

# The Book of the Phantom Bullet



His silenced gun triggered a shoken at me; but it missed me and clipped the Wainwright muffin.

By  
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*This movie ham named McBride acted the death scene very realistically—mostly because some sly sinister stinker had put a real bullet completely through his think-tank. And as foul luck would have it, Dan Turner was on the scene and having it demonstrated that the trigger-finger was quicker than his hawkshaw eye. From then on, Dan was busier than a confused dog in a flea circus . . . .*

I BATED my breath when the gunfire started; felt my hackles prickling as Ben McBride raced up the broad marble staircase to elude the shooter. Then, suddenly, he stiffened in midstride; toppled backward and pitched headlong down the flight, bouncing from tread to tread like a rubber dummy until he hit bottom. Motionless, he sprawled grotesquely in counterfeit death and waited for the cameras to quit grinding.

"Jeeze!" I heard somebody whisper on the sidelines. "What a performance!"

I fervently agreed with this remark. McBride's spectacular fall was as good as I've ever gandered in the galloping tintypes; particularly when you considered that he was just an ordinary contract hambo and not a professional stunt expert. The sequence was

being filmed on a Metrovox sound stage dressed to represent the ornate reception hall of a millionaire's mansion, and I had dropped by after lunch to cop a hinge at the shindig because the grapevine said it was going to be something extra special.

I hadn't expected anything so realistic as this, though, and I was flabbergasted to hear the pic's director snarl: "Cut! Let's try it once more—and next time put some zowie in it."

"Zowie?" Ben McBride yodeled indignantly, picking himself off the floor and starting across the set's mammoth dimensions. He was a hefty bozo with close-cropped hair the color of clay and a puss as rugged as a rock-crusher, but for all his size he was dwarfed by his surroundings. "What the hell do you want me to do, bust my

damned neck for the sake of authenticity?"

Abrupt tension gripped the cast and crew; there was a curious atmosphere of electrified anger you could feel in your gizzard. Up overhead a group of juicers peered down from their high catwalks; they left their lights and hunkered on their haunches as if preparing to witness a battle royal. Below, I sensed the same suppressed anticipation all around me; and it seemed oddly out of keeping with the dignity of the set itself.

Dignified was the only word you could describe the lay out; its designer had definitely smacked the jackpot for majestic splendor. On two sides, high white walls towered upward, festooned with heavily framed oil portraits and thick mock-Gothic tapestries. At the rear a wide sweeping staircase had been installed, its imitation-marble steps rising to a balustraded balcony which stretched to right and left the width of the set. The backdrop behind the balcony was garnished with long rows of bookshelves, crammed like a public library and arranged with an eye for the artistic effect of the vari-colored volumes, and you got the impression that this was a place for pompous repose, not violence.

**B**UT violence was brewing just the same. The McBride ham crossed the stage with assault and bashery in his slitted peepers; his maulies were balled for action and his kisser was a thin slash in the hard granite of his map as he barged to the camera setup and planted his bulk firmly ferninst the director, a dyspeptic little sourball named Sammy Krakowski.

"So you want zowie," McBride said. "Would you settle for a swift punch in the nose?"

For all his lack of poundage Krakowski was a gutty guy. Without getting out of his folding canvas chair he said: "Aw, go fry a fish, big boy." His narrow, wizened pan

crinkled in a maliciously mirthful grin. "Who do you think you're scaring?"

"You, you yellow little weasel." McBride stuck out his prognathous jaw. Curiously enough, though, there was a querulous quality in his voice as he added: "Three times now you've shot that scene of me running up those stairs and getting plugged and falling all the way down. Now you want another take, a fourth. What do you figure I'm made of, cement or something?"

Krakowski chuckled. "You can always quit."

"Quit? In the middle of the picture so you'd have to junk all the footage I've been in?" McBride bridled. "Quit so you'd have to do retakes with somebody else in my role?"

"I think you've got something there, pal."

"Oh no. Then you'd report me to the Guild for walking off the job and leaving you in a hole. I'd get my membership card canceled. I'd be blacklisted; barred from every lot in town."

"That I'll buy," the director agreed blandly.

McBride glowered at him. "I'm not quitting. If you want me out of the cast, fire me."

"I wouldn't think of such a thing," Krakowski purred. "But as long as you stay in the unit you'll take my orders and like them; you'll do as you're told."

"Meaning another stairway fall, eh?"

"Meaning exactly that, big boy."

From my spot on the sidelines I studied the runty director admiringly. Barring a faint hint of accent he talked American as fluently as if he'd been born here, although actually he'd landed in Hollywood less than five years ago, a refugee from Warsaw; and like most Poles he had a certain hard-fibered inner toughness you couldn't help respecting. He was boss of the troupe and he

took no lip from anybody.

It struck me, however, that there was more to this current argument than the mere exercise of directorial authority. I happened to know that Krakowski had been goofy over a certain frail on the Metrovox roster, a toothsome blonde bit player named Cynthia Wainwright who was very gorgeous indeed. Unfortunately for Krakowski's romantic notions, she couldn't see him with a microscope; instead, she'd fallen for Ben McBride. Then later, much to the director's indignation, McBride gave her the brush-off and left her with her heart fractured—a plot as corny as something out of a silent movie. But in this case it was genuine; and I had a hunch Krakowski hankered to get even with the hambo for the way he'd treated the Wainwright wren. Some guys are chivalrous that way, especially foreigners; damned if I can see why.

**Y**EARNING for vengeance is one thing, however, and executing it is another. It was a cinch Sammy Krakowski wouldn't get to first base in a fracas with McBride; the actor outweighed him at least a hundred pounds, all of it muscle. But you can get pretty nifty results by forcing somebody to fall downstairs a few times, and that was what the director was pulling. "Okay," he called sternly. "One more take. Places, everybody."

A dulcet she-male voice said: "Wait, Sammy. We have to get our guns reloaded."

"So you do, so you do," Krakowski said, and bent a fond swivel toward the jane with the dulcet delivery. She was a cuddly yellow-haired morsel in maid's regalia—black shoes and stockings, black taffeta dress, dinky white apron and a lace doily perched cockily on top of her coiffure. But as a servant she was only play-acting; in real life she was none other than Cynthia Wainwright, the doll who'd caused the beef between Krakowski and McBride.

I watched as she took her property roscoe to a slab-sided lug beyond the camera lines; lamped him stuffing it with blanks. Then another member of the troupe did the same: a character bozo named Pete Quillen who was playing a uniformed and elderly cop. As soon as the prop man had loaded both gats and handed them back to Pete and Cynthia the scene was ready to roll.

According to the scenario, McBride portrayed a big-time crook whose misdeeds were now catching up with him.

Cornered by a harness bull, he was striving to powder up the staircase; whereupon the bull started blasting, assisted by the parlor maid—although nobody but a punch-drunk script writer could tell you why a maid would take part in that brand of clambake. But that was the story line, believe it or not; and the action started as Krakowski yeepped: "Camera!"

Panting raggedly, McBride raced onto the set with Quillen at his heels and the Wainwright cookie following. There was the inevitable line of dialogue: "*Stop or I'll shoot!*" which McBride disregarded. He gained the stairs and started upward hellity-blippo. He got almost to the balcony.

Quillen raised his heater, triggered it. Cynthia's rod chimed in with a spiteful: *Ka-Chee! Chee!* and the set echoed thunderously to the barking chatter of blank cartridges. Then, a second ahead of his cue, McBride lurched awkwardly as if he'd missed his footing. For an instant he teetered on the balls of his brogans, the way a drunk sways when grabbing at a lamp-post. McBride grabbed at no lamppost, though. He didn't grab at anything; he just buckled at the knees, sagged, folded gently and smacked his puss ker-skush on the top step.

He stayed there. He was supposed to fall down the flight but he didn't.

**M**cBRIDE'S failure to perform as per schedule drew an enraged caterwaul

from Sammy Krakowski. "You dirty double-crossing creep, you spoiled another take!" the scrawny director screeched furiously. "Cut! Cut, dammit! Kill those lights. Now we've got to do it all over!"

I said: "Don't be too sure of that, chum," and belted onto the set with my glims bulging. I'd piped something that nobody else had noticed, apparently, and I scurried to the stairs under forced draft.

Krakowski angled across my path, blocked me. "Who in the hell do you think *you* are, red-hot?"

"Dan Turner is the handle," I snapped, and gave him a gander at my tin. "I'm a private snoop visiting on the lot, and do me a favor; get out of the way."

"Hey, what's the big—"

I shoved him, sent him staggering; then I sprinted up the ornate staircase with my hip pockets dipping dust. Twenty seconds later I came down again, pinned the steady focus on Cynthia Wainwright and said: "Pardon my horny exterior, toots, but would you mind slipping me that gat you used?"

"Wh-why, of course not," she faltered, and passed the property .32 over to me. "But wh-what—"

"Thanks," I said, and whirled on Pete Quillen, the character ham in the cop's uniform. "Now yours, pappy."

He relinquished his rod without argument. "I don't savvy the routine, but maybe you'll tell us later, eh?"

"He'll tell us now!" Krakowski squalled. "See here, wise guy, if you think you can—"

I growled: "Quiet, junior. All you numbskulls ought to catch hep by now. You don't see McBride coming downstairs, do you?"

"Wh-wha—?"

"Either Quillen or Miss Wainwright used a real bullet," I announced grimly.

Krakowski scuttled around me; dashed for the steps. "You mean McBride's . . . McBride is . . . you m-mean—"

"Yeah," I called after him. "There's no use going up there to look. A slug tunneled all the way through his think-tank and he's deader than minced clams."

He was dead indeed. McBride would henceforth be doing his acting in the Hereafter—with a harp or a coal shovel for stage prop.

## CHAPTER II

### *Long-gone Bullet*

THE NEXT few minutes were pretty nightmarish. To start the riot seething, Cynthia Wainwright swooned. Then Pete Quillen tried to take it on the lam and I had to lay him low with a flying tackle, swat him senseless. Next I was accosted by the slab-sided prop man who had loaded the artillery for them, and he excitedly swore on a stack of wheatcakes that he'd packed the gats with nothing but blank cartridges. "How could I make a mistake about anything like that? I know the difference between real bullets and blanks!" he orated loudly.

I said: "Yeah, yeah. Nobody's accused you—yet."

"They better not. Why dammit, you might think I wanted McBride burned down and fixed it so's either Miss Wainwright or Pete Quillen would do the job for me. That's ridiculous!"

"Yeah," I repeated. "Nobody's accused you—yet." But I kept my mental fingers crossed when I said it, because somehow it seemed to me as if this slab-sided party was protesting too much. Maybe it was the scared bleating of an innocent guy who was afraid he might get dumped into the grease; then again maybe not. It was too early to tell. I said, "Now go phone homicide headquarters; tell them to flag their diapers out here and bring a meat basket. Make it snappy."

The prop man nodded, scrambled. Then

Sammy Krakowski came down from the balcony with a seasick expression on his narrow mush. He approached me groggily and moaned: "Mr. Turner, this is t-terrible. The whole t-top of McBride's head is . . . is—"

"I warned you not to go up and look," I growled. "A sight like that can put caterpillars in anybody's clockworks." Then, to take his mind off his nausea, I gave him an order. "Fetch me a slug of water for this Wainwright muffin. We've got to snap her out of her swoon so she'll be in shape to answer questions when the cops get on the job."

THE COPS got on the job less than fifteen minutes later, headed by my friend Dave Donaldson of the bumpy detail. Dave took a startled slant at me and exploded: "Do you always have to be on the murder scene ahead of me? Can't I arrive first just once, hunh, please? I must be hexed or something." He then distributed his minions at strategic points around the sound stage, went through the usual preliminary motions of investigation and finally drew me over to an alcove where we could be alone together. "Okay, let's have it, fireball. Make with the facts; all of them."

I sketched him a brief verbal silhouette of the scenario, hitting the main outlines but omitting any personal opinions; if he wanted theories he could ask me for them. Sure enough, he asked me for them; I knew he would.

"How do you figure the kill, Sherlock?" he asked casually. Too casually.

"It looks open-and-shut," I shrugged. "You've got three prime suspects. Taken chronologically, the first is the prop man."

"What prop man?"

"The one who phoned in the bleat to you; a tall, slab-sided yuck. You probably got his monicker when you were listing everybody on the set a minute ago."

Dave scowled. "Let's see." He looked at a penciled list, and the scowl deepened like a thundercloud getting ready with the rain. "Nope. Nobody of that description here. Now what the—"

"Maybe he powdered," I said. "You'll have to check."

"But why *should* he powder?"

"Because he's a suspect and knows he's a suspect. In fact, he tried mighty damned hard to convince me he was clean when I quizzed him," I said. "He tried so hard he made me suspicious. Understand, I haven't the foggiest notion what his motive might be for croaking Ben McBride; but he could have done it."

"How?"

"By slipping a real cartridge in along with the blanks as he loaded the two rods—Cynthia's and Quillen's."

Dave thoughtfully rubbed his chin stubble, which gave off an unpleasant sound like sandpaper scraping rust from a drainpipe. "Okay, that's the prop man; we'll toss out the dragnet for him in short order. Who's next?"

"The Wainwright filly," I said. "It's possible she put a genuine slug in her roscoe when nobody was looking."

"Why?"

"Because she was sweet on McBride and he gave her the ozone. The scorned-woman angle."

"Yeah, I see. And the third suspect would be this elderly mozo that plays a cop part in the picture, Pete Quillen. He could have used a bullet with his blanks, too. Any motive?"

I said: "None that I know of, but then I don't know everything. Much as I hate to admit it."

"Comes the millennium." Dave remarked sarcastically.

I DISHED him the frosty focus. "Be funny. See what it buys on the open market. The

point is, Quillen tried to lam when the news broke, and I had to paste him unconscious. In my book that's a suspicious act."

"No kidding. It is?"

"All right," I growled. "Keep on with the gag lines. I was going to make a suggestion, but now nuts to you."

"A suggestion? What suggestion?"

"How to determine where the murder shot came from."

He went deadpan. "Tell me my business, go ahead. I love listening to lectures."

"Well, pry the bullet out of McBride's conk and let the slaves in your ballistics lab make a comparison test against these gats." I handed him the heaters I'd taken from Quillen and the blonde cupcake. "Then at least you'll know which cannon did the dirty work." As an afterthought I added: "The .32 was Cynthia's and the .38 was Quillen's."

"Aren't you clever!" he pretended to admire me. Then he roared: "Condemn your fatuous brass, do you take me for a dope? That's all elementary stuff, fireball. A ballistics tests was one of the first things I thought of."

I dredged a gasper out of my coat; set fire to it. "You're definitely improving, pal. Congratulations."

"Skip the flattery," he sneered. "If you had the sense installed in geese you'd realize we weren't able to pry the bullet from McBride's brains. You looked at him, didn't you?"

"Reluctantly, yeah. Why?"

"Then you know the slug went all the way through. It entered the back of his skull on an upward slant, proving it was triggered from behind and below; and it came out his forehead. Or didn't you notice?"

"Come to think of it, I did. So what?" I asked.

"So I've got my guys hunting the spent pill, and when we find it I'll have the comparison test made. So you can take your high-and-mighty suggestion and shove it.

I'm a step ahead of you." He sulked a moment, then added in a complaining tone: "The way these private dicks put on airs! You'd think a regular policeman didn't have sense enough to—"

"Hey, Lieutenant Donaldson," a voice interrupted him.

Dave pivoted and glowered at one of his plainclothes men who had just diffidently approached. "Yeah, what do *you* want?"

"I got a report for you, lieutenant."

"Okay, don't stand there with your teeth hanging out. You got a report, let's hear it."

"It ain't very good, lieutenant."

Dave lifted his glims to heaven and fretfully asked what he'd done to deserve such low-powered henchmen. "Good, bad or indifferent, what's the report? What's it about?"

"The bullet, lieutenant. You know," the plainclothes guy made a vague gesture. "The bullet. I mean . . . er . . . the bullet."

"What about the bullet?"

"Well, lieutenant, the way I figger, without it we can't tell what gat fired the murder shot, right? Yeah. So that puts us in a hell of a box, don't it? I mean after all—"

"Damn it, stop dribbling at the lips and say what you're trying to say!" Dave grated, his beefy features reddening as if some of his fuses were about to blow. "What about the bullet?"

"Didn't I tell you? We frisked that stage with a fine comb. I mean we prowled every inch of it. We sure did. Yeah."

"And—?"

"And there ain't no bullet," the flatfoot said forlornly. "It just ain't there. It's gone."

### CHAPTER III

#### *Suspects Supreme*

**S**PARKS SHOT out of Donaldson's peepers and he snorted fire and brimstone. "Gone?" he screeched in

outraged accents. "It can't be gone!"

"It is, though."

"But that's fantas—ridic—dammit, that's impossible! No hunk of lead can just up and disappear like steam from a teakettle! Not even in the movies."

"This is the movies, lieutenant."

Dave's crimson complexion slowly purpled. "It is not! It's only a movie set, which is another damned thing entirely. What I mean is, it's another damned thing entirely."

"You said that oncet, lieutenant."

"Oh, I did, did I? What's your rank, buster?"

"I'm a detective sergeant. You know that."

"You're mistaken. You're a detective, second grade. I'm demoting you as of now."

"Aw, lieutenant—"

"And I'm going on the set with you. We're going to find where that slug landed. Then when I find it I'm going to bust you plumb back to harness patrolman for insolence, inefficiency, bad breath and blindness. Come on." Dave looked at me. "You can come too, if you want to," he said grudgingly. "What the hell, one more irritation won't hurt me."

That was what he thought; but he was as haywire as snowstorms in the tropics. He had a whole cargo of irritations coming to him, and the first was his failure to locate the missing bullet. It had absolutely vanished.

**D**ONALDSON'S SEARCH was thorough, I'll give him that; but for all the good it did he might just as well have worn a blindfold on his optics. The bullet wasn't there.

Presently I took up a stance on the staircase, near the balcony landing. Then I let myself sag forward; dropped with my mush resting on the top tread. Dave goggled at me and got apoplectically petulant.

"What's the caper now? You tired or something?"

"No. I was going through Ben McBride's motion at the moment of his sudden departure from this mortal coil." I stood up again; imagined an invisible line running from the stage below to the spot I now occupied. "If the shot came from down there it should have spent itself—let's see—just about here somewhere. Among these books on the shelves."

"Now let's not go into that again," Dave pleaded in earnest accents. "I've looked at those damned books so often I know all the titles by heart and most of the contents."

I said: "Me too, it seems like. It hasn't educated us, though. Hey, look, here comes Krakowski."

As I spoke, the little director trudged up the stairs; smiled politely. "Have you found it yet?"

"No," Dave snarled. "Go away."

Krakowski looked humble and apologetic. "I didn't mean to intrude, Lieutenant Donaldson. But listen, there's no such thing as a phantom bullet. There can't be."

"That's what *I* thought," I horned in. "Now, I'm not so certain. Are you sure nothing was moved from up here?"

"Not a single thing's been touched, Mr. Turner, except by the police. Er . . . ah . . . could I make a suggestion?"

"Suggestion!" Dave blew his top. "Suggestion, suggestion, suggestion! Everybody wants to get suggestive. Hell's hinges, it's a bullet I want."

"That's what I had in mind." The scrawny Pole director nodded. "Perhaps it went on through the backdrop and fell behind the set somewhere; maybe it dropped backstage."

Dave narrowed his infuriated glimmers. "You cut that out, mister. In the first place we've searched backstage; no bullet. And in

the second place, if the slug went through the scenery there'd be a hole, right?"

"Yes. Naturally."

"Okay," Dave clenched his right fist and drove it into his left palm with a thwacking sound. "No hole." He glared savagely at Krakowski. "You hear me! No hole."

From the foot of the stairs a voice called: "Hey, lieutenant." It was the plainclothes dick who'd annoyed Donaldson a while back. "I got another report for you."

"Yeah! What?"

"It ain't a very good one, lieutenant. Maybe you better assign me to pounding a beat or something, on account of—"

"Say it!" Dave shrieked. "Say it fast!"

"Well, lieutenant, you see. . . ah . . . well, what I mean is, you know that guy Pete Quillen which we was holding in custody? He was in a officer of the law's oneyform?"

"I know Quillen, yes. What about him?"

"He sort of made a break, lieutenant. I mean, well . . . er, ah, he kind of got away. He escaped. That's just the half of it, either. The little wren with the yellow hair, you know, Cynthia Wainwright—well, she went with him."

Dave shuddered visibly, as if he had swallowed rat poison. "No," he whispered in a stricken gasp. "It isn't so. It's not true. This can't be happening to me. No, bigahd. I'm dreaming. It's all a delirium—!"

"Dave," I said.

He gave me a blank stare. "Hunh! Oh, hello, Hawkshaw. Sure is nice weather we're having, aren't you?"

"I'd like to haul bunions."

"You would, eh? You got a trucking license? Look, pal, save a pound of them for me. Nothing I like better than a nice hot portion of liver and bunions. *What did you say?*"

"I said I'd like to go home if you don't need me any more."

He erupted like a volcano. "Need you? *Need* you? I need you the way I need

Bright's disease. Go on, scram. Beat it. Blow. I never want to see you again." He thrust his anger-swollen map within an inch of mine. "You—you stinking jinx!"

"Thanks," I said, and ankled off the set; barged out of the giant sound-stage building and made for my coupe on the parking lot. I opened the jalopy's door, started to slide my poundage under the wheel. Then I froze.

Cynthia Wainwright was crouching on the floorboards. "Get m-me away from here, Mr. Turner," she whimpered. "Please!"

FOR AN instant I was too petrified to move, too flabbergasted to speak. Then I recovered from my brief paralysis and strangled: "I'll be a dirty name! What the devil are you doing in my bucket, baby? Or is that none of my business?"

Brine puddled her peepers. "Please, Mr. Turner!" she repeated frantically. "Get m-me away from here! I . . . I d-don't want to be arrested!"

"That's silly," I pointed out. "You already are arrested."

"You m-mean you're, going to m-make me go back in there? Going to hand me over to those policemen?"

I hedged a little. "Look, sweet stuff. Once a person is pinched he stays pinched until he's officially released. The fact that you escaped from custody doesn't mean you're free."

"Now you're b-being technical," her tone was chiding. "I asked you if you're g-going to turn me in."

"What else can I do? I carry a special badge and I've got the license that goes with it, which makes me a cop, sort of. You can see how it is. I'm sworn to uphold the laws and statutes—"

"Please," she reached forth and touched my arm. "Don't make a speech. I understand your position, but I . . . I thought maybe you'd help me in spite of that."

"Help you lam? That would make me an



accessory to murder.”

Her kisser sagged wanly. “I’m n-not a murderess. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. It’s why I hid in your car, after . . . after I was f-foolish enough to run away from those officers with Pete Quillen.”

“That *was* a foolish caper,” I agreed. “Why’d you do it?”

“I don’t exactly know. When Quillen made his break I guess I lost my head or something. Anyhow I went with him, although now I know I shouldn’t have.”

“Where’s Quillen now?”

“I don’t know that, either. He went one way and I—well, the minute I saw your coupe I thought I could persuade you to help me clear myself—” her voice trailed off hopelessly.

Maybe it was that hopeless, forlorn quality that got me; and besides, I’m a sucker for damsels in distress. Especially damsels of blonde denomination when they’re as gorgeous as this Wainwright chickchick. I said: “Hunker down, hon.”

“Wh-what are you going to d-do?”

“Get in and drive, of course.”

“You’re taking me off th-the lot?”

“Yeah,” I said, wedging my heft under the rudder and giving the starter a swift kick. “If you crave conversation with me I’d better find a place where we’re not so likely to be interrupted. Duck low, now. Here we go through the main gates.” And I whooshed toward the exit, identified myself to the guard on duty, got the high sign. In two shakes of a snake’s rattles I was wheeling out onto the street and heading west into the slanting rays of a mid-afternoon sun. Apparently nobody had noticed I was toting a passenger, which goes to show you how careless the cops can be when they trust you.

**T**WENTY BLOCKS later I drew over to the curb; parked and latched my anchors. “Okay, Toots,” I remarked. “You can sit up on the seat now. I think it’s safe.”

She obeyed; rewarded me with a wistful smile of gratitude and a quavery: “Thanks, Mr. Turner. I can’t begin to t-tell you h-how much I appreciate—”

“Never mind that. Just tell me about the kill.”

“I c-can’t tell you about the k-kill—because I didn’t d-do it. All I can tell you is I’m innocent. I wouldn’t have murdered Ben. I . . . I loved him.”

“Which might make a good motive, considering the way he brushed you off.”

She sobbed faintly, and two tears as big as gumdrops skittered down her pallid mush. “I realize how it looks. But you’re all wrong! I’m innocent; I swear I am. And I don’t want to go to prison for something I didn’t do.”

“I’m not a lawyer, kitten; I’m a snoop.”

“That’s what I need. Someone to prove it was Quillen who shot Ben.”

“What makes you so certain it was Quillen?”

“It *had* to be!” she came back at me. “In the first place, I . . . know something about g-guns. I know enough to understand they’re dangerous. Whenever I’m cast in a role where I have to fire one, I always check it to make sure it’s loaded with blanks. I . . . I don’t trust the prop man’s word; I see for myself. And the one I used on the set this afternoon had no real cartridges in it. I can tell the d-difference between bullets and blanks; I’m not that stupid.”

I said: “Okay, what else?”

“Well, there’s a difference in the feel of a revolver when you fire a real bullet or a blank. The real one has more recoil; kicks your hand harder. So I’m positive I shot blanks. And blanks can’t kill anybody. Therefore I didn’t kill Ben. And if I didn’t—then Quillen must have.”

“Very neat indeed,” I said. “Q.E.D. and so forth. There’s one flaw in it, though.”

“Flaw?”

“Yeah. All I’ve got is your unsupported word.”

"You . . . d-don't believe me?"

"Let's just say I'm reserving judgment. Meanwhile let me quiz you some more. First, what motive would Quillen have for croaking McBride?"

Her glimmers widened. "Notes, of course."

"Now wait," I said resentfully. "If you're going to get facetious and say nuts when I ask you a civil question—"

"Not nuts. Notes. Promissory notes."

"Oh," I backed water, mollified. "Promissory notes. You mean McBride owed Quillen dough?"

"No. Quillen owed money to McBride. Everybody owed money to him," she tacked on. "That was his sideline. He was a . . . private loan shark as well as an actor. You see, Ben never got very far in pictures; he didn't have too much ability. Usually he was cast as a gangster or a crook or something, just like in the production today. He always wound up being captured by the police, or shot by his underworld enemies—"

"Yeah. Strictly a B-picture guy. So what?"

"So he was money-hungry. Like this afternoon, they could have hired a double to take that staircase fall; a stunt man. Ben talked them out of it. He said he would do the fall if they'd pay him extra for it. He was to get a stunting check."

"All right," I said. "He liked geetus. Lots of us do."

"But with him it was almost a mania. Some while back an uncle or something left him several thousand dollars. You know what happened?"

"He went on a bender?" I hazarded.

She shook her head. "No. He started running a loan business at illegal interest."

"Hm-m. The usury racket, hunh?"

"Yes. Well, anyhow, Pete Quillen borrowed a thousand from him; this was about six months ago. Pete's wife needed an operation and he was broke at the time, so he

got the money from Ben and signed a promissory note and agreed to pay it back a hundred a week for twenty weeks—"

"Wait," I cut across her dialogue. "A yard a week for twenty weeks adds up to two grand."

"Two thousand, yes, that's right."

"But you said Quillen borrowed only one thousand."

"The extra thousand was interest," she said.

I WHISTLED softly. "A rate of one hundred percent semiannually. Yipe!"

"That's not all," she went on. "Just last month Quillen's wife got worse. The doctor said she had to go to the desert; a hospital in Arizona. Quillen couldn't afford to send her and keep paying off his promissory note at the same time. He asked Ben to let him skip a few weeks' payments. Ben refused; threatened to take him to court unless he lived up to his bargain. So Quillen's wife didn't go to Arizona. She died last week."

"And you were in love with a heel like McBride, a guy who'd do anything as rotten as that?"

Her smile was a wry grimace. "Women are funny. Yes, I was. He was a heel, yes, but I thought I could change him after we were . . . married. Only we didn't get married. Anyhow, that's not what I was talking about. I was trying to show a possible murder motive for Pete Quillen."

"It sounds pretty damned valid," I admitted. "Especially when you consider that Quillen took a powder just now from the coppers. On the other hand, though, maybe he scrambled for the same reason you did; he was innocent but realized how black things looked for him. He was scared of getting railroaded."

This time her smile contained less bitterness. "Thank you."

"Thank me for what, kitten?"

"For saying I'm innocent."

"Merely an assumption," I covered up. "You haven't proved it yet, any more than you've proved Quillen's guilt. All this gab is only theory as far as I'm concerned. And speaking of suspects taking it on the lam, there's a third character to be considered."

"Who?"

"The prop man," I said. "That slab-sided ginzo who loaded the rods you and Quillen used."

She drew a sharp breath. "Bill Fisher?"

"Yeah, if that's his monicker. You claim your gat was stuffed with blanks; therefore the death slug came from Quillen's roscoe. Okay, maybe Quillen was merely an innocent instrument; maybe this Bill Fisher bozo put a real bullet in his heater."

"I . . . I hadn't thought of that."

"Then suppose you do think about it. The way I see this clambake, there are just three persons who could have cooled McBride. You're one; we'll rule you out for a moment. Quillen's another—and you've just supplied him with a possible motive. The third is Fisher, the prop man. We know he had opportunity, because he loaded the guns. We also know he disappeared from the lot after I had him call the cops; and scammery is always a suspicious act. Okay, did Fisher have any murder motive?"

She looked thoughtful. "The only way I can answer that is by guessing. And my guess would be money."

"You think McBride had his usurious hooks in Fisher?"

"It's possible. Ben loaned money to almost everybody. All the little people around the studio, anyhow."

"I suppose he kept complete records?"

"Yes, I think so. Secretly, though; I mean he wouldn't enter the exorbitant interest rates in his ledgers, just in case of tax inspection or something. He was careful to make the ledgers look legal. But he listed the loans and kept constant track of them, I believe."

I ASKED: "Where would those ledgers be?"

She said: "I'm not sure, but I think in his apartment. It's a penthouse in that big building on the Sunset Strip." Then she got my drift. "You . . . you're going there to check up?"

"That's the general idea. I'd like to find out if Fisher was in debt to the guy. Yeah, a spot of prowling is indicated at this point." I toed my starter. "Are you game to join me while I indulge in burglarious entry?"

"I'll do anything if it'll help clear me, Mr. Turner," she answered earnestly. "But—" she faltered.

"But what?"

"There's one puzzle I don't understand. Back there on the set, just before Quillen and I b-broke away from the police, I heard a lot of talk about the . . . the death bullet being missing."

"Yeah."

"So even if you can find some motive for Fisher wanting to murder Ben, how can you prove anything? I'm sure Quillen fired the shot, either innocently or intentionally; I know it didn't come from my gun, so it must have been Quillen's. As you say, that narrows it down between Quillen, who fired it, and Fisher who loaded it. But how are you going to make that stick when you haven't got the slug itself?"

I grinned grimly. "When the cops pick those two guys up they'll run them through the wringer, give them the third degree. If anybody can sweat a confession out of a guilty ginzo, Dave Donaldson can. He's an artist with a length of rubber hose."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"Where's the bullet?" she said. "Where did it go?"

I wheeled into the traffic stream. "There you've got me, hon. I've rammed into plenty of riddles in my years of private prying, but that one has me stopped cold. The hell with

it.” And I headed for the Sunset Strip with my think-tank buzzing like a hive of hornets. At long last I’d encountered a case where the impossible had happened, and if I wasn’t careful I’d find frustration giving me an inferiority complex; I might even wind up cutting out paper dolls. “The hell with it!” I said again, violently, and jammed my throttle to the floorboards.

## CHAPTER IV

### *No Modest Mayhem*

IN THE corridor outside Ben McBride’s penthouse wigwam I posted the Wainwright cookie over by the elevator and the stairway to stand guard and warn me in case intruders approached. Then I drifted to the apartment portal, moving stealthily.

Presently I called in a stage whisper: “S-sst! Come on, kitten. We’re going in.”

She sulked close to me. “How did you get it open? I . . . I didn’t see you use a skeleton key or anything.”

“I didn’t have to. It was unlatched.” We slipped hastily over the threshold, left the door just barely ajar behind us for a fast getaway in case of need, and stole forward into a living-room bloated with opulence. Some starry-eyed interior decorator must have shot his wad on the carpet and furnishings, not to mention the genuine tapestry drapes which paneled two matching alcoves on either side of the pretentious chamber. “Jeeze,” I said. “The loan-shark racket must have paid off in box-car numbers.”

The blonde muffin nodded. “I guess Ben did all right. Look at this piece of statuary here in the alcove.”

“Never mind that alcove,” I said sharply, crossing the length of the room. “Cop a gander at this one over here!”

“A wall safe! And it . . . it’s been opened!”

I rasped: “You can say that again, Toots.” There were bank-deposit slips, canceled checks, legal papers and statements scattered to hellangone on the floor beneath the looted safe; a littered welter of stuff that looked as if it had been stirred by a recent cyclone. There were also some ledgers, the kind you buy in a dime store to keep a record of your intake and output.

“Do . . . do you suppose—?” the Wainwright doll started to fling a question at me. But I waved her quiet.

“Ix-nay on the chatter,” I said. “Stick close to the door and keep an ear peeled for visitors.”

“You think someone m-might—?”

“Let’s not take chances. Guard that door!”

“I . . . I’m scared!” she whimpered.

“We’ll have plenty of reason to be scared if we get caught in a murdered guy’s igloo,” I snapped. “Particularly since somebody else got here ahead of us and prowled the premises.”

“Wh-who?”

I said: “Maybe Pete Quillen, maybe Bill Fisher, maybe Frankenstein’s monster; how the hell should I know? But I’ll lay you six, two and even it was a character who was in debt to the late lamented McBride.”

“What m-makes you think so?”

“My intuition,” I said. “I’m lousy with intuition. I’ve got a hunch whoever came here owed McBride money and wanted to glom the records of the loan.”

“Why?”

“To avoid having to pay the geetus back to McBride’s estate or heirs, for one thing,” I said. “And to keep the cops off the trail, for another. Quit asking dizzy questions. Get over to the door while I frisk these papers.”

RELUCTANTLY she dragged herself away. Then I got busy on the scattered documents; gave them my undivided concentration. Presently I struck paydirt in

one of the ledgers. The pages of this were arranged alphabetically with the names of people who'd patronized Ben McBride's private loan-shark racket, an individual page for each person. As I thumbed through the volume and reached the "F" section I tensed. A leaf had been crudely torn out.

Bill Fisher's page, I wondered? Could it have been the slab-sided prop man who'd burgled the flat and destroyed the evidence of his indebtedness to McBride—to cover up a murder motive?

Again I riffled through the ledger; and when I came to "Q" I found another sheet missing. "Pete Quillen?" I said aloud. "Hellfire and sauerkraut, which one of them did this? *Or were they in on the kill together?*"

It was the first time I'd thought at that possibility; but it made sense when I considered it. Maybe Fisher had slipped a real bullet into Quillen's roscoe with Quillen's full knowledge and consent. Maybe both of them had owed dough to McBride and decided to gang up on him, rub him out. Then, when they both escaped, maybe they'd come here to scuttle the evidence.

And even as I reflected on that angle, I happened to lamp another clue; an object half buried under the scattered papers littering the rug. It was a book in a gold-colored binding; a diary. I leaped on it, copped a long slant at its flawless yellow cover; and suddenly something meshed in my memory. The riddle's jigsaw pieces fell into place; gave me the answer I'd been looking for.

"Cynthia!" I called. "Come here a minute!"

She didn't answer me.

"Cynthia," I said again. Then I straightened up, turned; felt my peepers popping. "Jeepers!" I choked, and went catapulting toward her.

She was stretched prone on the floor, unconscious, breathing shallowly; if she'd made any noise in falling I hadn't heard it because I'd been too preoccupied with my own job. Now I leaned over her, shook her. "Hey, Toots, what the—"

That was as far as I got. Somebody sneaked out of the alcove nearby; the alcove with the statuary in it. He'd been hiding there ever since the Wainwright jane and I entered the joint; he was the one who'd left the door unlatched after picking the lock. And he had bopped the blonde doll senseless, maced her while her back was turned as she guarded the portal.

I didn't get a hinge at him. He gave me no chance to defend myself. He tiptoed up behind me and flailed me on the noggin with a blunt instrument, whereupon I went bye-bye.

A PRIVATE dick needs a thick conk if he hopes to stay in business, and mine has taken many a flogging without getting shattered. I opened my bleary glims and mumbled mushily: "Durable Dan Turner, that's me. Knock him down and win a cigar. Step right up and tee off on his thatch. See can you dent him. He's tough like an army tank. Tank you very much."

"Ohh-h-h, my head!" somebody moaned alongside me.

I blinked at the Wainwright cupcake. We were sprawled on the carpet, cheek by jowl; and my left arm, outflung when I fell, was resting across her slender waist in which might have seemed to the casual observer like a tender caress. It was a good thing no casual onlookers were on deck, I reflected fuzzily.

"My head . . ." the blonde muffin moaned again.

I said: "Mine too, Toots."

"Somebody . . . hit me!"

"Me likewise."

We both got silent for a moment, trying to clear away the cobwebs. Then, just as I was mustering up enough energy to move, an astonished yodel came from the doorway. The roar arose from Dave Donaldson, who lumbered into the room and exploded: "Neckery, bejeest! Of all the unmitigated shameless gall—"

"Stow it, bub," I muttered wearily, propping myself on my aching haunches. "I know what you're thinking, and fie on you for thinking it. You need your brain washed out with soap."

The veins and arteries stood out like cords in his throat. "I do, hey? And who the hell are you to talk? I come here, by gad, to check a murdered man's effects for clues and so forth, and what do I find? You and a dame—" Abruptly he recognized the quail at my side and foamed: "That's the jane we're looking for! That's Cynthia Wainwright!"

"Yeah."

"But how . . . what . . . where . . . Who? I mean—"

"Oohh-h-h, my head," Cynthia said faintly.

Dave pounced on her, lifted her upright. "Got you, sister. If you think you can get away this time, guess again!"

"She won't even try," I said. "Lay off her. She's been bopped. So have I, for that matter."

He ignored me; favored the blonde chick with a malevolent glower. "Why did you do it? Come on, talk."

"Wh-why did I d-do wh-what?" she whimpered.

"Croak Ben McBride."

"I didn't. I swear I didn't!"

I said: "She's leveling, Dave." Then I remembered the clue I had found just before being maced senseless; and as memory flooded back into my grey matter I lurched to my feet. "Listen, we've got to get going!"

"Oh, yeah? Where?"

"To nab the killer!" I bleated. "I'm hep

to the whole caper now and there's no time to waste frittering around with palaver. You see that safe over there? It's been petered. That stuff scattered on the floor is what the burglar frisked. And that diary in the gold binding is the payoff. Let's go!"

"Hunh?" He blinked at me in a stupefied way.

I dragged him doorward; and he, in turn, dragged Cynthia. I reminded myself of a locomotive pulling a load of freight. "I'll explain everything en route," I panted. "Come on, bright-eyes, we may be too late even now!"

## CHAPTER V

### *Brawl for a Book*

IN A BRACE of shakes we were down on the sidewalk, piling into Dave's official sedan. I took the wheel without asking permission; what I craved was speed without having to instruct anybody about the directions. The instant Dave and the doll were settled in the tonneau where he could keep her under observation I romped on the gas and we zoomed off in a shower of waffle batter.

I talked as I drove; fired a blurt of wordage out of the side of my kisser. "In the first place, Ben McBride was a loan shark—he charged such usurious interest that guys who got in debt to him had a hell of a time getting out. It's a known fact that Pete Quillen was one of his usury victims and I think we can safely assume the prop man, Bill Fisher, was another."

"The devil you warble!"

"Yeah," I said. "Cynthia will back me up on it. Right, hon?"

"It's t-true," she answered faintly.

I went on: "Now then. McBride's igloo was burgled when Cynthia and I went there a while ago. The prowler was still on the premises, hiding in an alcove. He had torn

two pages from McBride's loan ledger; an F page and a Q page."

"Fisher and Quillen!" Dave rasped. "Correct?"

"That's my guess, pal."

"But which one did it?"

"We'll know pretty soon if we're lucky," I promised. "I've got a score to settle with the bozo for clonking me on the sconce; also for bashing Miss Wainwright."

"And what about the diary you mentioned, the one with the yellow cover?"

I took a corner on two wheels and a prayer. "That's the major key; the answer to the riddle of the missing murder bullet."

"Wh-what?"

"Yeah. When I lamped it, my memory meshed. It made me recall another gold-colored volume I'd seen recently."

"Where?" Dave demanded.

"On that balcony setback at Metrovox. Among the books in the balcony shelves when the shooting scene was being made there had been one with a gold binding, the only yellow one in the batch—all the others were red, blue, green, brown, black and so on. I'd noticed the golden book rather casually at the time because—" I hesitated.

"Because why?"

"Because it matched Cynthia's hair. It was very gorgeous."

The blonde doll said shyly: "Why, thank you, Mr. Turner."

"Think nothing of it, babe," I grunted, squealing into a left turn and stoking more ethyl into the sedan's yammering cylinders. "Anyhow, Dave, the point is this. Later, when I helped you search that set for the missing slug, the yellow book was gone."

"Hm-m. Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing any yellow volume on those shelves." Then Dave's tone sharpened. "If you realized it was gone, why didn't you say so?"

"Chalk up an error for me," I admitted sourly. "I had a vague feeling the lineup of

books didn't quite look the same, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't savvy the score until I copped a hinge at the diary in McBride's stash. The diary has nothing to do with the case except that it triggered my recollection, because it had the same color binding as the book missing from the shelves on the sound stage."

"Well?"

"So then I knew how the death bullet disappeared. It drilled all the way through McBride's steeple and spent itself in a yellow book. Subsequently somebody glommed that book with the bullet in it so we couldn't match up the pill to Miss Wainwright's roscoe—or Pete Quillen's."

Dave said: "I get it. That covered up the kill so we couldn't actually prove who'd pulled it. And without that proof we'd never separate the guilty from the innocent, thereby allowing the murderer to go scot free!"

"Bull's-eye." I nodded and slammed a brogan on the brake pedal. "And here's the end of the line—I hope. Come on, chum, and keep your fingers crossed." I skittered out of the sedan with Donaldson puffing in my wake and Cynthia Wainwright pattering along behind. There was a modest bungalow directly ferninst us, bathed in red glow from the sunset and squatting peacefully in the center of a neatly barbered lawn. Smoke drifted from a chimney, wispily blue as it curled skyward.

CYNTHIA gasped: "But this . . . this is . . . it's Sammy Krakowski's cottage!"

"Correct," I answered, and came to the French windows of what turned out to be a small combined den-library. I hadn't time for knobs and latches; I lowered my cranium, hunched my shoulders and went crashing through the panes like a landslide smacking a glass hothouse. "Okay, Krakowski!" I yeepeed. "No use burning that yellow book in your fireplace. You're all washed up!"

The dyspeptic little Polish director gurgled, whirled, spotted me and clawed under his coat; dragged a Belgian F-N .32 automatic out of his belt. The rod had a bulbous dingus on its muzzle—an adapted silencer of the gas-suppression type. He triggered a token at me and the gat whispered: "*Ka-Speesh!*"

He missed me.

His slug found a substitute target, though. It slammed past Dave Donaldson directly in back of me and clipped the Wainwright muffin, who was behind him. She wailed strickenly and toppled at the window's threshold. Then Krakowski fired again.

This was a very bad blunder indeed.

When you use a silencer you're supposed to space your shots, waiting between them so the accumulated gas-pressure can be dissipated from the labyrinthine muffling chambers. Otherwise your second discharge builds up more pressure than the silencer can handle; whereupon it flies apart with a loud explosion, usually taking your fingers along with it.

That was what happened to Krakowski.

He squeezed his trigger. There was a hell-roaring blast. Then he emitted a hideous screech and stared down at where his mitt had been; it wasn't there now. All he had was a gory stump that spurted ketchup. "My hand . . . my hand—!"

"Stew your hand," I snarled, and covered him with my own .32 heater. "Hey, Dave, how's Cynthia?"

"Wait. I'll look."

While he was looking I leaped to the fireplace, kicked a smouldering gold-bound book from the flames, stomped on it to put the fire out. Then Dave said: "She's okay; got a scratch in her shoulder is all. She fainted."

"My hand!" Krakowski sobbed. "My hand—!"

I sneered at him. "Confess bumping Ben McBride or I'll let you leak all your gravy and you'll be meat for the morgue."

"You . . . I . . . my hand—"

"Listen," I said crisply. "You were in love with Cynthia, and McBride took her away from you. Then he ditched her, so you decided to get even with him. It was a revenge croaking. You used that silenced cannon, covering it with a script you held in your lap as you sat at the camera setup. When Cynthia and Quillen started firing blanks, you squeezed a noiseless slug through McBride's dandruff. Later you went to his apartment. You prowled that penthouse, petered his safe and tore out two ledger pages—Bill Fisher's and Pete Quillen's. That was to divide suspicion between those two innocent characters and louse up the mystery so the cops wouldn't be able to solve it."

"Please . . . my hand—!"

I said: "Also, by pointing suspicion toward Quillen and Fisher, it would help yank Cynthia out of the grease. You still cared for her, probably, and you didn't want to leave her behind the eight-ball. Although when I ankled into the penthouse with her, you were forced to do something I imagine you hated. You hid in an alcove and you wanted to get away, so you beaned her—being careful not to crush her skull. You weren't quite as gentle when you swatted me, though," I added resentfully, rubbing the lump on my dome.

"My hand . . . I'm bleeding—" he moaned piteously. Then, resigned to the inevitable, he added: "I confess. Now . . . help me . . . take me to a doctor—"

**I** CAST a triumphant grin at Donaldson. "Wrap a tourniquet on his flipper, Dave. He's finished."

Dave did this. "Yeah. But how did you figure he was the killer?"



"The missing yellow book," I said. "Here it is, slightly scorched but still showing where the bullet went in. The fact that we nabbed him trying to destroy it is all the proof we need. Plus his confession, of course."

Krakowski's dulled glimmers searched mine. "How did you . . . connect the missing book . . . with me?"

"By a process of elimination, pal. When I first announced that McBride was defunct at the top of that staircase, you raced up there to see for yourself. At the same instant, Cynthia swooned—and Pete Quillen tried to make a getaway which I stopped by knocking him cold. There was a good deal of confusion before you came back down the steps."

"But . . . but—"

"After that, nobody went up onto the balcony until the cops got on the job. By that time the yellow volume was missing. Okay;

you were the only one who'd been up there. *Consequently you're the only guy who could have glommed the book with the bullet in it. And nobody but a guilty bozo would want to steal the death slug.* Your reason was obvious: you didn't want that bullet matched against the two property pistols. Such a comparison would show the shot hadn't been fired by Cynthia or Quillen—and the dicks would begin hunting for third party with a silenced gat."

"Yes, you . . . are right. I tried . . . to cover myself . . . but I failed." He turned meekly to Dave. "Shall we go now, lieutenant?"

Over by the busted French window, the Wainwright cupcake came out of her swoon. She was just in time to see Donaldson marching the little director out of the stash and to hear Krakowski saying gently: "Goodbye, darling."

Sometimes love is the damndest thing.