

It's in the Book

Bibliomysteries

Mike Hammer

by Mickey Spillane, 1918-2006

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COPS ALWAYS COME IN TWOS. One will knock on the door, but a pair will come in, a duet on hand in case you get rowdy. One uniform drives the squad car, the other answers the radio. One plain-clothes dick asks the questions, the other takes the notes. Sometimes I think the only time they go solo is to the dentist. Or to bed. Or to kill themselves.

I went out into the outer office where a client had been waiting for ten minutes for me to wrap up a phone call. I nodded to him, but the six-footer was already on his feet, brown shoes, brown suit, brown eyes, brown hair. It was a relief his name wasn't Brown.

I said, "I can see you now, Mr. Hanson."

At her reception desk to one side of my inner-office door, Velda—a raven-haired vision in a white blouse and black skirt—was giving me a faintly amused look that said she had made him, too.

Mr. Hanson nodded back. There was no nervous smile, no anxiety in his manner at all. Generally, anybody needing a private investigator is not at ease. When I walked toward him, he extended a hand for me to shake, but I moved right past, going to the door and pulling it open.

His partner was standing with his back to the wall, like a sentry, hands clasped behind his back. He was a little smaller than Hanson, wearing a different shade of brown, going wild with a tie of yellow and white stripes. Of course, he was younger, maybe thirty, where his partner was pushing forty.

"Why don't you come in and join your buddy," I said, and made an after-you gesture.

This one didn't smile either. He simply gave me a long look and, without nodding or saying a word, stepped inside and stood beside Hanson, like they were sharing the wrong end of a firing squad.

Something was tickling one corner of Velda's pretty mouth as I closed the door and marched the cops into my private office.

I got behind my desk and waved at the client's chairs, inviting them to sit down. But cops don't like invitations and they stayed on their feet.

Rocking back, I said, "You fellas aren't flashing any warrants, meaning this isn't a search party or an arrest. So have a seat."

Reluctantly, they did.

Hanson's partner, who looked like his feelings had been hurt, said, "How'd you make us?"

I don't know how to give enigmatic looks, so I said, "Come off it."

"We could be businessmen."

"Businessmen don't wear guns on their hips, or if they do, they could afford a suit tailored for it. You're too clean-cut to be hoods, but not enough to be feds. You're either NYPD or visiting badges from Jersey."

This time they looked at each other and Hanson shrugged. Why fight it? They were cops with a job to do; this was nothing personal. He casually reached in a side suit coat pocket and flicked a folded hundred-dollar bill onto the desk as if leaving a generous tip.

"Okay," I said. "You have my attention."

"We want to hire you."

The way he hated saying it made it tough for me to keep a straight face. “Who is we?”

“You said it before,” Hanson said. “NYPD.” He almost choked, getting that out.

I pointed at the bill on the desktop. “Why the money?”

“To keep this matter legal. To insure confidentiality. Under your licensing arrangement with the state of New York, you guarantee that by acceptance of payment.”

“And if I reject the offer?”

For a moment I thought both of them finally would smile, but they stifled the effort, even if their eyes bore a hint of relief.

Interesting—they wanted me to pass.

So I picked up the hundred, filled out a receipt, and handed it to Hanson. He looked at it carefully, folded it, and tucked it into his wallet.

“What’s this all about?” I asked them.

Hanson composed himself and folded his hands in his lap. They were big hands, but flexible. He said, “This was *not* the department’s idea.”

“I didn’t think so.”

He took a few moments to look for the words. “I’m sure you know, Hammer, that there are people in government who have more clout than police chiefs or mayors.”

I nodded. He didn’t have to spell it out. Hell, we both knew what he was getting at.

There was the briefest pause and his eyes went to my phone and then around the room. Before he could ask, I said, “Yes, I’m wired to record client interviews... no, I didn’t hit the switch. You’re fine.”

But they glanced at each other just the same.

I said, “If you’re that worried, we can take it outside... onto the street, where we can talk.”

Hanson nodded, already getting up. “Let’s do it that way then.”

The three of us went into the outer office. I paused to tell Velda I wasn’t sure how long this would take. The amusement was gone from her dark eyes now that she saw I was heading out with this pair of obvious coppers.

We used the back door to the semi-private staircase the janitor used for emptying the trash, and went down to the street. There you can talk. Traffic and pedestrians jam up microphones, movement keeps you away from listening ears and, stuck in the midst of all those people, you have the greatest privacy in the world.

We strolled. It was a sunny spring morning but cool.

A block and a half later, Hanson said, “A United States senator is in Manhattan to be part of a United Nations conference.”

“One of those dirty jobs somebody’s gotta do, I suppose.”

“While he’s in town, there’s an item the senator would like you to recover.”

Suddenly this didn’t sound so big-time, senator or not.

I frowned. “What’s this, a simple robbery?”

“No. There’s nothing *simple* about this situation. But there are aspects of it that make you ... ideal.”

My God, he hated to admit that.

I said, “Your people have already been on it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Not your concern, Hammer.”

Not my concern?

We stopped at a red light at the street corner and I asked, “Where’s the FBI in this, if there’s investigating to do? A U.S. senator ought to be able pull those strings.”

“This is a local affair. Strictly New York.”

But not something the NYPD could handle.

The light changed and we started ambling across the intersection in the thick of other pedestrians. There was something strange about the term Hanson used—*recovery*. If not a robbery, was this mystery item something simply... lost? Or maybe I was expected to steal something. I deliberately slowed the pace and started looking in store windows.

Hanson said, “You haven’t asked who the senator is.”

“You said it was strictly New York. That narrows it to two.”

“And you’re not curious which one?”

“Nope.”

Hanson frowned. “Why not?”

“Because you’ll tell me when you’re ready, or I’ll get to meet him myself.”

No exasperation showed in the cop’s face, and not even in his tone. Strictly in his words: “What kind of private investigator are you, Hammer? Don’t you have any other questions?”

I stopped abruptly, turning my back to a display window, and gave them each a look. Anybody going past would have thought we were just three friends discussing where to grab a bite or a quick drink. Only someone knowledgeable would have seen that the way we stood or moved was designed to keep the bulk of a gun well-concealed under suit coats and that the expressions we wore were strictly for the passerby audience.

I said, “No wonder you guys are pissed off. With all the expertise of the NYPD, the senator decides to call *me* in to find a missing geegaw for you. That’s worth a horselaugh.”

This time Hanson did choke a little bit. “This... *geegaw* may be small in size, Hammer, but it’s causing rumbles from way up top.”

“Obviously all the way up to the senator’s office.”

Hanson said nothing, but that was an answer in itself.

I asked, “What’s higher than that?”

And it hit me.

It was crazy, but I heard myself asking the question: “Not... the president?”

Hanson swallowed. Then he shrugged again. “I didn’t say that, Hammer. But... he’s top dog, isn’t he?”

I grunted out a laugh. “Not *these* days he isn’t.”

Maybe if they had been feds, I’d have been accused of treason or sedition or stupidity. But these two—well, Hanson, at least—knew the answer already. I gave it to them anyway.

"These days," I said, "political parties and bank-rollers and lobbyists call the shots. No matter how important the pol, he's still a chess piece for money to move around. That includes the big man in the Oval Office."

Hanson's partner chimed in: "That's a cynical point of view, Hammer."

A kid on a skateboard wheeled around the corner. When he'd passed, I said, "What kind of recovery job rates this kind of pressure?"

We started walking again.

Hanson said, "It's there, so who cares. We're all just pawns, right, Hammer? Come on. Let's go."

"Where?"

"To see the senator," he said.

We might have been seated in the sumptuous living room of a Westchester mansion, judging by the burnished wood paneling, the overstuffed furnishings, the Oriental carpet. But this was merely the Presidential Suite of the Hotel St. Moritz on Central Park South.

My host, seated in an armchair fit for a king, was not the president, just a United States senator serving his third consecutive term. And Senator Hugh Boylan, a big pale fleshy man with a Leprechaun twinkle, looked as out of place here as I did. His barely pressed off-white seersucker suit and carelessly knotted blue-and-red striped tie went well with shaggy gray hair that was at least a week past due a haircut. His eyebrows were thick dark sideways exclamation points, a masculine contrast to a plumply sensuous mouth.

He had seen to it that we both had beers to drink. Bottles, not poured glasses, a nice common-man touch. Both brews rested without coasters on the low-slung marble coffee table between us, where I'd also tossed my hat. I was seated on a nearby couch with more well-upholstered curves than a high-ticket call girl.

The senator sat forward, his light blue eyes gently hooded and heavily red-streaked. He gestured with a thick-fingered hand whose softness belied a dirt-poor up-bringing. His days as a longshoreman were far behind him.

"Odd that we've never met, Mr. Hammer, over all these years." His voice was rich and thick, like Guinness pouring in a glass. "Perhaps it's because we don't share the same politics."

"I don't have any politics, Senator."

Those Groucho eyebrows climbed toward a shaggy forelock. "You were famously associated with my conservative colleague, Senator Jasper. There was that rather notorious incident in Russia when you accompanied him as a bodyguard."

"That was just a job, sir."

"Then perhaps you won't have any objection to doing a job for a public servant of... a *liberal* persuasion."

"As long as you don't try to persuade me, Senator."

"Fair enough," he said with a chuckle, and settled back in the chair, tenting his fingers. "I would hope as a resident of our great state that you might have observed that I fight for my constituency and try to leave partisan politics out of it. That I've often been at odds with my party for the good of the people."

"Senator, you don't have to sell me. No offense, but I haven't voted in years."

A smile twitched in one corner of his fleshy face. "I am only hoping that you don't view me as an adversary. That you might have some small regard for my efforts."

"You're honest and you're a fighter. That goes a good distance with me."

His pale cheeks flushed red. *Had I struck a nerve without intending?*

"I appreciate that," he said quietly.

Sunshine was filtering through sheer curtains, exposing dust motes—even the St. Moritz had dust. Horns honked below, but faintly, the city out there paying no heed to a venerable public servant and an erstwhile tabloid hero.

"Nicholas Giraldi died last night," he said.

What the hell?

Don Nicholas Giraldi, head of New York's so-called sixth Mafia family, had died in his sleep yesterday afternoon in his private room at St. Luke's Hospital. It had been in the evening papers and all over the media: "Old Nic," that most benign of a very un-benign breed, finally gone.

"I heard," I said.

Boylan's smile was like a priest's, blessing a recalcitrant parishioner. "You knew him. There are rumors that you even did jobs for him occasionally. That he trusted you."

I sipped my Miller Lite and shrugged. "Why deny it? That doesn't make me a wiseguy any more than taking on a job for you makes me a liberal."

He chuckled. "I didn't mean to suggest it did. It does seem... forgive me, Mr. Hammer... it does seem a trifle strange that a man who once made headlines killing mobsters would form an alliance with one."

"Alliance is too strong a word, Senator. I did a handful of jobs for him, unrelated to his ... business. Matters he didn't want corrupted by his own associates."

"Could you be more specific?"

"No. Him dying doesn't mean client confidentiality goes out the window. That cop Hanson, in the other room, has the receipt for that C-note that I signed before coming. Spells it out in the small print, if you're interested."

The dark eyebrows flicked up and down. "Actually, that's something of a relief. What I want to ask you dances along the edges of that confidentiality, Mr. Hammer. But I hope you might answer. And that you would trust me to be discreet as well."

"You can ask."

He folded his arms, like a big Irish genie about to grant a wish. "Did you receive something from the old don, shortly before... or perhaps *upon*... his death?"

"No. What would it have been if I had?"

"A book. A ledger, possibly."

I put the beer bottle back on the coffee table. "No. Is that what you're trying to recover? A ledger?"

He nodded. Now when he spoke it was nearly a whisper: "And here your discretion is key. The don was in power a very long time... going back to the late forties. His ways, by modern standards, were old-fashioned, right up to the end. One particular antiquated practice peculiar to Don Giraldi was, apparently, keeping a hand-written record of every transaction, every agreement he ever made. No one knows precisely what was in that book. There were other books kept,

accounting records that were largely fictional, intended for the IRS but in this particular volume he was said to record the real events, the actual dealings of his business. When asked about such matters, he would say only, *It's in the book.*"

I shrugged. "I heard the rumors. That he kept a book under lock and key, or in a safe somewhere, and all his secrets were kept in the thing. But I never believed it."

"Why not?"

I pawed at the air dismissively. "He was too shrewd to write anything down and incriminate himself if it fell into the wrong hands? Naw. It's a myth, Senator. If that's what you want to send me out looking for, my advice is to forget it."

But the big head was shaking side to side. "No, Mr. Hammer, that book is very real. Old Nic told his most innermost associates, when his health began to fail earlier this year, that the book would be given to the person he trusted most."

I frowned, but I also shrugged. "So I'm wrong. Anyway, *I'm* not that person. He didn't send me his damn book. But how is it you know what his *innermost associates* were told?"

"FBI wiretaps." His smile had a pixieish cast, but his eyes were so hard they might have been glass. "Do you think you could find that ledger, Mr. Hammer?"

I shrugged. "It's a big city. Puts the whole needle-in-a-haystack bit to shame. But what would you do with the thing? Does the FBI think they can make cases out of what's in those pages?"

He swallowed thickly. Suddenly he wasn't looking me in the eye. "There's no question, Mr. Hammer, that names and dates and facts and figures in a ledger would be of interest to law enforcement, both local and federal. There's also no question of its value to the old don's successors."

I was nodding. "Covering their own asses and giving them valuable intel on the other mob families and crooked cops and any number of public figures. The blackmail possibilities alone are..."

But I didn't finish. Because the senator's head lowered and his eyes shut briefly, and I knew.

I knew.

"You've always been a straight shooter, Senator. But you didn't come from money. You must have needed help in the early days, getting started. You took money from the don, didn't you?"

"Mr. Hammer..."

"Hell. And so did somebody else." I hummed a few nasty off-key bars of "Hail to the Chief."

"Mr. Hammer, your country would be very—"

"Can it. I put in my time in the Pacific. I should let you all swing. I should just sit back and laugh and laugh and let this play out like Watergate was just the cartoon before the main feature."

He looked very soft, this man who had come from such a hard place so long ago. "Is that what you intend to do?"

I sighed. Then I really did laugh, but there wasn't any humor in it. "No. I know what kind of foul waters you have to swim in, Senator. And your public record is good. Funny, the president having to send you. Your politics and his couldn't be

much more at odds. But you're stuck in the same mire, aren't you? Like dinosaurs in a tar pit."

That made him smile sadly. "Will you walk away and just let us decay, Mr. Hammer?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, for one thing, somewhere out there, in that big city, or that bigger country beyond, are people that Old Nic trusted. People like you, who aren't tainted by the Mob. And who are now in grave danger."

He was right about that.

"And Mr. Hammer, the way we came looking for you does not compare to the way other interested parties will conduct their search—the other five families, for example. And they may well start with you."

I grunted a laugh. "So I owe you a big thank you, at least, since I would have had no idea I was in anybody's cross-hairs over this. I get that."

"Good. Good." He had his first overdue sip of beer. He licked foam off those rather sensual lips and the Leprechaun twinkle was back. "And what would you say to ten thousand dollars as a fee, Mr. Hammer?"

"Ten thousand dollars of the tax payers' money?" I got up and slapped on my hat. "Sure. Why not? It's a way for me to finally get back some of what I paid in, anyway."

"Bring me the book, Mr. Hammer." His smile was reassuring but the eyes were hard again. "Bring us the book."

"See what I can do."

Hoods always come in twos. The bent-nose boys accompany their boss to business meetings, often in restaurants. Sometimes they sit with their boss, other times at an adjacent table. Or one sits nearby while the other stays outside in the car, at the wheel, an eye on the entrance. Or maybe parked in the alley behind a restaurant, which is a smarter move. Mob watchdogs are always teamed up in twos. So are assassins.

This time the guy waiting in the hall outside my office in the Hackard Building was in his twenties, wearing a yellow shirt with a pointy collar and no tie under a light-blue suit that gave no hint of gun bulge. But a piece was under there, all right. He would have been handsome if his nose hadn't been broken into a misshapen thing, stuck on like clay a sculptor hadn't gotten around to shaping. His dark hair was puffy with hair spray and his sideburns were right off the cough-drop box.

Hoods these days.

"Let's go in and join your boss and your buddy," I said.

"What?" His voice was comically high-pitched and his eyes were small and stupid, all but disappearing when he frowned.

I made an educated guess. "You're with Sonny Giraldi's crew. And Sonny and your opposite number are waiting inside. I'm Hammer." I jerked a thumb toward the door. "Like on the glass?"

He was still working that out when I went in and held the door open for him.

John "Sonny" Giraldi, nephew of Don Nicholas Giraldi and assumed heir to the throne, was seated along the side wall like a patient waiting to get in to see the

doctor. He was small, slender, olive-complected, with a narrow face, a hook nose, and big dark eyes that had a deceptively sleepy cast. The other bodyguard, bigger than the guy in the hall, was another pointy-collared disco dude with heavy sideburns; he had a protruding forehead and a weak chin, sitting with a chair between himself and his boss.

Sonny's wardrobe, by the way, was likely courtesy of an Italian designer, Armani maybe, a sleekly cut gray number with a black shirt and gray silk tie. No way a gun was under there anywhere. Sonny let his employees handle the artillery.

"I'd prefer, Mr. Hammer," Sonny said, his voice a radio-announcer baritone too big for his small frame, "if you'd let Flavio keep his position in the corridor. This is a... uh... transitional time. I might attract unwanted company."

"Fine. Let Flavio stand watch. Hell, I know all about unwanted company."

That got a tiny twitch of a smile from Velda, over at her desk, but prior to that she had been sitting as blankly unconcerned as a meter maid making out a ticket. The Giraldi mob's heir apparent would not have suspected that the unseen right hand of this statuesque beauty undoubtedly held a revolver right now.

I shut the door on Flavio and turned to walk toward my inner office door, saying, "Just you, Mr. Giraldi. I take it you're here for a consultation."

He rose on his Italian loafers and gave me a nod, tossing a flat-hand gesture to the seated bodyguard to stay that way. Velda's head swivelled slightly and I flashed her a look that said be ready for anything. She returned that with a barely perceptible nod.

I shut the door and gestured Sonny Giraldi toward the client's chair. I got behind the desk as Sonny removed a silver cigarette case from inside his suit coat. No chance he was going for a gun the way those threads fit. He reached his slender, well-manicured hand out to offer me a smoke from the case and I shook my head.

"I gave those up years ago," I said. "How do you think I managed to live so long?"

He smiled, a smile so delicious he seemed to taste it. "Well, a lot of us were wondering. Mr. Hammer, do you know why I'm here?"

"You want your uncle's ledger."

"Yes. Do you have it?"

"No. Next question."

He crossed his legs as he lighted up a cigarette. He was not particularly manly, though not effeminate, either. "Do you understand why I thought you might have the book?"

"Yeah. On his deathbed, your uncle said he was bequeathing the thing to somebody he trusted."

He nodded slowly, the big dark sleepy eyes in the narrow face fixed on me. "You did a few jobs for the old don, jobs that he didn't feel he could entrust to his own people."

"That's true as far as it goes."

"*Why* did he trust *you*, Mr. Hammer? And why would *you* work for *him*? You're well-known to be an enemy of La Cosa Nostra. Carl Evello. Alberto Bonetti. Two dons, representing two of the six families, and you killed them both. That

massacre at the Y and S men's club—*how* many soldiers did you slaughter there, anyway? Thirty?"

"It was never proven I did that. Anyway, who's counting?"

Another tasty smile. There was an ashtray on my desk for the benefit of clients, and he used it, flicking ash with a hand heavy with bejeweled golden rings. The suit might be Armani, but down deep Sonny was still just another tacky goombah.

He was saying, "And yet Don Nicholas, Old Nic himself, not only let you live, he trusted you to do jobs for him. Why?"

"Why did he let me live? Now and then I killed his competitors. Which saved him the trouble. As for why I would do a job for Old Nic... let's just say he did me a favor now and then."

"What kind of favor, Mr. Hammer? Or may I call you 'Mike'? After all, you and my uncle were thick as thieves."

"Not that thick, but you can call me Mike... Sonny. Let's just say your uncle helped me out of the occasional jam in your world."

The hooded eyes narrowed to slits. "They say he helped you get out of town after the waterfront shoot-out with Sal Bonetti."

I said nothing.

Giraldi exhaled smoke, blowing it off to one side. Thoughtful of him.

"What is the government paying you?" he asked.

"What government? Paying me for What?"

"You were followed to the St. Moritz, Mike. Senator Boylan is staying there. The G wants the book—maybe to try to bring us down, or maybe they got entries in there themselves. I don't give two shits either way, Mike. I want that book."

"You've got an army. I'm just one guy. Go find it yourself."

Again he blew smoke to one side. His manner was casual but I could tell he was wound tight.

He said, "I have a feeling you're in a position to know where it is. Call it a hunch. But I don't think that book got sent to anybody in the family business. I was close to my uncle. *He would have given it to me!*"

He slammed a small fist onto my desk and the ashtray jumped. I didn't.

Very softly he repeated, "He would have given it to me."

I rocked back. "What use would somebody outside of the family have for that book?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know, Mike."

"Does the thing even exist? Do you really believe that your uncle wrote down every important transaction and key business dealing in some ledger?"

He sat forward and the big eyes didn't seem at all sleepy now. "I *saw* him with it. The book exists. He would sit in his study—he wasn't a big man, he was my size, never one of these big fat slobs like so many in our business—a gray little guy always impeccably dressed, bald in his later years, and like... like a *monk* goin' over some ancient scroll. After anything big would go down, he'd retire to his study and hunker over that goddamn book."

"What did it look like?"

"It was a ledger, but not a big one, not like an accountant uses. Smaller, more like an appointment book, but not *that* small. Maybe six by four. Beat-up looking brown cover, some kind of leather. But thick—three inches thick, anyway."

"Where did he keep it?"

"Well, it wasn't in his safe in that study, or in a locked drawer, and we've been all over his house, looking." He sat forward and did his best to seem earnest. "Mike, would it mean anything to you if I said the Giraldis are going to stay on the same path as Uncle Nic?"

"You mean prostitution, gambling, loan-sharking, that kind of thing? Am I supposed to be proud of you, Sonny?"

"You know that Uncle Nic never dealt drugs. We're the only one of the six families that stayed out of what he called an *evil enterprise*. No kiddie or gay porn, neither, no underage hookers."

Did they give a Nobel Prize for conscientious racketeering, I wondered?

He was saying, too quickly, "And we—I—am gonna continue contributing to charities, through St. Pat's Old Cathedral in Little Italy. We fund orphanages and drug treatment centers and all kinds of good works, Mike. You know that. We're *alone* in that, of the six families."

"Okay. So you Giraldis are the best of the bad guys. What's that to me?"

He shrugged. "I suspect it's why you were willing to do jobs for my uncle. Not just because he bailed your ass out when crazy Sal Bonetti damn near killed you."

I trotted out my lopsided grin. "Sonny, I don't have the book."

"But you know where to look. There's one-hundred K in it for you, Mike, if you turn that book over to me. Cash."

"That's a lot of green for a ledger whose contents you aren't sure of."

"Find it, Mike. *Find it.*"

Sonny got up, stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. Smoothed his suit coat. "Do you think I'm the only one who knows you were on the old boy's list of trusted associates? And do you think the other five families aren't going to be looking for that thing?"

Suddenly the government's ten thousand didn't seem like so much loot after all. Even Sonny's hundred K seemed short of generous.

"Of course, you can *handle* yourself, Mike. That's another reason why you're the ideal person to go looking for this particular volume. And any members of the other five families who you might happen to dispose of along the way, well, that's just a bonus for both of us."

He gave me a business card with his private numbers, an after-hours one jotted on the back. Then he went out with a nod of goodbye that I didn't bother to return.

I just sat there thinking. I heard the door close in the outer office, and then Velda was coming in. She skirted the client's chair and leaned her palms on the desk. Her dark eyes were worried.

"What's going on, Mike? First cops, now wiseguys? What next?"

"I missed lunch," I said. "How about an early supper?"

She smirked and shook her head, making the arcs of raven-wing hair swing. "Only you would think of food at a time like this."

"Give Pat a call and have him meet us at the Blue Ribbon in half an hour."

"What makes you think a captain of Homicide is going to drop everything just because you call?"

"He'll drop everything because *you* called, doll. He has a thing for you, remember. And me? I'm the guy who solves half the captain's cases."

The Blue Ribbon Restaurant on West Forty-fourth Street was in its between-lunch-and-supper lull, meaning Velda and I had the restaurant part of the bar damn near to ourselves. We sat at our regular corner table with walls of autographed celebrity photos looking over our shoulders as I put away the knockwurst and Velda had a salad. She worked harder at maintaining her figure than I did.

Pushing her half-eaten rabbit food aside, Velda leaned in and asked, "So... you think you can find this ledger? What leads do you have?"

"Just two."

"Such as?"

I gulped from a pilsner of Miller. "Well, one is Father Mandano in Little Italy."

"Makes sense," she said with a nod. "His parish is where Don Giraldi was the primary patron."

I laughed once. "Patron. That's a good way to put it."

"Buying his way into heaven?"

"I don't think these mob guys really believe in God—not the top guys anyway. Buying himself good will is more like it. Like Capone in Chicago opening up soup kitchens in the Depression."

"So you'll talk to the good father."

"I will."

"That's one lead, Mike. You said two."

I looked at her slyly over the rim of my glass. I was almost whispering when I said, "Remember that job we did for Old Nic about twenty years back? That relocation number?"

Velda was nodding, smiling slyly right back at me. Like me, she kept her voice low. "You're right. That's a lead if ever there was one. You want me to come along?"

"I would. She liked you. She'll talk more freely if you're around. But I'll talk to the priest on my own."

"Yeah," she said with a smirk. "Only room for two in a confessional."

Pat came in the revolving door and came straight to us—he knew where we'd be. Enjoying the spring afternoon, he was in a lightweight tan suit, chocolate tie, and no hat—though he and I were two rare New Yorkers who still wore them. He stopped at the bar to grab a beer from George and brought it along with him when he came over, sitting with me on his left and Velda on his right.

"Don't wait for me," he said, noting the meal I was half-way through. "Dig right in."

"I said thirty minutes," I said. "You took forty-five. A man has to eat."

"Yeah, I heard that rumor. You didn't say what this was about, so let *me* tell *you*—old Don Giraldi finally croaking. Everybody and his dog is out looking for that legendary missing ledger of his."

"Is it legendary, Pat?"

His expression was friendly but the blue-gray eyes were hard. "Legendary in the sense that it's famous in certain circles. But I think it's very real, considering the stir it's causing among the ziti set."

"The other families?"

“Just one, really—the Pierluigi bunch. They were the family that Old Nic was allied most closely with. Their territories really intertwined, you know. Talking to the OCU guys, they say Old Nic’s reputation as the most beneficent of the Mafia capos is bullshit. Specifically, they say he invested in drug trafficking through Pierluigi. That and *other* nasty criminal enterprises that wouldn’t have made the old don such a beloved figure around Little Italy.”

“Meaning if the don really was keeping a record of his transactions,” I said, “that book would be of high interest to the Pierluigi clan.”

“Damn straight. But they aren’t the only interested parties. There are a couple of underbosses in the Giraldi family who are looking at the old don’s passing as an invitation to move up in the world.”

“You mean Sonny Giraldi doesn’t have the don’s chair sewn up.”

“He *might*... if he had that book. So, Mike,” Pat’s smile was wide but those eyes of his remained shrewd. “Do you have it?”

“Well, I may be older, but I hope I still have it. What would you say, Vel? Do I still have it?”

“I should say you do,” she said.

“Can the comedy,” Pat said. “It’s well known you had a soft spot for Old Nic, Mike.”

“That’s horseshit, Pat. I had no illusions about the old boy. He was probably the best man in his world, but what a lousy world, huh?”

Pat sipped beer, then almost whispered: “Word on the street is, that book went to somebody the old don trusted. Are *you* that somebody, Milke?”

“No. Tell me about this guy Hanson.”

“Hanson? *What* Hanson?”

“Hanson in the department. He didn’t show me his badge but he didn’t have to. He had a buddy with him whose name I didn’t catch—younger guy.”

“That would likely be Captain Bradley.”

I grinned at him. “Captain! How about that? A young guy achieving such a rarefied rank. You must be impressed, Pat.”

“Screw you, buddy. Hanson is an asskisser—sorry, Velda—and a political player from way back. He made inspector at thirty-five. You never ran into him before?”

“No.”

“When *did* you run into him?”

I ignored the question. “So this Hanson is strictly a One Police Plaza guy? No wonder I don’t know him. But is he honest?”

“Define honest.”

“Is he *bent*, Pat? Not just a little, but all the way?”

Pat shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t sound very convinced.”

“We don’t travel in the same orbit, Hanson and me. Mike, I never heard a whisper of corruption in regard to him, but that doesn’t make it impossible. I mean, he’s a political animal.”

I gave him a small, nasty smile. “Could Inspector Hanson be in that ledger?”

Pat had a sip of beer and thought about it. “If he is bent, of course he could. But so could any number of bad apples. Why, did he come looking for it?”

I ignored that question, too. “Seems to me there are a lot of people with guns who might like to check this book out of whoever’s library it’s landed in.”

“Brother, you aren’t kidding.”

I put a hand on his shoulder. “Pat, let me treat you to a platter of this knockwurst. On me.”

“What’s the occasion for such generosity?”

“I just think it’s a pity that average citizens like me don’t take the time out, now and again, to properly thank a public servant like you for your stalwart efforts.”

“Stalwart, huh? Normally I’d say *baloney*.”

But instead he had the knockwurst.

St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, built in the 1870s, was a late arrival compared to old St. Pat’s on the corner of Prince and Mott. The original St. Pat’s had started saving souls in Little Italy a good seventy years before that midtown upstart.

I sat with Father Mandano in his office in the Prince Street rectory—this was a Wednesday night with no mass at old St. Pat’s. Velda sat outside in the reception area, reading an ancient issue of *Catholic Digest*—the desk where her nun equivalent usually sat was empty. This was early evening, after office hours.

The broad-shouldered priest, in casual black and that touch of white, sat with thick-fingered, prayerfully folded hands on the blotter of a massive contradiction of a desk, its austere lines trimmed with ornamental flourishes. The office with its rich wood paneling and arched windows had a conference table to one side and bookcases everywhere, the spacious chamber under-lit by way of a banker’s lamp and a few glowing wall-mounted fixtures.

The father was as legendary in Little Italy as that ledger of Don Giraldi’s—the old priest deemed tough but fair, his generosity renowned. Still, even in his seventies, he had the well-fed look and hard eyes of a line coach, his white hair cut military short, his square head home to regular features that were distorting with age.

“I have of course heard the tales about this notorious ledger, Michael,” he said in a sonorous baritone schooled for the pulpit. “But the late don did not leave it with me.”

“You must have had many meetings with Giraldi over the years, Father. Would you have any notion about who he might have entrusted with that book?”

He shook his head once, a solemn and final gesture. “I only met rarely with Mr. Giraldi. For many years, I dealt solely with his wife, Antoinetta, who was a wonderful, devout woman.”

“How could she be devout and married to a mob boss?”

“Our Father’s house has many mansions.”

“Yeah, and compartments, too, I guess. And mob money can build plenty of mansions.”

His smile was barely perceptible. “When were you last at mass, Michael? I assume you are of the faith, Irish lad that you are.”

“I haven’t been a ‘lad’ for a lot of years, Father, and I haven’t been to mass since I got back from overseas.”

“The war changed you.”

“The war showed me that God either doesn’t give a damn or has some sick sense of humor. If you’ll forgive my frankness, Father.”

The dark eyes didn’t look so hard now. “I’m in the forgiveness business, Michael. You hold God responsible for the sins of man?”

“If you mean war, Father, fighting against an evil devil like Hitler isn’t considered a sin, is it?”

“No. But I would caution you that holding God responsible for the actions of men is a dangerous philosophy. And I gather, from your words, that you *do* believe in God.”

“I do.”

There was nothing barely perceptible about his smile now. “Years ago, the headlines were filled with your colorful activities, working against evil men. You were raised in the church, so surely you know of your namesake, St. Michael.”

“Yeah, the avenging archangel.”

“Well, that’s perhaps an over-simplification. Among other things, he leads the army of God against the minions of Satan, the powers of Hell.”

“I’m semi-retired from that, Father. Let’s just say you don’t have time to hear my confession, but I bet you heard some beauts from Old Nic.”

The smile disappeared and the priest’s countenance turned solemn again. “Nicholas Giraldi never came to confession. Not once.”

“What?”

“Oh, he will lie in consecrated ground. I gave him bedside Last Rites at St. Luke’s. But he never took confession here. And I will confess to you, Michael, that I was surprised when, after his wife’s death, he continued to fund her charities. If there was any purpose in it, other than his own self-aggrandizement, it might have been to honor her memory.”

“The old don bought himself plenty of good will here in Little Italy.”

“He did indeed. But I don’t believe his good works had anything to do with seeking forgiveness. And, before you ask how I could accept contributions from the likes of Don Giraldi, I will tell you that even a spiritual man, a servant of God, must live in this physical world. If suffering can be alleviated by accepting such contributions, I will accept that penance, whether sincere or cynical. You might consider this in itself a cynical, even selfish practice, Michael. But we were put here in this place, this, this...”

“Vale of tears, Father?”

“Vale of tears, son. We were put here in this problem-solving world, this physical purgatory, to exercise our free will. And if I can turn ill-gotten gains into the work of the Lord, I will do so, unashamed.”

Why shouldn’t he? All he had to do was take confession from some other collar and get his sins washed away for a few Hail Marys. But I didn’t say that. Hypocritical or not, Father Mandano had helped a lot of people. He was a practical man and that wasn’t a sin in my book.

I got to my feet, my hat in my hands. “Thanks for seeing me at short notice, Father. Listen, if you happen to get a line on that ledger, let me know. It could spark a shooting war out on your streets. And innocent people could die.”

“And that troubles you, doesn’t it, Michael?”

“Don’t kid yourself, Father. This is just a job to me. I have a big payday coming if I pull this off. This is one valuable book.”

“In my line of work, Michael,” he said, “there is only *one* book of real value.”

Wilcox in Suffolk County was a prosperous-looking little beach burg with a single industry: tourism. In a month the population would swell from seven-thousand to who-the-hell-knew, and the business district would be alive and jumping till all hours. Right now, at eight-thirty p.m., it was a ghost town.

Sheila Burrows lived in a two-bedroom brick bungalow on a side street, perched on a small but nicely landscaped yard against a wooded backdrop. The place was probably built in the fifties, nothing fancy, but well-maintained. A free-standing matching brick one-car garage was just behind the house. We pulled in up front. The light was on over the front door. We were expected.

I got out of the car and came around to play gentleman for Velda but she was already climbing out. She had changed into a black pants suit with a gray silk blouse and looked very business-like, or as much as her curves, long legs and all that shoulders-brushing raven hair allowed. She carried a good-size black purse with a shoulder strap. Plenty of room for various female accouterments, including a .22 revolver.

She was looking back the way we came. “I can’t shake the feeling we were followed,” she said.

“Hard to tell on a damn expressway,” I admitted. “But I didn’t pick up on anything on that county road.”

“Maybe I should stay out here and keep watch.”

“No. I can use you inside. I remember you hitting it off with this broad. She was scared of me, as I recall.”

Now Velda was looking at the brick house. “Well, for all she knew you were one of Don Giraldi’s thugs and she was getting a one-way ride. And maybe something about your manner said that a ‘broad’ is what you thought she was.”

“I wasn’t so cultured then.”

“Yeah,” she said sarcastically, as we started up the walk. “You’ve come a long way, baby.”

Twenty years ago, more or less, Velda and I had moved Sheila Burrows out to these Long Island hinterlands. That hadn’t been her name then, and she’d had to leave a Park Avenue penthouse to make the move. The exact circumstances of why Don Giraldi had wanted his mistress to disappear had not been made known to us. But we had suspected.

The woman who met us at the door was barely recognizable as the former Broadway chorus girl we had helped relocate back when LBJ was still president. She had been petite and curvy and platinum blonde. Now she was stout and bulgy and mousy brunette. Her pretty Connie Stevens-ish features, lightly made up, were trapped inside a ball of a face.

“Nice to see you two again,” she said as she ushered us inside. She wore a pink top, blue jeans and sandals.

There was no entryway. You were just suddenly in the living room, a formal area with lots of plastic-covered furniture. A spinet piano against the right wall was

overseen by a big gilt-framed pastel portrait of our hostess back in all her busty blond glory.

She quickly moved us into a small family room area just off a smallish kitchen with wooden cabinets and up-to-date appliances; a short hallway to the bedrooms was at the rear. She sat us down at a round maple table with captain's chairs and a spring-theme centerpiece of plastic flowers.

She had coffee ready for us. As I stirred milk and sugar into mine, I glanced at the nearby wall where rough-hewn paneling was arrayed with framed pictures. They charted two things: her descent into near obesity, and the birth, adolescence and young manhood of a son. It was all there, from playpen to playground, from high school musical to basketball court, from graduation to what was obviously a recent shot of the handsome young man with an attractive girl outside a building I recognized as part of NYU.

"That's our son," she said, in a breathy second soprano that had been sexy once upon a time.

"We *thought* you were pregnant," Velda said with a tiny smile.

Her light blue eyes jumped. "Really? You knew? Why, I was only a few months gone. Barely showing."

"You just had that glow," Velda said.

Our hostess chuckled. "More like water retention. How *do* you maintain that lovely figure of yours, Miss Sterling? Or are you two *married* by now?"

"Not married," Velda said. "Not quite. Not yet."

"She eats a lot of salad," I said.

That made Sheila Burrows wince, and Velda shot me a look. I'd been rude. Hadn't meant to be, but some things come naturally.

I said, "You probably never figured to see us again."

"That's true," she said. She sipped her coffee. "But I wasn't surprised to hear from you, not exactly."

Velda asked, "Why is that?"

"With Nicholas dying, I figured there would be *some* kind of follow-up. For a long time, there was a lawyer, a nice man named Simmons, who handled the financial arrangements. He would come by every six months and see how I was doing. And ask questions about our son."

I asked, "Any direct contact with Don Giraldi since you moved out here?"

"No. And, at first, I was surprised. I thought after Nick was born... our son is Nicholas, too... that we might, in some way, resume our relationship. Nicolas Giraldi was a very charming man, Mr. Hammer. Very suave. Very courtly. He was the love of my life."

"You were only with him for, what? Five or six years?"

"Yes, but it was a wonderful time. We traveled together, even went to Europe once, and he practically lived with me during those years. I don't believe he ever had relations with his wife after the early years of their marriage."

"They had three daughters."

"Yes," she said, rather defensively, "but none after our Nick came along."

Funny that she so insistently referred to the son in that fashion—'our Nick'—when the father had avoided any direct contact. And this once beautiful woman,

so sexually desirable on and off the stage, had become a homemaker and mother—a suburban housewife. Without a husband.

Velda said, “I can see why you thought Nicholas would come back to you, after your son’s birth. If he had *really* wanted you out of his life—for whatever reason—he wouldn’t have kept you so close to home.”

“Wilcox is a long way from Broadway,” she said rather wistfully.

“But it’s not the moon,” I said. “I had assumed the don felt you’d gotten too close to him—that you’d seen things that could be used against him.”

Her eyes jumped again. “Oh, I would never—”

“Not by you, but by others. Police. FBI. Business rivals. But it’s clear he wanted his son protected. So that the boy could not be used against him.”

She was nodding. “That’s right. That’s what he told me, before he sent me away. He said our son would be in harm’s way, if anyone knew he existed. But that he would always look out for young Nick. That someday Nick would have a great future.”

Velda said, “You said you had no direct contact with Nicholas. But would I be right in saying that you had... *indirect* contact?”

The pretty face in the plump setting beamed. “Oh, yes. Maybe once a year, always in a different way. You see, our Nick is a very talented boy—talented young *man* now. He took part in so many school activities, both the arts and sports. And so brilliant; valedictorian of his class! But then his father was a genius, wasn’t he?”

I asked, “What do you mean, *once a year, always in a different way?*”

She was looking past me at the wall of pictures. Fingers that were still slender, graceful, traced memories in the air.

“There Nicholas would be,” she said, “looking so proud, in the audience at a concert, or a ball game, or a school play. I think Nick gets his artistic talent from me, if that doesn’t sound too stuck up and, best of all, Nicholas came to graduation and heard his son speak.”

Velda asked, “Did they ever meet?”

“No.” She pointed. “Did you notice that picture? That very first one, high up, at the left?”

A solemn portrait of a kid in army green preceded the first of several baby photos.

“That’s a young man who died in Vietnam,” she said. “Mr. Simmons, the attorney, provided me with that and other photos, as well as documents. His name was Edwin Burrows and we never met. He was an only child with no immediate family. He won several medals, actually, including a Silver Star, and *that* was the father that Nick grew up proud of.”

I asked, “No suspicions?”

“Why should he be suspicious? When he was younger, Nick was very proud of having such an heroic father.”

“Only when he was younger?”

“Well... you know boys. They grow out of these things.”

Not really, but I let it pass.

“Mrs. Burrows,” I said, sitting forward, “have you received anything, perhaps in the mail, that might seem to have come from Don Giraldi?”

“No...”

“Specifically, a ledger. A book.”

Her eyes were guileless. “No,” she said. “No. After Mr. Simmons died, and his visits ended, another lawyer came around, just once. I was given a generous amount of money and told I was now on my own. And there’s a trust fund for Nick that becomes his on his graduation from NYU.”

“Have you talked to your son recently?”

She nodded. “We talk on the phone at least once a week. Why, I spoke to him just yesterday.”

“Did he say anything about receiving a ledger from his father?”

“Mr. Hammer, no. As I thought I made clear, as far as Nick is concerned *his* father is a Vietnam war hero named Edwin Burrows.”

“Right,” I said. “Now listen carefully.”

And I told her about the book.

She might be a suburban hausfrau now, but she had once been the mistress of a mob boss. She followed me easily, occasionally nodding, never interrupting.

“You are on the very short list,” I said, “of people who Don Giraldi valued and trusted. You might *still* receive that book. And it’s possible some very bad people might come looking for it.”

She shook her head, mousy brown curls bouncing. “Doesn’t seem possible... after all these years. I thought I was safe... I thought *Nick* was safe.”

“You raise the most pertinent point. I think your son is the logical person the don may have sent that book.”

She frowned in concern, but said nothing.

I went on: “I want you to do two things, Mrs. Burrows, and I don’t want any argument. I want you to let us stow you away in a safe-house motel we use upstate. Until this is over. You have a car? Velda will drive you in it, and stay with you till I give the word. Just quickly pack a bag.”

She swallowed and nodded. “And the other thing?”

“I want you to call your son right now,” I said, “and tell him I’m coming to visit him. I’ll talk to him briefly myself, so that he’ll know my voice. I’ll come alone. If more than one person shows up at his door, even if one of them claims to be me, he’s not to let them in. If that happens, he’s to get out and get away, as fast as he can. Is all of that clear?”

She wore a funny little smile. “You know, Mr. Hammer, I think my impression of you all those years ago was wrong, very wrong.”

“Yeah?”

“You really are quite a nice, caring human being.”

I glanced at Velda, who didn’t bother stifling her grin.

“Yeah,” I said. “I get that a lot.”

If Wilcox at eight-thirty p.m. was a ghost town, the East Village at eleven-something was a freak show. This was a landscape of crumbling buildings, with as many people living on the streets as walking down them, where in a candy store you could buy a Snickers Bar or an eightball of smack, and when morning came, bodies with bullet holes or smaller but just as deadly ones would be on sidewalks and alleyways like so much trash set out for collection.

Tompkins Square Park was this neighborhood's central gathering place, from oldtimers who had voted for FDR and operated traditional businesses like diners and laundries to students, punkers, artists, and poets seeking life experience and cheap lodging. Every second tenement storefront seemed home to a gallery showcasing work inspired by the tragic but colorful street life around them.

NYU student Nick Burrows lived in a second-floor apartment over a gallery peddling works by an artist whose canvases of graffiti struck me as little different from the free stuff on alley walls.

His buzzer worked, which was saying something in this neighborhood, and he met me on a landing as spongy as the steps coming up had been. He wore a black CBGB T-shirt, jeans and sneakers, a kid of twenty or so with the wiry frame of his father but taller, and the pleasant features of his mother, their prettiness turned masculine by heavy eyebrows.

He offered his hand and we shook under the dim yellowish glow of a single mounted bulb. "I appreciate you helping out my mom, Mr. Hammer. You know, I think I've heard of you."

"A lot of people think they've heard of me," I said, moving past him into the apartment. "They're just not sure anymore."

His was a typical college kid's pad—thrift-shop furnishings, atomic-age stuff that had looked modern in the fifties and seemed quaint now. Plank and cement-block bookcases lined the walls, paperbacks and school books mostly, and the occasional poster advertising an East Village art show or theatrical production were taped here and there to the brick walls. The kitchenette area was off to one side and a doorless doorframe led to a bedroom with a waterbed. We sat on a thin-cushioned couch with sparkly turquoise upholstery.

He offered me a smoke and I declined. He got one going, then leaned back, an arm along the upper cushions, and studied me like the smart college kid he was. His mother had told him on the phone that I had something important to talk to him about. I had spoken to him briefly, as well, but nothing about the book.

Still, he'd been told there was danger and he seemed unruffled. There was strength in this kid.

I said, "You know who your real father was, don't you, Nick?"

He nodded.

I grinned. "I figured a smart kid like you would do some poking into that Vietnam-hero malarkey. Did the don ever get in touch with you? He came to the occasional school event, I understand."

He sighed smoke. "Get in touch? No, not in the sense that he ever introduced himself. But he started seeking me out after a concert, a basketball game, just to come up and say, *Good job tonight*, or *Nice going out there*. Even shook my hand a couple of times."

"So you noticed him."

"Yeah, and when I got older, I recognized him. He was in the papers now and then, you know. I did some digging on my own, old newspaper files and that kind of thing. Ran across my mom's picture with him, too, back when she was a real knockout. She wasn't just a chorus girl, you know, like the press would have it. She had speaking parts, got mentioned in reviews sometimes."

"Your mother doesn't know that you know any of this."

“Why worry her?”

“Nick, I’m here because your father kept a ledger, a book said to contain all of his secrets. Word was he planned to give it to the person he trusted most in the world. Are you that person?”

He sighed, smiled, allowed himself a private laugh.

Then he asked, “Would you like a beer? You look like a guy who could use a beer.”

“Has been a long day.”

So he got us cold cans of beer and he leaned back and I did too. And he told me his story.

Two weeks ago, he’d received a phone call from Don Nicholas Giraldi—a breathy voice that had a deathbed ring to it, making a request that young Nick come to a certain hospital room at St. Luke’s. No mention of old Nicholas being young Nick’s father, not on the phone.

“But when I stood at his bedside,” Nick said, “he told me. He said, *I’m your father*. Very melodramatic. Ever see *Stars Wars? Luke, I am your father?* Like that.”

“And what did you say?”

He shrugged. “Just, ‘I know. I’ve known for years.’ That seemed to throw the old boy, but he didn’t have the wind or the energy to discuss it or ask for details or anything. He just said, ‘You’re going to come into money when you graduate from the university.’”

“You didn’t know there was a trust fund?”

“No. And I still don’t know how much is in it. I’ll be happy to accept whatever it is, because I think I kind of deserve it, growing up without a father. I’m hoping it’ll be enough for me to start a business. Don’t let the arty neighborhood fool you, Mr. Hammer. I’m a business major.”

“Is that what Old Nic had in mind, you starting up something of your own?”

The young man frowned, shook his head. “I’m not sure. He may have wanted me to step into *his* role in his... organization. Or he may have been fine with me going my own way. Who knows? In any event, he said, ‘I have something for you. Whatever you do in life, it will be valuable to you.’”

“The book?”

He nodded. “The book, Mr. Hammer. He gave it to me right there in that hospital room. The book of his secrets.”

I sat forward. “Containing everything your father knew, a record of every crooked thing he’d done, and all of those he’d conspired with to break God knows how many laws.”

“Something like that.”

I shook my head. “Even if you go down a straight path, son, that book would be valuable.”

He nodded. “It’s valuable, all right. But I don’t want it, Mr. Hammer. I’m not interested in it or what it represents.”

“What are you going to do with the thing?”

“Give it to you.” He shrugged. “Do what you will with it. I want only one thing in return.”

“Yeah?”

“Ensure that my mother is safe. That she is not in any danger. And do the same for me, if you can. But Mom... she did so *much* for me, sacrificed everything, gave her *life* to me... I want her *safe*.”

“I think I can handle that.”

He extended his hand for me to shake, and I did.

He got up and went over to a plank-and-block bookcase under the window onto the neon-winking street. I followed him. He was selecting an ancient-looking sheepskin-covered volume from a stack of books carelessly piled on top when the door splintered open, kicked in viciously, and two men burst in with guns in hand.

First was Flavio, still wearing the light-blue suit and yellow pointy-collar shirt, but I never did get the name of his pal, the big guy with the weak chin and Neanderthal forehead. They come in twos, you know, hoods who work for guys like Sonny Giraldi.

They had big pieces in their fists, matching .357 mags. In this part of town, where gunshots were commonplace, who needed .22 autos with silencers? The big guy fell back to be framed in the doorway like another work of East Village art, and Flavio took two more steps inside, training his .357 on both of us, as young Nick and I were clustered together.

Flavio, in his comically high-pitched voice, said, “Is that the book? Give me that goddamned *book!*”

“Take it,” Nick said, frowning, more disgusted than afraid, and stepped forward, holding out the small, thick volume, blocking me as he did.

I used that to whip the .45 out from under my shoulder, and I shoved the kid to the floor and rode him down, firing up.

Flavio may have had a .357, but that’s a card a .45 trumps easy, particularly if you get the first shot off, and even more so if you make it a head shot that cuts off any motor action. What few brains the bastard had got splashed in a shower of bone and blood onto his startled pal’s puss, and the Neanderthal reacted like he’d been hit with a gory pie, giving me the half second I needed to shatter that protruding forehead with a slug and paint an abstract picture on the brick out in that landing, worthy of any East Village gallery.

Now Nick was scared, taking in the bloody mess on his doorstep. “Jesus, man! What are you going to do?”

“Call a cop. You got a phone?”

“Yeah, yeah, call the cops!” He was pointing. “Phone’s over there.”

I picked the sheepskin-covered book up off the floor. “No—not the cops. A cop.”

And I called Pat Chambers.

I didn’t call Sonny Giraldi until I got back to the office around three a.m. I had wanted to get that book into my office safe.

The heir to the old don’s throne pretended I’d woken him, but I knew damn well he’d been waiting up to hear from his boys. Or maybe some cop in his pocket had already called to say the apartment invasion in the East Village had failed, in which case it was unlikely Sonny would be in the midst of a soothing night’s sleep when I used the private number he’d provided me.

Cheerfully I asked, “Did you know that your boy Flavio and his slopehead buddy won a free ride to the county morgue tonight?”

“What?”

"I sent them there. Just like you sent them to the Burrows kid's apartment. They'd been following me, hadn't they? I really *must* be getting old. Velda caught it, but I didn't."

The radio-announcer voice conveyed words in a tumble. "Hammer, I didn't send them. They must be working for one of my rivals or something. I played it absolutely straight with you, I swear to God."

"No, you didn't. You wanted me to lead you to the book, and whoever had it needed to die, because they knew what was in it, and I had to die, too, just to keep things tidy. Right? Who would miss an old broken-down PI like me, anyway?"

"Believe me, Hammer, I—"

"I don't believe you, Sonny. But you can believe me."

Actually, I was about to tell him a whopper, but he'd never know.

I went on: "This book will go in a safe deposit box in some distant bank and will not come out again until my death. If that death is nice and peaceful, I will leave instructions that the book be burned. If I have an unpleasant going away party, then that book will go to the feds. Understood?"

"Understood."

"And the Burrows woman and her son, they're out of this. Any harm befalls either one, that book comes out of mothballs and into federal hands. *Capeesh?*"

"*Capeesh*," he said glumly.

"Then there's the matter of my fee."

"Your *fee!* What the hell—"

"Sonny, I found the book for you. You owe me one-hundred grand."

His voice turned thin and nasty. "I heard a lot of bad things about you, Hammer. But I never heard you were a blackmailing prick."

"Well, you learn something every day, if you're paying attention. I want that hundred K donated to whatever charities that Father Mandano designates. Think of the fine reputation you'll earn, Sonny, continuing your late uncle's good works in Little Italy."

And I hung up on him.

Cops always come in twos, they say, but the next morning, when Hanson entered my private office, he left his nameless crony in the outer one, to read old magazines. Velda wasn't back at her reception desk yet, but she soon would be.

"Have a seat, Inspector," I said, getting behind my desk.

The brown sheepskin volume, its spine ancient and cracked, lay on my blotter at a casual angle, where I'd tossed it in anticipation of his visit.

"*That's* the book," he said, eyes wide.

"That's the book. And it's all yours for ten grand."

"May I?" he asked, reaching for it.

"Be my guest."

He thumbed it open. The pleasure on his face turned to confusion, then to shock.

"My God..." he said.

"It's valuable, all right. I'm no expert, though, so you may be overpaying. You may want to hold onto it for a while."

"I'll be damned," he said, leafing through.

“As advertised, it has in it everything the old don knew about dirty schemes and double-dealing. Stuff that applies to crooks and cops and senators and even presidents.”

He was shaking his head, eyes still on the book.

“Of course, we *were* wrong about it being a ledger. It’s more a how-to-book by another Italian gangster. First-edition English-language translation, though—1640, it says.”

“A gangster named Machiavelli,” Hanson said dryly.

“And a book,” I said, “called *The Prince*.”

