends her compliments.”

“Say, you ain’t a cop?”

“Never said I was.”

I went on down the sidewalk and as I went up the steps into the entrance, I nodded to Swortle and said, “Good morning, Lieutenant! Cabby down the street there’d like to have a word with you.”

I was anxious to distract the dumb flatfoot because something had occurred to me about a half hour earlier and I’d been kicking myself for being so stupid. I was certainly being no credit to the Hawkshaw Academy of Detection.

Sylvester was at the desk, leaning on it with both skinny elbows as though he were trying to bore holes in the wood. He looked up at me with a pained, unhappy expression.

"Exciting times, huh?" I said.

"Too much so to suit me."

"Say, you told me this morning that the fellow who'd been asking about Smith's room left a note?"

"Naw—he tore it up when I said I couldn't run it right up."

"Tore it up? What'd he do with the pieces?"

"Threw 'em away, of course."

"Where?"

"The waste basket there, where else?"

I looked where he pointed and saw, right beside my feet, a wire basket half-filled with scrap. *Jesus*.

"This been emptied yet this morning?"

"Naw—too much going on, the maid's not caught up yet."

I looked around the little lobby but it was devoid of cops so I picked up the basket and dumped the contents on the floor, ignoring the feeble protests of the clerk. It only took a couple of minutes to find the note, which had been torn into only four pieces. I shoved them together and read what had been written, which was:

Dear Anne,

I tried to see you but couldn't get up to your room. Meet me at three tomorrow afternoon at the Goose & Hammer.

Brian

Three tomorrow would be three today. I looked at my watch. It was five after three now. Would he have waited? Not if he'd seen the morning papers . . .

I shoved the scraps in my pocket and went back out to the street. I nearly bumped headlong into Swortle.

"Say!" he said, putting a beefy hand in the middle of my chest, which I'm sure he enjoyed more than I did. "Just where'd you come off tellin' that cabby you were a cop?"

"I never told him any such thing. He asked me if I was a cop and I told him no, I just liked asking nosy questions. How was I supposed to know he'd make something out of it? And would you please take your hand off my bosom? I don't want you to be disappointed in Mrs. Swortle."

He jerked his hand back as though he'd just discovered he'd been leaning on a hot stove. He glared at me with an expression that he must've thought would put the fear of God in me. I was smart enough not to laugh.

"You're gonna get yourself in hot water, one a these days, Velda, you don't watch out. Remember what happened to your dad."

I remembered all right and shoved my way past the big ape before I did something I know I'd regret, however much satisfaction it'd give me. Damn lousy flatfoot.

The cabby I'd talked to was still standing beside his hack. He frowned as I came up to him.

"Say, what'd you mean, telling me you was a cop?"

"I did no such thing. But just to show there's no hard feelings, how about a ride over to Smotz Street?"

He wasn't too gracious about it, but neither was he about to turn down a fare, so he opened the door for me and I climbed in while he went around the car and got into the driver's seat.

“Where to?”

“The Goose and Hammer. You know it?”

“Sure.”

“Want this paper back here? Can I take it?”

“Knock yourself out, lady.”

There wasn’t much said after that, until a few minutes later when I was getting out in front of the Goose & Hammer.

“How much?” I asked, leaning in the passenger side window.

“Eighty-five cents.”

I handed him a dollar and told him to keep the change. He said something rude and, pleased with myself, I turned my back and went into the bar.

The chances were a million to one that the guy who’d left the note would still be there. It was nearly four o’clock now. Besides being late, he surely would’ve seen the news about the murder. I went to the bar and ordered a beer. While I waited for it I looked around the room. There were only three or four other people, it being still a little early in the day for all but the most dedicated lushes. I spotted him almost immediately, since he stood out among the late afternoon barflies like an altar boy.

I dropped a dime on the bar, took my beer and went over to the booth where the kid was sitting.

“Join you?” I asked, sitting down opposite him before waiting for his answer.

“Pardon?”

“New in town?”

“Well—yeah, but . . .”

“Seen the papers today?”

“No, I—”

“Good story on the front page. Take a look.”

I shoved the paper across the table, folded so the story about Anne’s murder was uppermost.

“What’s the idea?”

I didn’t say anything, but just tapped on the paper with my fingertip. He picked it up and glanced at it—then, as he began to get the drift of the story, read it clear through.

“Jesus.”

“Indeed.”

“I—I’d better go see the police.”

“Relax. There’s plenty of time. The cops have no idea you even exist, but I’ve been looking for you all day. Why don’t you just lean back, make yourself comfortable and tell me all?”

“Why should I? Who are you?”

I dug out one of my cards and handed it to him. He read it and looked back up at me.

“You’re a *detective*?”

“Sure am. I’ve been working on Anne’s case since this morning. It’s okay to talk. The police know all about me.”

His name was Aloysius Prendergast and he’d only just arrived in the city the previous day. He was an unemployed printer’s assistant who’d been working for some dinky paper in Pennsylvania and had come to the city looking for Something Better. He’d never been in trouble with the law and was all too obviously scared simpler than he probably already was.

“How’d you meet Anne?” I asked.

“I met her in front of the station, around one o’clock. She knew her way around and we spent the rest of the afternoon drinking beer in one place and another. She’s—she was a swell kid. I liked her right off. We split up for a while and I met her later, around midnight I guess. This time she was with another fellow.”

“A tall, well-dressed man?”

“That’s him. I met her in a hotel bar a few blocks from the station—I don’t know the name or the street. I don’t know my way around the city yet.”

“Place called Riley’s?”

“That sounds like it. I guess so. She was with this guy.”

“She tell you his name?”

“Sure. Wiplet. Gordon Wiplet.”

I didn’t think the name meant anything to me, but there was a nagging familiarity to it.

“She said they wanted to go someplace in, ah, the Village she called it, someplace I’d never heard of, of course, and invited me to come along. Well, I’d liked Anne’s company, even if I had to share it with someone else, and, besides, I had nothing better to do, so I said, sure, I’d come along. So the fellow, this Wiplet, called a cab and we got in.”

“This bar you were at—it was the Goose and Hammer?”

“Yeah, that was it.”

“Go on.”

“Well, the first place we stopped at wouldn’t serve us because it was too late. We tried a couple other places and were told the same thing, so this Wiplet suggested we buy some liquor and get a room in a hotel. Couldn’t find rooms in the first coupla places we tried then Wiplet said he knew of a place’d have a room for sure. I was beat and wanted something to eat, too, so I told them I’d wait in a restaurant I saw down the block while they got the room. Well, I took about twenty minutes or so, eating, then I went outside to see if they were coming. I paced up and down until two o’clock and they never showed up. So I walked on down to the hotel and that’s when I saw Wiplet coming out of the place. He was walking fast and crossed the street. I called his name and he stopped and let me catch up. I asked him where he was going and he said he was going to get a bottle. He said he’d gotten room four thirty and for me to go on up and keep Anne company until he got back.

“I told him I didn’t really want to do that. It—it didn’t seem quite right to me, being alone like that with a girl in a hotel room. So I said I’d just hang around until he got back and not to be too long about getting a bottle. I was afraid the cops might pick me up for vagrancy. He just laughed and said, ‘Don’t worry about that. Just go on up and you’ll be all right. I’ll see you later.’ He was about to go when I asked him what name he’d registered under and he said, ‘George Smith.’ Anyway, I figured, what the hell, so I went on into the hotel and asked where room four thirty was and they told me there wasn’t no such room. I told the fella at the desk I was looking for George Smith and if I could go up, but he said he couldn’t let no one go upstairs that late so there wasn’t much else for me to do but go back outside and walk around some more. It must’ve been after three and I hadn’t seen hide nor hair of Wiplet, so I went back into the hotel and asked if I could leave a note but the guy at the desk said he couldn’t take it up for me so I tore it up and went to the Y.”

“You’re sure this guy’s name was Wiplet? Gordon Wiplet?”

“Sure. At least, that’s the name Anne called him.”

“And you never saw him after he left to get the bottle?”

“Nope.”

“When you saw him last, did he seem at all nervous or excited?”

“I guess not, but he was talking awful fast.”

“Look here, Al—I can call you Al, can’t I?—look here. You need to get to the police before they start looking for you. Just tell them the whole thing, just like you told me and everything’ll be okay. You didn’t have anything to do with the girl being killed. The desk clerk can keep you clear of that. Okay?”

“Yeah, sure—I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

The thing of it was, I knew this Gordon Wiplet—why the name sounded so familiar had materialized in my brain like a developing photo—and, like an absolute idiot, I decided to do something about it. I should’ve just turned over what I’d learned to Swortle and McForley but I let my dislike for those two big bozos override my better judgement.

Wiplet was a waiter at Schiaparelli’s Cafe about five blocks from my street. I hadn’t eaten there all that often, it being a little swank for my budget (shoot, the Automat is too swank for *my* budget), but it was one of Chip Finney’s favorite eateries and we’d gone there pretty often when we’d still been dating. There were four or five waiters in the place, but since Chip had his regular table we also got the same waiter every time. Since Chip is naturally gregarious and likes talking to everyone he meets, it was inevitable that the waiter’s name came up. He’d practically interviewed the guy, for Christ’s sake.

Being at the Goose & Hammer, I was already halfway to Schiaparelli’s, so it only took me fifteen minutes to walk over. The dinner crowd was keeping the place busy, so I took the time to look around. I didn’t see Wiplet anywhere, which didn’t particularly surprise me, after all, it’d take a pretty cool customer to go back to work right after strangling a girl in a hotel room. But then, I of all people oughta know there’s some strange birds in this city. The manager finally recognized me and came over all smiles, but pulled a disappointed moue, if moue is the word I want, when he found that I didn’t plan to stay for dinner. I asked him if he’d seen Wiplet lately and he replied that, no, not since the day before. He was supposed to have shown up for today’s evening shift, but hadn’t yet appeared, which was unusual, he said, since Wiplet was normally very reliable. I told him that I was a friend of Wiplet and thought I’d look in on him to see if maybe he was sick or something if the manager’d be kind enough to give me his address. Overlooking the fundamental illogic of why a friend wouldn’t already know where Wiplet lived, he gave me a number on a street that was just around the corner, thank God, since I was getting pretty tired of chasing around the city.

Wiplet lived in a dump that belied the slick description everyone had given of him and I was willing to bet that he’d never taken a date back to his place, at least not if he wanted to see her a second time he didn’t. He probably only owned the one new suit and pair of good shoes. His name was on the mailbox, so I went right on up to the fourth floor. I can tell you was getting tired of running up and down stairs all day. I was going to add plenty to my expenses to cover that.

I knocked on the door and put my ear against it. I could hear someone stirring inside, so I knocked again.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Velda.”

“Who?”

“You remember—the tall brunette with the legs who came into Schiaparelli’s all the time with Chip Finney, the reporter?”

“Yeah, I remember. So, whattaya want?”

“Just wanted to talk with you for a few minutes.”

“Yeah? What about?”

“Well, it’s about a girl named Anne—”

That was as far as I got since as the door suddenly flew open, causing me to stagger off balance a couple of paces into the room. Before I could regain my footing, a hand grabbed me by the collar and dragged me the rest of the way in. The door slammed behind me. I stumbled forward a couple of yards, got my balance and spun to face the man who was just then shutting the door.

“Whaddaya you know about Anne?” he demanded.

“Not much. I mean, I know she’s dead, but that’s about all. What do *you* know about her?”

“What the hell?—What’re you doing here? Whaddaya you want? Money? You got another think coming there, babe, I can tell you.”

I hate being called “babe”.

“No—I just came to let you know that the cops are right behind me. It’d go better for you if you turn yourself in first.”

“What’s it to you what I do?”

“Nothing—except that a friend of a friend is going to be spared a lot of grief if you can cut this whole thing short.”

“The cops’ve got someone else fingered? Well, that’s plenty tough on *him*, ain’t it?”

“Tough on you, you mean,” and I turned back to the door, which was the idiotic thing that I mentioned earlier because he kicked me in the small of my back and I slammed face first into the cheap paneling. Who the hell’d think a guy would do that to a girl, anyway? That hurt like blazes, as you might imagine, and stars were still spinning when he grabbed me by the throat and spun me around. I lost my balance and toppled back a few steps, carrying Wiplet with me. He was half a head shorter than me, but solidly built, with a chest like a professional wrestler. I tried to get a knee into his groin, but he was wise to that and twisted out of my way. We both of us fell onto a card table that’d been set up in the middle of the room. It still had his dinner on it—a plate of canned spaghetti and a bottle of beer, as a matter of fact—and the whole thing collapsed under our weight. He didn’t waste a moment in grabbing a dish towel that’d fallen from the table and whipped it around my neck. I scrabbled at his eyeballs with my fingernails, but he punched me in the side of the head and all I saw for several seconds were flashing lights. Then I felt the awful sensation of my neck being squeezed by a vice. I tried to get hold of his hands, but he’d taken advantage of the few seconds I’d been stunned to pin my arms under his knees. The fight was going out of me as everything was getting kind of grey and fuzzy and the pain in my throat was becoming unbearable. Since I’m telling you all of this in the first person, it’s pretty obvious that the guy didn’t kill me, but I can tell you that it wasn’t at all obvious to me at the time. It’s a pretty horrible sensation when your lungs are trying to suck in air and nothing happens except for the sensation that your esophagus is on fire, if esophagus

is the word I want. The flashing lights were fading to black when there was a horrible crash and what sounded like a herd of cattle thundering into the room. I felt the weight suddenly lifted from me and, better yet, the towel unknotted from around my neck. I sat up, sucking in air that felt like broken glass, but welcome all the same.

“Say, you all right, Velda?” someone asked, and I looked up as a big grey blur gradually came into focus.

“Jesus, Fred . . .”

“Come on, get up on this chair.”

A pair of big hairy hands plucked me from the wreckage of the table and helped me stagger over to an armchair by the window. Things seemed clearer now and I looked around the room. The biggest blur turned out to be Fred McForley and the second biggest was Bill Swortle, who was just then handing me a glass of water. Across the room a couple of uniformed cops were manhandling a considerably subdued Gordon Wiplet out the door.

“Christ, Velda, what the hell did you think you were doing?”

“Yeah, Velda, you coulda got yourself killed or something.”

“How—ow!—” my throat hurt like hell as the words came out in a hoarse croak, “how did you guys find me here? I mean, thanks a lot and all that, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t see—”

“Hey, I know you think we’re just a bunch a big dumb oxes, but we got our methods.”