



VELDA

# The Naked Milkmaid



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VELDA

# The Naked Milkmaid

I WAS ON MY WAY TO JOE'S TO GET A CHEESEBURGER AND BEER FOR LUNCH I HEARD "HEY! VELDA!" IN A voice I recognized even before I turned to look. It was, as I knew it would be, Heironymous Kaplan, the elderly art dealer who keeps a little gallery halfway down the block. He was a nice old man who'd I stopped and chatted with now and then, especially on rainy days when there wasn't much else to do, which happened sometimes, and on days when I didn't have anything else to keep me busy, which happened, unfortunately, much more often. He didn't sell much art, so far as I could tell, and the walls of his little showroom were filled with the (to my eye at any rate) bizarre creations of the avant garde Village artists he encouraged, though it was mostly moral support since few of the things ever seemed to sell, no surprise. He was apparently quite a scholar, though, and evidently well-respected in his field, and made most of his living as a consulting expert, with museums and galleries and collectors from all over the country seeking out his advice—I once noticed that one day's mail had envelopes bearing stamps from Belgium and France and even Russia, if that's the place that calls itself CCCP for some reason I can't figure out.

"Hi, Mr. Kaplan, how're you doing?"

"I could do worse, Velda, I could do worse. Come in and have a cup of tea with me? It has been a long time since we visited."

"Well, I was just on my way to get a cheeseburger at Joe's . . ."

"Oy! Then come in you must and have some good tea first. Your stomach it will brace for the awful ordeal that is to follow."

As usual, he was hard to say no to, and, besides, I really wasn't in any particular hurry, other than that I'd been getting pretty hungry. So I sipped some of his tea, which was black and astringent and as fragrant as incense, and talked about nothing in particular as I waited for him to get around to the point since it was obvious from the get-go that he had something he wanted to tell me.

"So," he said at last, "how's business been?"

"Fair to middling. You know how it is."

"Are you too busy maybe to take on a new job, do you suppose?"

"If you have something you'd like for me to do for you, Mr. Kaplan, I'd always have time to—"

“No, no! It is not for me. For one of my friends it is. Do you know of the ‘Naked Milkmaid’?”

“A new strip act at Slotsky’s?”

“No, it is a painting, by an artist named Guglielmo Fumetti. Not a great painting, or even a very good one, but a very rare, very famous one. You have never heard of it?”

“Did he ever paint anything for *The Saturday Evening Post*?”

“No. He worked in the mid-nineteenth century and even though the *Post* existed then, I do not think they would have willingly published his work. Here, let me show you.”

He rummaged around for a minute and dragged out a huge book and opened it. He flipped through a few pages, said “Ah!” and turned the volume around so I could see the page he’d turned to. On it was a full-page reproduction of a painting of a nude woman. It was okay, I thought, something like the stuff you see on calendars, though to tell you the truth I’d run across a lot better figures at the Slotsky’s, this girl being a little full-figured, if you get my drift. But tastes were different back then, I guess.

“That is Fumetti’s ‘Naked Milkmaid’,” Kaplan explained unnecessarily.

“And?”

“It has been stolen.”

“Stolen? Why? You said it wasn’t all that great, so how much could it have been worth?”

“Not so much as other paintings of that period and school, perhaps, but it is easily worth twenty-five, maybe thirty thousand dollars.”

I whistled. Who would have believed it? I looked at the picture in the book with whole new respect. Boy, was I in the wrong business.

“Someone stole this from you, Mr. Kaplan?”

“No—It was stolen sometime last night or early this morning from the Schuyler J. Crosby Museum. That is a privately endowed museum uptown. The friend I mentioned, Crampton Spoolberg, is the curator. He called me not an hour ago to tell me the news.”

“I’m not sure what you want me to do, Mr. Kaplan, the police—”

“No! No! Notifying the police is the last thing Spoolberg wants to do. Tomorrow is the annual board of directors meeting. It is when the benefactors of the museum decide on each year’s operating funds. There has been much talk lately of cutting back and the theft of a famous painting only twenty-four hours earlier might be seen by some as reason enough to withdraw their financial support. You understand?”

“This Spoolberg wants the theft kept quiet?”

“That certainly—but even more so he wants the painting returned. You see, an art museum in California is planning a retrospective of Fumetti’s work and the ‘Naked Milkmaid’ was to be its centerpiece. You see, the painting had long been thought lost and was only recovered a few years ago, as part of a Nazi horde in France. There has been much publicity about this loan and the directors are surely going to want to see the painting.”

“Well, it sounds as though your friend needs a good private investigator.”

“That is exactly what I told him! I said, ‘Crampton, you must get a good private investigator to find your painting for you’, and I told him I knew just the person for the job.”

“Me?”

“Exactly!”

“But Mr. Kaplan, I don’t know the least thing about art, you know that.”

"Maybe you know that and maybe I know that, but Spoolberg, he does not know that."

"Gee, Mr. Kaplan," I said, getting to my feet, "I really appreciate this and all, but it sounds way out of my league. I'd better go on and get my cheeseburger—"

"He will pay you five hundred dollars."

That, I decided, would buy me a lot of cheeseburgers.

I called this Spoolberg from Mr. Kaplan's phone and made an appointment for two o'clock, which just gave me time to get back to my apartment, wolf down a peanut butter sandwich (no substitute for one of Joe's cheeseburgers, I can tell you, when you'd really been set on one), shower and change clothes. I decided I'd better look a little more businesslike and conservative than I usually do, so I pulled out the only suit I own. I got it for three dollars at a church rummage sale, but it looks great on me and anyone would think I was a private secretary for Rockefeller or something.

I splurged on a cab to the museum, figuring, what the hell, it was coming out of a five hundred dollar fee, and found Mr. Crampton Spoolberg waiting for me like a kid waits for Santa Claus on Christmas morning (or maybe how an audience waited for me to lose my last feather). He was practically dancing back and forth, like he had to pee and no one had excused him yet. The way he treated me made me feel like I was bringing him a last-minute pardon from the governor. Which was okay by me.

"Miss Bellinghausen?" he said in a funny high-pitched voice, which suited him, he being a fussy, little birdlike fellow with sharp, pointed features, those pince-nez glasses you see on professors and a skinny moustache that he probably thought made him look like Clarke Gable, but didn't.

"That's me, yes."

"Mr. Kaplan recommended you very highly—"

"Yes, Mr. Kaplan and I have had a long professional relationship."

"Good, good—that's fine. That's excellent. He told you what happened? About our—our recent loss?"

"He did, and that you need the painting returned by tomorrow morning?"

"No later than eleven—that's when the board meeting is scheduled. I can't begin to tell you what a catastrophe it would be if the board were to discover that the painting has been stolen. The trust they have placed in me—"

"—might have been misplaced. After all, the painting *was* stolen."

He turned a deep beet red and clutched a pencil in his hands so tightly that, had he been but just a little bit stronger, might have snapped right in two.

"Miss Bellinghausen! I assure—"

"No offense meant. What I mean to say is, how was the painting taken? Surely you have security precautions?"

"Well, of course!"

"Uh huh. Well, why don't you just tell me exactly what happened?"

He gestured for me to take a seat, which I did, crossing my legs demurely and taking a notepad and pen from my purse, not so much because I thought I needed them but because I thought it looked professional and well-educated. Spoolberg bent at two perfect right angles and sat on the chair behind his desk. At least I assumed there was a chair there.



“At seven this morning, McWreenly, the night watchman, heard a loud crash in the street outside the museum. He opened the door, looked out and saw that two automobiles had collided. One of them was thrown onto the sidewalk just outside the entrance. He stepped outside and called to ask if anyone was hurt—”

“How far outside the door did he go?”

“He said not more than a pace or two and I believe him. McWreenly’s a solid, reliable man, the best we have. In any event, as you saw when you came in this afternoon, there are only eight steps down to the sidewalk, so the car was practically right in front of him. The driver’s side door opened and a young woman emerged—”

“A woman?”

“Yes. Quite a, ah, beautiful one, according to McWreenly, who is not normally given to hyperbole. She staggered and fell against the car—would have fallen to the sidewalk if the machine hadn’t been there to support her. McWreenly is certain he saw blood on her face, hands and dress. She said she was hurt and needed help and McWreenly told her he would call for an ambulance and went back inside.”

“He shut the door behind him?”

“Of course.”

“Of course. Let me make a stab at what happened next, Mr. Spoolberg. The ambulance arrived and there was no one there.”

“Exactly. The woman had vanished completely. The police were summoned, naturally, and they declared that both cars had been reported stolen earlier that night.”

“The guard didn’t see who was in the other car, the one still in the street?”

“No. He never thought to look, his attention being, um, taken by the young woman.”

“I can imagine. Well, look—mind if I see this Mr. Wreenly, ask him a couple of questions?”

“Not at all. I’ll call him—”

“No, I’d rather see him in his native environment. If you’ll just tell me where I can find him—”

“Certainly. Although he’d normally be off-duty in the afternoons, I asked him to come in, knowing you might want to ask him some questions. The guards have a small office beneath the main stairs—you saw them as you came in?”

I told him I knew just what he was talking about and found the office after looking around for only a couple of minutes. McWreenly was a tough-looking old bird who could’ve been anything between fifty and seventy. He looked like he’d been whittled out of six feet of jerky and it was pretty clear that it’d be hard to pull a fast one over on him. It was also clear from the moment I stepped into his office that he had a good eye for women, too, as he gave me a once-over that I was pretty sure didn’t overlook a single detail. He could probably have drawn me from memory after that.

McWreenly told me about the same story he’d apparently told Spoolberg. I asked him how far out of the building he’d gone.

“Not more’n a pace or two, if you’re thinkin’ someone slipped in behind me. It ain’t possible. I woulda noticed for sure.”

“I’m sure you would have. Mr. Spoolberg said you told him the girl who got out of the car was pretty. Can you describe her more specifically?”

"Sure can. She was middling height, lot shorter than you ma'am, maybe five-four, five-five. Slick little figger, short blond hair, kinda wavy-like, round face and a pert little turned-up nose."

"Notice what color her eyes were?"

"Kinda hard to tell, it bein' not quite light yet, but I'd say they was blue."

"Did you notice what was she wearing, Mr. McWreenly?"

"Just a pretty little dress—whattaya call 'em?—a sundress, like you see girls wearin' in the park, blue like her eyes, kinda short—showed her knees—and cut real low in front, you know what I mean? One a the little shoulder straps was broke and she kinda kept fidgetin' with it—"

I knew what he meant all right—just as I knew for sure a brass band could have walked into the museum behind him and he wouldn't have seen a thing.

"Who first noticed that the painting was missing?"

"Mr. Spoolberg, did, ma'am, first thing he got here this morning."

"When would that've been?"

"Ten o'clock on the dot, every day, like clockwork. He come in and went straight to the gallery the picture's in—he bein' all in a swivet 'bout the board meetin' tomorrow—and the yell he let out coulda been heard six blocks away."

"I can imagine."

"The picture'd been cut out of its frame, like with a razor or somethin' and you'd a thought it'd been his own mother, the way he bawled and carried on. I wanted to call the police right then, but he told me, no, he'd have to have it handled carefully what with the board comin' an' all."

I went back to Spoonberg's office, where he apparently hadn't moved an inch and still looked like he had one of his toes stuck in a light socket. He needed to calm down before he had an embolism or something. I told him I needed to do some looking around and would report back to him as soon as I found out anything. He looked pretty unhappy about that, but what the hell did he expect already? Me to have walked in with the painting under my arm? I brought up the matter of my fee.

"Yes. Mr. Kaplan mentioned something about expenses?"

"In advance," I dared adding.

"Of course," he replied, picking up his phone. "I'll have the office prepare a check for you—"

"Ah—cash would be, ah, a little more useful, given the, um, time restraints . . ."

"I understand." He spoke into the phone and hung up. "You must understand that all I'm interested in is the return of the painting. There will be no questions asked, no charges pressed, so long as we get it back in good condition."

"If you were to offer a reward, that might help encourage things considerably."

"You're probably right. Feel free to offer any amount up to, oh, say five thousand dollars."

I swallowed hard. Five grand. Jesus, I hadn't seen that much money in one place in my entire life.

I took a cab back to Pith Street, thinking pretty furiously the whole way. It was pretty clear to me, if it wasn't to Spoolberg and McWreenly, what happened. Someone'd slipped in behind the night watchman when he'd stepped out the door, cut the painting out of the frame and merely hid until



the museum opened again the next morning. Exactly how the thief got out of the building wasn't too clear, but what with all the commotion there must've been a way. It wasn't really important—what mattered was that it was dead certain that the blonde girl and her accomplices had taken the painting. Now what?

I had the driver drop me off at Joe's. I was starving since I'd skipped lunch, practically, in order to get to my appointment with Spoolberg so I was more than ready for my postponed cheeseburger. Joe's always glad to see me since even I have to admit that I add just about the only class his greasy spoon ever gets. He's an ex-Merchant Marine captain who'd turned to professional boxing for a few years before finally trading his gloves for an apron while he could still see straight and compose coherent sentences. I'd been eating breakfast at his place for years, and most of my lunches and dinners, too, when I couldn't get someone to take me anywhere else. Joe lets me put my meals on the tab when I'm between jobs, which is pretty much all the time. He automatically brought me a cup of black coffee and said, "What're you all dolled up for? Someone die?"

"Ha ha—here, go buy yourself some clean underwear," I replied, handing him a ten-spot. "And while you're at it, fix me up with a cheeseburger with all the trimmings."

"Jesus, Velda," he said, taking the bill gingerly, like he'd never seen one before, "I'm sorry. Was it someone close left you this?"

"Nah—I got a job."

"Well, I'm mighty happy to hear that. It ain't none a my business, Velda, but I never thought detectin' was any work for a lady. Where you workin' now? You ain't gone back to Slotsky's have you?"

"You're just sorry I can't get you free passes anymore. But I guess I'm no lady because it's a detecting job I got and I think I could use your help on it." And I told him all about what had happened at the museum that morning. "You got any ideas?" I asked when I'd finished. "I mean, you got any idea where I could start looking? I haven't a clue where to ask about finding anyone who specializes in art theft or fancy driving."

"I ain't never heard of no girl around here like you described, but if you wanta hire someone for a job in this part of town you couldn't do no better than talking to Luigi Sporcolini."

"Sporcolini? The guy that runs the gym over on Bluebell?"

"He's the one. He's a kinda clearing house for outta work hoods. You need a job done, he's probably got the man for you. Especially if you want a guy works cheap."

A couple of customers walked in about then, so Joe slid my cheeseburger onto a plate, shoved it in front of me and went to see what the newcomers wanted. I wrapped my face around my burger in thoughtful silence.

There was a big lug at the door of Sporcolini's gym who wasn't about to let me in, claiming in broken English that ladies wasn't welcome in the place. I told him that it was a matter of some debate whether I was in fact a lady, but he didn't seem to grasp the subtleties of my argument.

"Ladies ain't allowed in," he persisted in repeating. "It ain't decent."

"Holy Mary Mother of God!" bellowed a voice that felt exactly as though someone had sounded a truck's air horn in my ear. I turned, my head ringing, and saw, not surprisingly, something I at first took to be a diesel engine but which turned out to be just the largest human being I'd ever seen.

“Holy Mary Mother of God!” it repeated, just in case I hadn’t heard it the first time. “Velda Bellinghausen!”

“I—”

“Hey! You don’t remember me? Luigi Sporcolini! Your biggest fan! Say,” he screamed at the man in the doorway, who no longer resembled a big lug. Next to his boss he was reduced to something more resembling a sickly Cub Scout. “You don’t remember the great Velda Bellinghausen? Jesus Christ God Almighty! She was the best, I tell you! I see her three, four, five times ever week! Jesus, she was great!”

He did kind of ring a bell, now that I had a chance to think about it for a moment. I normally never paid the least attention to anyone in the audience at Slotsky’s—I mean, who cared?—but I remembered a vast bulk whose elephantine laughter and cheers threatened the structural integrity of the antique building. So that’d been Sporcolini, had it?

“Come on in, come on in! The great Velda Bellinghausen is welcome at the Southeast West Side Gentlemen’s Athletic Club any time! Any time! And don’t you ever forget it,” he added to the doorman, thunking him on the back of the head with a blow that nearly knocked the poor bozo senseless. I followed Sporcolini into the gymnasium, where a couple of dozen men were working out in the space surrounding a raised ring erected in the middle of the room, where two helmeted men were pummeling one another. The place smelled like sweat and cigar smoke and urine, layered in decades like some awful parfait.

The place went dead silent by degrees as the inhabitants gradually noticed me. I’d felt less self-conscious half naked on a runway than I did at that moment.

“Come inna my office,” Sporcolini invited, and I followed him into a little cubicle set into one wall, with a window looking out into the gym. There wasn’t much room left for me once Sporcolini had settled in, so not for the first time I was thankful for my size. I may be tall but I’m skinny, thank God.

“What can I do for you, Velda? Anything you ask, I am your humble servant!”

“Well, Mr. Sporcolini—”

“Luigi! Please! Call me Luigi!”

“Well, ah, Luigi, I’m, ah, looking for someone—”

“Yes?”

“Well, look—if I needed someone to, um, let’s say arrange a car accident—I mean, something that looked like an accident but where no one really got hurt, you know what I mean, who, ah, who might I ask for?”

The big man looked at me with an expression that mingled disappointment with wariness. He shook his huge head reprovingly. “I can tell you, Velda, friend to friend, that insurance fraud is something you should not get involved in—too risky, much too risky, no, no. I do not recommend it at all.”

“It’s nothing like that. There was an—ah—accident this morning in front of the Crosby Museum. The drivers of the cars disappeared and I’d like to find out who they might’ve been, that’s all.”

He just stared at me, his eyes hooded and opaque. I got what was worrying him.

“It’s nothing to do with the police or anything like that. I’ve no intention of getting anyone in trouble—far from it. I just need to know who it might’ve been, that’s all. It’ll go no further.”

He stared at me for a moment longer with that inscrutable expression and just as I was wondering what in the world he was going to do to me—I mean, all he had to do was take a deep breath and I'd be crushed against the wall like a cockroach—he broke into a broad grin and said, “You just wait a minute, right there. Whatever Velda wants, if Luigi's got it, it's hers, too!”

He squeezed himself through the door and shouted, “Hey, Roscoe! Come over here a minute, will ya?”

One of the men who'd been dancing around with some weights trotted over and said, “Yeah, boss?” without once taking his eyes from me. I took my time uncrossing my legs as I stood up just to watch the palooka try to keep from biting his tongue.

“The lady'd like to know somethin'. Whatever she wants to know, you tell her, okay, Roscoe?”

Roscoe said, sure it was okay by him so I asked him if he knew anyone who could fake a car accident and Roscoe said, yeah, and that someone had just been asking him the same question.

“Really? Who? When?”

“Some dame, jus' other day. I was havin' a beer over t' Harry's when dis dame come in an' sat down beside me an' started askin' all a dese questions 'bout cars.”

“A girl? What'd she look like?”

“Jesus—oh, excuse me—I mean, uh, gosh, she was really a looker. Blonde, blue eyes, cute as hell, maybe only come t' here on me.” He held a hand up to the level of his sternum—about five feet five inches above the floor, I'd say.

“Why was she asking you these things?”

“Well—” he looked at the floor and shuffled his feet like a shy schoolboy, “well, ya see, I gotta kinda reputation—I mean, I useta, but I been straight now for a coupla years, anyone'll tell you dat—but once I was da best driver in dis town, jus' ask anyone, they'll tell you.”

“I'll take your word for it, Roscoe. Did she say what she wanted a driver for?”

“Not exactly.”

“What did you tell her?”

“What could I tell 'er? Da best driver I know's Noodles O'Hibble. He useta do a lotta stunt work when dey was still makin' movies over in Jersey an' he did a lotta runnin' durin' Prohibition. I mean, I gone straight, all my pals know dat, but dat ain't no reason I can't send a little work dere way, dem's what ain't gone straight, you know what I mean.”

“I think so. Where can I find this friend of yours, Nibbles?”

“That's easy. He's da bouncer at Harry's.”

Nibbles was easy to find since he was the only thug at Harry's who wasn't drinking. He was about halfway in size between Luigi and Roscoe, meaning he wasn't much bigger than a Checker Cab. He looked something like Abraham Lincoln, if Abe's mother had been a Caterpillar tractor. He looked at me in much the same way he probably would have regarded a specimen of calcite at the Museum of Natural History, which is to say without much interest at all. I figured the only approach that would work with him would be the direct one, so I swallowed hard, walked up to the big ox and asked, “Say, Noodles, who hired you to stage that accident this morning?”

He looked at me with a pair of eyes about as piercing and intelligent as a flounder's and said, “Da cute dame, she hired me.” Then he brought both eyes into focus on me simultaneously and asked, “So what's it t' you?”

"Nothing you need to worry about. You know who this woman was? She tell you her name?"

"Nope. But I know who she is."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

I got the idea and slipped a sawbuck out of my purse. He performed some sort of slick sleight-of-hand trick and the bill disappeared from my fingers.

"Yeah. Her name's Lydia."

"Lydia?"

"Yeah. Lydia Whipple, so she says."

"You know where to find her?"

"Sure." Fish-eyes again, so I pulled out another bill. I told myself that this was all being charged to expenses, but it irked me anyway. "She's gotta room over at da Arcadia. Leas' she did yesterday."

"That when she set things up?"

"Yup"

"You have any idea what was going on?"

"Nope."

"You know who else she might've hired?"

"Nope."

The lummox'd been hired to lift a car, fake a crash and walk away from it. So far as he was concerned, it was all history, so there didn't seem to be much else to do but heigh myself to the Arcadia, which I knew as a third-class hotel over on Kladmer that mainly catered to transients—traveling salesmen and their ilk. Third-class or not, I knew there'd be little point in trying to get past the desk clerk, but I had some luck in recognizing someone I knew in the form of one of the bellhops, a kid named Wilmer who used to hang around the stage door at Slotsky's looking (so he said) for any odd job. He didn't fool any of us, and we'd give him the eyeful he'd come for and asked him to run occasional errands for us. I gave him a high sign and went back out to the sidewalk where, a few minutes later, he slipped out to join me.

"Hiya, Velda, how's tricks?"

"Tricks are fine, Wilmer. How'd you like to earn a fin?"

"Heck, yes! Who do I have to kill?"

"All I want is some information—and maybe a little help."

"Anything for you, baby."

"You got a blonde here named Lydia? Lydia Whipple? Blue eyes, cute, about your size?"

"A real looker?"

"So I understand."

"There's a hot little number checked in just the day before yesterday, but she's registered as Lucia Whork."

"That must be her. The initials are the same, at any rate. You know if she's in right now?"

"Sure. She's been in since this morning. So far as I know, she hasn't left her room since then."

"Can you find out if she's made made or received any calls?"

"Maybe..." I gave him another five. "Thanks. Lemme ask the operator. She'll do anything for me. Gimme ten minutes?"

"I'll meet you across the street in the drug store. Can you get away then?"

"Shoot. I can do anything I want. See ya later, alligator."

It was more like twenty minutes and I was just finishing my chocolate soda when Wilmer came swaggering through the door. This signified nothing special—he always walked that way. He took the stool next to mine and ordered a cherry coke.

"Well?"

"She's there all right. Just sent out for some Chinese. Chow mein and a egg roll 'cording to Hilda. Lemme see—" he fumbled around inside his jacket and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper "—I got a list of her calls here. Got all the numbers of the calls she made. Ain't got the numbers of the incoming calls, naturally, but I got their times." He handed me the list.

There were only about a dozen calls or thereabouts, all of them to the same number, with the exception of one call each to the drug store and the Chinese restaurant when she ordered lunch and dinner, respectively. All the rest were to a single number. It was in the Belmont exchange, which was a pretty high-class neighborhood. There was only one incoming call, made about half an hour ago.

"Any idea where this call came from?"

"No way of telling. Hilda said it was a man, though, and he sounded pretty angry when he asked for Miss Whork's room."

"I need to get upstairs to see this girl, Wilmer, think you can do that?"

"Are you kidding?"

He held me up for another fin, but it was Spoolberg's money and five minutes later I was on the eighth floor standing in front of room 822. I knocked and a female voice asked who it was.

"Chow mein and an egg roll," I said and a moment later the door opened.

"Okay—" the girl started to say as I pushed my way into the room and shoved the door shut behind me.

"Who the hell are you?"

McWreenly and Wilmer weren't kidding. The girl was a looker indeed. She reminded me of the wholesome girls-next-door you see on the higher-class calendars, the kind who haven't a clue how sexy they are and pout with that sensually full lower lip and uncomprehending eyes as big as hard boiled eggs about at how all those silly men just fall all over themselves whenever they're around her, gee golly I just can't figure out why. She was at least a full head shorter than me, with wavy, taffy-colored hair spilling over her shoulders and cornflower-blue eyes in a face so cute and openly naïve as to make Doris Day look like Lucrezia Borgia.

"Who the hell are you?" she repeated.

"I'm the person you're going to give the painting to."

"What're you talking about?" she demanded, working up some considerable indignity, but there'd been a hesitation that told me immediately that she was The One.

"Come off it. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Who's on their way up here? Your buyer? The one you stole the picture for?"

"I don't know what you're talking about but if you're not out of here in two seconds, I'm calling the cops."

"Be my guest. You want the number? I've got it memorized. Here, I'll give it to the operator for you—" I crossed over to the night stand and picked up the receiver. She leaped across the room like

gazelle and snatched it out of my hand, slamming it back onto the cradle. She didn't look so cute any more.

"What the hell do you want?"

"All I want is the picture back."

"What picture?"

"Give it up. You know as well as I do what it is: the picture you stole from the museum this morning. Give it to me and that'll be the end of it. All the museum wants is the picture back, no questions asked."

"I can't give it back."

"You sold it already?"

"No—no, it's not for sale, not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly?"

"That's none of your business!" She was standing close enough to me to be looking straight into my face if her face hadn't been level with my sternum. Instead, she had to look up at me, which gave her the effect of being a petulant, stubborn child. I grabbed her by her shoulders, letting my fingers sink into the soft flesh, and shook her.

"You little idiot! I'm giving you a free ticket out. Give me the picture and you'll not hear another word about it. Otherwise, you're going to end up in jail, I promise you."

"I don't care!"

"Arrh!" I growled in disgust, pushing her back onto the bed, where she fell clumsily. She pushed her hair back from her face and sniffled.

"You don't understand."

"Damn right I don't. Is it money? The painting's not worth that much. The museum's offered a reward of five grand for its return—that's more than you could get for it on the street. Take it and go back to Duckanus, Arkansas or wherever it is you came from and count yourself lucky you're not spending the next ten years sewing mail sacks up at Taconic."

"I don't care about the painting or the money! All I want is to keep it for another hour, then—then you can have it back."

"What difference does another hour make? I don't get it."

"I—I can't tell you."

"Sure you can, because if you don't I'm picking up that phone and calling the cops."

She mulled this over.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"My name's Velda, Velda Bellingshausen. I'm a private investigator. The museum hired me to get the painting back. That's all they're interested in. They could care less about you."

"You're a private eye? You look like a model."

"Yeah, well, look—you give me a good reason why I oughta wait an hour and I'll give it to you—so long's I have your word I get the picture back then."

"Oh, yes! Yes! That's all the longer I want it. After that—I don't care what you do with it. I'll probably be in jail by then anyway."

"No—I promise you: if I get the painting back no one's going to prosecute you. You can go scot free."

"That's not what I meant. I—I—I'll have killed someone. I'll be arrested for murder."



"I don't get it."

"Look—Velda—you look like you're okay. You—you're a woman, I think maybe you'll understand."

"Tell me what it's all about and we'll see." I looked at my watch. It was a little after seven. "You've got about fifty-five minutes. Good a way to pass the time as any." I pulled a chair up between the bed and the door, threw myself into and said, "Shoot."

She fiddled with her hair some and squirmed on the bed and again looked like a little kid who'd been caught stealing a buck from the cookie jar.

"You ever hear of a man named Hector Swaddle?" she finally said.

"Swaddle? Sure, I think so. Small-time operator and would-be tough guy, owns a string of roadhouses up north?"

"Uh huh. Hector's from a little town up the Hudson, same place I'm from, place you've probably never heard of I'm sure. He and my dad knew each other since they were kids, went to high school together. I guess no one could ever figure out why they ran around together since they were so different. My dad was a good student, always had a job—he worked in my grandad's hardware store weekends and summers—always planned to go to college. He wanted to be a horticulturist, you know. Hector was completely different, wild, always in trouble, got thrown out of school half a dozen times, arrested nearly as often. When the war came, they enlisted together. Only—only one came back."

"Hector, I take it?"

"Yes. Dad was killed—I didn't find out how until just recently. But when my mom got the news she took it awful hard. She just pined away until she died a couple of years later. When the war was over and Hector came back, he seemed to have an awful lot of money. He used it to start his chain of roadhouses. They're pretty rough places, lots of liquor, gambling, women—I guess you know the kind of place they are. Well, I never saw Hector after the war—no one around town saw much of him, which was okay with everyone, I can tell you. There's never going to be a sign saying, 'Kluteville: Birthplace of Hector Swaddle', that's for sure. It was okay by me, too, and I would have been glad to have forgotten him if—if I hadn't gotten a letter a couple of weeks ago."

"A letter?"

"Yeah. It was from a soldier who'd been with my dad and Hector overseas. He told me he'd heard something awful about them—just a rumor, but he knew Hector well enough that the more years went by and he thought about it, the more he believed it might be true. He thought that—that Hector k-killed m-my f-father."

"Why?" I asked, after she'd snuffled enough.

"They'd found a treasure. I'm not sure what it was exactly, but it was something worth an awful lot of money. It was something the Germans had taken that rightly belonged to someone else and my dad wanted to turn it over to the authorities and Hector wanted to keep it. Lots of soldiers were doing things like that, he said, so why shouldn't they? Whatever it was was worth a fortune, so my dad wouldn't have to go to college and be some five-thousand-dollar-a-year employee of the Farm Bureau for the rest of his life. But my dad wouldn't have any of it and insisted that they tell their superiors about the treasure. That's—that's when—when Hector k-killed h-him."

"You figure that's where Swaddle got his startup money from?"

“How else could a soldier come home with so much money? Everyone in town was so glad to be rid of him that nobody asked any questions.”

“This is all well and good, but what does it have to do with the painting?”

“I’m getting to that. After I got the letter I started checking up on Hector, found out everything I could about him. I found out that he’d put on a lot of airs, pretended to a lot of class he really didn’t have. One of the things he did was collect art and somewhere got it into his head that the painting he wanted more than anything else was that painting called ‘The Naked Milkmaid’, though why anyone would want it I don’t understand. I think it’s just awful.”

“You’ve got the painting here, I take it?”

“Uh huh.”

“Can I see it?”

“You won’t take it? You promised I could have it for another hour.”

“I won’t take it. I just want to see it.”

She slipped off the bed and fumbled under the mattress, finally pulling out a large, flat package, about fifteen by twenty inches or so. It was a couple of sheets of corrugated cardboard held together by string. She laid this on the bed and untied it. Between the cardboard sheets was a rectangle of canvas. She turned it over and there was ‘The Naked Milkmaid.’ I wasn’t very impressed—like I said, you could see a lot better stuff on calendars in just about any bar, but there you go. I guess what something’s worth depends on how much someone wants it.

“Not much of a picture, is it?”

“I guess not. But Hector wants it more than anything else in the world and it just drove him crazy that it was in that museum.”

“I don’t get it. If you hate Hector as much as you seem to, why steal a painting for him? Why risk going to prison for the next ten years for someone you think might’ve killed your father?”

“It’s bait.”

“Bait?”

“After I got the letter, I did everything I could think of to get to Hector, but he wouldn’t see me. I’d just about given up when I learned about how much he coveted that painting—I figured he couldn’t resist that.”

“So you stole the painting in order to lure Hector to you?”

“Sure. It was pretty easy, too. I just asked around and it was a snap finding a couple of hoodlums who were willing to help me. I just batted my eyes and said ‘pretty please’ real nice and they’d do just about anything for me. Cost me almost all my savings—nearly three hundred dollars—but if it gets Hector to come here it’ll have been worth it.”

“What for? I mean, that’s an awful lot of trouble to go to just to talk to someone.”

“Talk? Who wants to talk? I mean to kill the son of a bitch.”

“I beg your pardon? I mean, that’s a little rough, isn’t it? You don’t know for sure he had anything to do with your dad’s death—just a letter from someone you’ve never met telling you about a rumor he heard. That’s not much to justify a murder.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t think so—but . . .”

“Go on.”

“I—I—I’ve never told anyone this before. I—Hector raped me, Miss Bellingshausen, He raped me just before he went overseas. I wasn’t even fourteen years old and was his best friend’s

daughter and he raped me. My dad'd already left and he never knew. A couple of months later I discovered I was pregnant. I didn't know what to do—I couldn't tell my mother or anyone—but it didn't matter. I had a miscarriage in the fourth month. I was sick for days. I'm pretty sure the doctor figured everything out but he's never said a word."

"Well, you got a better reason there, I've got to admit. And if he killed your father on top of it . . ."

"Yeah. I figured that if I got to see Hector just once I could make him tell me for sure, one way or the other and—."

There was a knock at the door and we both jumped.

"*Hector!*" she whispered. "What should I do?"

"Let him in, what else?"

She went to the door while I stood alongside it, my hand in my purse, gripping my dad's nickel-plated .45.

"Go ahead," I said, as the knock was repeated, "open it."

She opened the door and stood back.

"Come on in, Hector."

"Lydia! What the hell . . . ?" I could only hear his voice, since he was hidden from me by the open door, but I could imagine the sneer on his face just from the sound of it.

"Surprised?"

"If this is some sort of . . ."

"I've got your painting, Hector."

I heard heavy footsteps enter the room so I swung the door shut and leaned against it. When he heard the latch click, the man turned to face me. He was a heavy-set thug, barrel-chested, blue-chinned, balding, most of what must have once been a pretty impressive set of muscles turned to flab.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I've been asked that already. My name's Velda. You must be Mr. Swaddle."

"What's going on here?" He turned back to the girl. "If this is some sort of scam—"

"I got your painting right here, Hector, like I said." She turned the canvas around on the bed so it faced him. I could see him stiffen and his hands clench. Jesus, I thought, we're playing with dynamite here.

He took a step toward the bed, but the girl stopped him with a gesture that held a great deal of authority, namely a .38 Police Special that'd suddenly appeared in her hand. "Not so fast, Hector. I forgot to tell you my price."

"What do you mean? I'll give you whatever you want for it—within reason, of course."

"This is perfectly reasonable, Hector. I don't want a penny for the painting—I just want you to tell me what happened to my dad. That's all."

"What do you mean, what happened to your dad? You know what happened."

"Do I? All I know is he bled to death in some godforesaken village in France."

"Well, that's what happened."

"Why do you want this painting so bad, Hector? It's lousy. Even you ought to be able to tell that. You never had any interest in art before, least not anything that didn't have a calendar attached."

“What’s wrong with someone developing a little interest in culture?”

“Phooey. I think your interest lies more in the written word. You want to see something, Velda? Come on over here and take a look at this.”

Keeping my hand in my bag, I made a wide circle around Swaddle until I got to the bed. I glanced at the painting, but I still couldn’t see anything special. Maybe you had to be a man to appreciate it, but it seemed to me that Petty, Vargas and Gint were painting a lot better-looking women than the heifer in this picture.

“No accounting for taste, I suppose.”

“Turn it over,” she said, so I did. It was just a back of a painting, so far as I could tell. I picked it up and looked more closely. Old, rough canvas, paint-stained, a few words scribbled in charcoal and pencil, remnants of old stamps and paper labels, almost all of it in French or some other foreign language, and . . . and a word I recognized. It was barely there, scrawled in a nearly indecipherable scribble—I probably only caught it because the word was on my mind. Written in some faded, brownish ink was the word *Hector*. I took the canvas over to the table lamp by the bed and held it under the light. There were two more words, barely distinguishable from the color of the fabric: *killed me*. *Hector killed me*. I looked up to the girl who still held the gun on Swaddle.

“What the hell?”

“That’s my dad’s—” but she got no further because she took her eyes from the man for just a split second, which was too long. He sprang for her with a speed I would never have credited him with, slapping the gun from her hand with his left arm while the other hit her face like a pile driver. She went backwards over the other bed table with a crash. I had my gun out in a flash, but so did he—his gun, I mean, which he’d whipped out from inside his jacket. There was a flash and I felt something whip past my cheek. I don’t think I ever heard the bang. I dropped to my knees and fired three shots in rapid succession in the general direction of Swaddle, who didn’t even seem to be particularly distracted from taking dead aim on the middle of my forehead. There was a sharp *crack!* and I saw him suddenly spin to his right and I fired again without even thinking. The slug slammed him in the chest, just ahead of his left armpit, and he went backwards as though I’d just hit him with a baseball bat. I got one more shot off before he fell out of sight behind the bed. As I got up from the floor, so was Lydia or Lucia or whatever her name was, a thread of smoke trickling from the muzzle of her revolver.

I went around the bed to where the late Hector Swaddle lay crumpled. The girl was already standing beside the body and gave it a sharp kick in the head with the point of her shoe. He was dead all right.

There wasn’t much to do until the cops arrived but talk to Lydia (her real name, in case you were wondering), though there wasn’t much left to piece together. Her dad and Hector had found a cache of Nazi loot—mostly paintings and other artwork. Lydia’s father had wanted to turn it over to the authorities while Hector’d wanted to cash in on it. They’d fought and Hector’d shot him, leaving him to bleed to death while he hid as many paintings as he could—paintings that he sold later and which formed the basis of his post-war fortune. There was one painting he didn’t get, however, the one on which Lydia’s father had managed to scrawl three damning words in his own blood. How Hector learned of that neither of us had any idea—and it was too late to ask him, not that it really mattered—but he must have kept a close eye on the painting as it made its way from hand to hand until it finally found a place in the Crosby Museum.

Neither Lydia nor I saw any reason to tell the police about the painting, so we didn't even bring it up when we gave them our highly imaginative and well-rehearsed version of that night's events, which, in short, was that after failing to buy her silence Hector'd tried to kill Lydia in order to keep her from exposing his earlier rape. With my sworn testimony as eyewitness, it was pretty much an open and shut case of self-defense, which was not questioned too deeply since neither the cops nor anyone else had any special love for Hector Swaddle.

Lydia went with me when I returned the painting to Spoolberg, who cried like a baby when he saw it, and collected the five grand reward, no questions asked or answered, which we split fifty-fifty once we got out of the place. I invited her over to meet Joe and sprang for cheeseburgers for everyone, my treat.