

"Westlake knows precisely how to grab a reader . . . escape is impossible."
—*Washington Post*

RICHARD STARK
The
Mourner

A PARKER
NOVEL

*With a new Foreword
by John Banville*



The Mourner

RICHARD STARK

With a New Foreword by John Banville

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John Banville

It was in the 1960s that Richard Stark began writing his masterly series of Parker novels—at least count there were twenty-four of them—but they are as unrepresentative of the Age of Aquarius as it is possible to be. Try imagining this most hardened of hard-boiled criminals in a tie-dyed shirt and velvet bell-bottoms. Parker does not do drugs, having no interest in expanding his mind or deepening his sensibilities; he cares nothing for politics and is indifferent to foreign wars, although he fought at least took part in one of them; he would rather make money than love and would be willing to give peace a chance provided he could sneak round the back of the love-in and rob everybody's unattended stuff. When he goes to San Francisco it is not to leave his heart there—has Parker got a heart?—but to retrieve some money the Outfit owes him and kill a lot of people in the process.

The appeal of the conventional crime novel is the sense of completion it offers. Life is a mess—we do not remember being born, and death, as Ludwig Wittgenstein wisely observed, is not an experience in life, so that all we have is a chaotic middle, bristling with loose ends, in which nothing is ever properly over and done with. It could be said, of course, that all fiction of whatever genre offers a beginning, middle, and end—even *Finnegans Wake* has a shape—but crime fiction does it best of all. No matter how unlikely the cast of suspects or how baffling the strew of clues in an Agatha Christie whodunit or a Robert Ludlum thriller, we know with a certainty not afforded by real life that when the murderer is unmasked or the conspiracy foiled, everything will click into place, like a jigsaw puzzle assembling itself before our eyes. The Parker books, however, take it as a given that if something can go wrong, it will, and that since something always can go wrong, it invariably does.

Indeed, this is how very many of the Parker stories begin, with things going or gone disastrously awry. And Parker is at his most inventive when at his most desperate.

We first encountered Parker in *The Hunter*, published in 1962. His creator, Donald Westlake, was already an established writer—he adopted the pen name Richard Stark because, as he said in a recent interview, “When you’re first in love, you want to do it all the time,” and in the early days he was writing so much and so often that he feared the Westlake market would soon become glutted.

Born in 1933, Westlake is indeed a protean writer and, like Parker, the complete professional. Besides crime novels, he has written short stories, comedies, science fiction, and screenplays—his tough, elegant screenplay for *The Grifters*, adapted from a Jim Thompson novel, was nominated for an Academy Award. Surely the finest movie he wrote, however, is *Point Blank*, a noir masterpiece based on the first Parker novel, *The Hunter*, directed by John Boorman and starring Lee Marvin. Anyone who saw the film will consider Marvin the quintessential Parker, though Westlake has said that when he first created his relentless hero—hero?—he imagined him looking more like Jack Palance.

In that first book, *The Hunter*, Parker was a rough diamond—“I’d done nothing to make him easy for the reader,” says Westlake, “no small talk, no quirks, no pets”—and looked like a classic pulp fiction hoodlum:

He was big and shaggy, with flat square shoulders and arms too long in sleeves too short.... His hands, swinging curv
fingering at his sides, looked like they were molded of brown clay by a sculptor who thought big and liked veins. His hair w
brown and dry and dead, blowing around his head like a poor toupee about to fly loose. His face was a chipped chunk
concrete, with eyes of flawed onyx. His mouth was a quick stroke, bloodless. (p. 3–4)

Even before the end of this short book, however, we see West-lake/Stark begin to cut and burnish
his brand-new creation, giving him facets and sharp angles and flashes of a hard, inner fire. He h
been betrayed by his best friend and shot by his wife, and now he is owed money by the Outfit—the
Mafia, we assume—and he is not going to stop until he has been repaid:

Momentum kept him rolling. He wasn't sure himself any more how much was a tough front to impress the organization a
how much was himself. He knew he was hard, he knew that he worried less about emotion than other people. But he'd nev
enjoyed the idea of a killing.... It was momentum, that was all. Eighteen years in one business, doing one or two clean f
simple operations a year, living relaxed and easy in the resort hotels the rest of the time with a woman he liked, and then all
a sudden it all got twisted around. The woman was gone, the pattern was gone, the relaxation was gone, the clean swiftne
was gone. (p. 171)

The fact is, though Parker himself would be contemptuous of the notion, he is the perfection of th
existential man whose earliest models we met in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. If Park
has ever read Goethe—and perhaps he has?—he will have recognized his own natural motto in Faust
heaven-defying declaration: “*Im Anfang war die Tat*” [In the beginning was the deed]. Dona
Westlake puts it in more homely terms when he says that, “I’ve always believed the books are real
about a workman at work, doing the work to the best of his ability,” and when in the context of Park
he refers to “Hemingway’s judgment on people, that the competent guy does it on his own and th
incompetents lean on each other.”

In Parker’s world there is no law, unless it is the law of the quick and the merciless against the di
and the slow. The police never appear, or if they do they are always too late to stop Parker doing wh
he is intent on doing. Only twice has he been caught and—briefly—jailed, once after the betrayal b
his wife and Mal Resnick, which sets *The Hunter* in vengeful motion, and another time in the rece
Breakout. Parker treats the law-abiding world, that tame world where most of us live, with tight-lipp
impatience or, when one or other of us is unfortunate enough to stumble into his path and hinder him
with lethal efficiency. Significantly, it is the *idea* of a killing that he has never enjoyed; this is not
say that he would enjoy the killing itself, but that he regards the necessity of murder as a waste
essential energies, energies that would be better employed elsewhere.

Violence in the Parker books is always quick and clean and all the more shocking in its swiftness an
cleanliness. In one of the books—it would be a spoiler to specify which—Parker forces a young ma
to dig a hole in the dirt floor of a cellar in search of something buried there, and when the thing h
been found, the scene closes with a brief, bald line informing us that Parker shot the young fellow an
buried him in the hole he had dug. In another story, Parker and one of his crew tie a hoodlum to a cha
and torture some vital information out of him, after which they lock him in a closet, still chair-boun
and depart, indifferent to the fact that no one knows where the hoodlum is and so there will be no on
to free him.

With the exception of the likes of James M. Cain, Jim Thompson, and Georges Simenon—that i
the Simenon not of the Maigret books but of what he called his *romans durs*, his hard novels—a
crime writers are sentimentalists at heart, even, or especially, when they are at their bloodiest. I
conventional tales of murder, mayhem, and the fight for right, what the reader is offered is escape,
only into the dream of a world where men are men and women love them for it, where crooks a

crooks and easily identified by the scars on their faces and the Glocks in their fists, where policemen are dull but honest and usually dealing with a bad divorce, where a good man is feared by the lawless and respected by the law-abiding: in short, where life is otherwise and better. In the Parker books, however, it is the sense of awful and immediate reality that makes them so startling, so unsettling, and so convincing.

As the series goes on, Parker has become more intricate in motivation and more polished in manner—his woman, Claire, the replacement for his wife Lynn, the one who shot him and subsequently committed suicide, is a fascinating creation, forbearing, loving, nurturing, the perfect companion for a professional—yet in more than forty years his creator has never allowed him to weaken or to mellow. The most recent caper, *Dirty Money*, published in 2008, ends with a vintage exchange between Parker, a woman, and a grifter who was foolish enough to try pulling a fast one on Parker:

He helped McWhitney to lie back on the bed, then said to Sandra, “If we do this right, you can get me to Claire’s place in two in the morning.”

“What a good person I am,” she said.

“If you leave me here,” the guy on the floor said, “he’ll kill me tomorrow morning.”

Parker looked at him. “So you’ve still got tonight,” he said.

And that is about as much as Parker, or Richard Stark, is ever willing to allow to anyone.

When the guy with asthma finally came in from the fire escape, Parker rabbit-punched him and took his gun away. The asthmatic hit the carpet, but there'd been another one out there, and he landed on Parker's back like a duffel bag with arms. Parker fell turning, so that the duffel bag would be on the bottom, but it didn't quite work out that way. They landed sideways, jokingly, and the gun skittered away into the darkness.

There was no light in the room at all. The window was a paler rectangle sliced out of blackness. Parker and the duffel bag wrestled around on the floor a few minutes, neither getting an advantage because the duffel bag wouldn't give up his first hold but just clung to Parker's back. Then the asthmatic got his wind and balance back and joined in, trying to kick Parker's head loose. Parker knew the room even in the dark, since he'd lived there the last week, so he rolled over to where he knew there wasn't any furniture. The asthmatic, coming after him, fell over a chair.

Parker rolled to where the wall should be, bumped into it, and climbed up it till he was on his feet, the duffel bag still clinging to his back. The duffel bag's legs were around Parker's hips, and his left arm was around Parker's chest. His right hand kept hitting the side of Parker's head.

Parker moved out to the middle of the room, and then ran backward at the wall. The second time he did it, the duffel bag fell off. Across the room, the asthmatic was still bouncing back and forth among the furniture. Parker went over that way, got the asthmatic silhouetted against the pale rectangle of the window, and clipped him. The asthmatic went down, hitting furniture on the way.

Parker waited a few seconds, holding his breath, but he couldn't hear anybody moving, so he went over and shut and locked the window, pulled the venetian blinds, and switched on the table lamp beside the bed.

The room was a mess. One bed had been turned at a forty-five-degree angle to the wall, and the mattress was half-pulled off the other one. The dresser was shoved out of position so it was blocking the closet door, and the wastebasket lay on its side in the middle of the floor with a big dent in it. A few chairs were knocked over. One of them had both wooden arms broken.

Parker walked through the mess to see what he'd landed.

Fifteen minutes ago it had started, with Parker lying clothed on the bed in the darkness, thinking about one thing and another, and waiting for Handy to come back. That was after eleven o'clock, so Handy was late already. The lights were off because Parker liked it that way, and the window was open because November nights in Washington, D.C., are cool but pleasant. Then through the window had come the faint clatter of somebody mounting the fire escape, four flights below at street level. Parker had got off the bed and listened at the window. The somebody came up the fire escape about as quietly as the Second World War but trying to be quieter, and stopped at Parker's floor. Somebody with asthma. It was all so amateurish, Parker couldn't take it seriously, which is why the second one

surprised him. He'd waited, and the guy with asthma had waited outside—probably to make sure the wasn't anybody home in Parker's room—and then finally he came in and it all had started.

The nice thing about a hotel. Nobody questions any noise that lasts less than ten minutes.

They were both out, the duffel bag on his face and the asthmatic on his back. Parker looked the over one at a time, and then frisked them.

The asthmatic was short, scrubby, wrinkled as a prune, and fifty or more, with the withered look of a wino. He was wearing baggy gray pants, a flannel shirt that had once been plaid but had now faded down to a gray like the pants, and a dark-blue double-breasted suit coat with all but one button missing and the shoulder padding sagging down into the arms. He had white wool socks on and brown oxfords with holes in the soles.

Parker went through his pockets. In the right-hand coat pocket he found a boy-scout knife with all the attachments—a screwdriver, nail file, corkscrew, everything but a useful blade—and in the left-hand pocket a hotel key. The board attached to the key was marked: HOTEL REGAL 27. In the shirt pocket was a crumpled pack of Camels and in the left-hand pants pocket forty-seven cents in change. From the hip pocket he took a bedraggled old child's wallet of imitation alligator skin, with a two-color picture of a cowboy on a bucking bronco on one side and a horseshoe on the other. Inside the wallet was a hundred dollars in new tens and four dollars in old singles, plus half a dozen movie-theater ticket stubs, a long, narrow photo of a burlesque dancer named Fury Feline, clipped from a newspaper, and a Social Security card and membership card in Local 802, International Alliance of Chefs and Kitchen Helpers. The Social Security card and the union card were made to James F. Wilcoxon.

That was all. Parker left Wilcoxon and went over to the duffel bag, who had started to move. He had long, straight, limp hair, dry blond in color, and Parker grabbed a handful of it and slapped his head against the floor. He stopped moving. Parker rolled him over.

This one was just as short, and maybe even thinner, but about twenty years younger, with the face of a ferret. He was dressed all in black. Black shoes and socks, black pegged trousers, black wool-knit sweater. He had long, thin fingers and narrow feet.

Parker searched him. Under the black sweater was a blue cotton shirt, and in the pocket was a pair of sunglasses. The right-hand pants pocket contained fifty-six cents in change and a key to room 29 Hotel Regal; the left, a roll of bills—one hundred dollars in new tens. Left hip pocket, a Beretta Jagu .22, with the three-and-a-half-inch barrel. Right hip pocket, a wallet containing seven dollars, plus a bunch of dog-eared clippings about the various arrests of Donald Scorbi on suspicion of this and that, mostly assault or drunk and disorderly, with one narcotics possession. The wallet also disgorged a laminated reduced photostat of a Navy discharge—general discharge, for medical reasons—with the same name on it, Donald Scorbi.

Parker kept the two stacks of new tens and the Beretta, but put everything else back in Scorbi's and Wilcoxon's pockets. Then he used their shoelaces to tie their hands behind them, and their belts to secure their ankles together. Scorbi started to come out of it again and he had to be put back to sleep, but Wilcoxon was still out, wheezing through his open mouth.

Parker looked them over, and decided to keep Wilcoxon. He used a washcloth and face towel to gag

Scorbi, then dragged him into the bathroom and dumped him in the tub. He closed the door and searched around the room for the other gun, the one he'd taken from Wilcoxen early in the scuffle.

It was under the dresser, a Smith & Wesson Terrier, five-shot .32. Parker took it and the Beretta and stowed them away in his suitcase. His watch said eleven-thirty-five, which made Handy over half an hour late, so something had gone wrong.

Parker straightened the room and Wilcoxen still hadn't come out of it. Parker dragged him over the wall, propped him up in a sitting position, and pinched him awake. Wilcoxen came out of complaining, groaning and thrashing his head around and keeping his eyes tight shut. There was a so-called smell of wine on his breath. His face was all wrinkled gray leather except for two bright red circles on his cheeks, like a clown's makeup.

Parker said, "Open your eyes, Jimmy."

Wilcoxen stopped complaining and opened his eyes. They were a wet, washed-out blue, like an overexposed color photo. He took a while getting them to focus on Parker's face, and then the red blotches on his cheeks got suddenly redder, or the rest of the face paler.

Parker said, "Good," then straightened up and went away across the room to the nearest chair. He brought it over and sat down and kicked Wilcoxen conversationally in the ribs. "We'll talk."

Wilcoxen's lips were wet. He shook his head and blinked a lot.

Parker said, "I got a partner. You had a partner. Scorbi."

Wilcoxen looked around and didn't see Scorbi.

"Your partner wouldn't tell me about my partner. I threw him back out the window."

Wilcoxen's eyes got bigger. He stared at Parker and waited, but Parker didn't have anything else to say. The silence got thicker, and Wilcoxen squirmed a lot. His feet jiggled, and he licked his lips and kept blinking. Parker sat looking at him, waiting, but Wilcoxen's eyes kept darting all over the place.

Finally, he asked, "What you want from me?"

Parker shook his head and kicked him again. "Wrong answer."

"I don't know no partner. Honest to Christ."

"What *do* you know?"

"I got a hundred bucks. Donny and me both. Go to the Wynant Hotel, first fire escape in the alley on the fifth floor. If there's nobody home, take everything there. Suitcases and like that."

"And if there's somebody home?"

"Don't do nothing. Come back and report."

“Back where?”

Wilcoxon's blinking was getting worse. His eyes were closed more than they were open. “Listen,” he said. “It's just a job, you know? A hundred bucks. Nobody hurt, just pick up some suitcase. Anybody woulda took it.”

Parker shook his head. He didn't care about that. “Back where?” he asked.

“Howison Tavern. On E Street, down by Fourth Precinct.”

“Who do you see?”

Wilcoxon frowned, and the blinking settled down a little. “I don't know,” he said. “He just told us to go in there and sit down. If we got the stuff, somebody would come by, pick it up. If not, somebody would come by, get the report.”

“What time you supposed to be there?”

“By one o'clock.”

“Which E Street?”

“Huh? Oh, Southeast.”

“Who gave you the job?”

“The job? Listen, I got pins and needles in my hands.”

Parker looked at his watch. Quarter to twelve. He had an hour and fifteen minutes. “I'm in a hurry, Jimmy,” he said.

“How come you know my name?”

Parker kicked him in the ribs again, not hard, just as a reminder.

“I'm giving you the straight story. I ain't going to lie for a hundred bucks. You didn't have to throw Donny out no window.”

“Who gave you the job?”

“Oh, uh—a guy named Angel. He's a heavy, he hangs out around North Capitol Street, up behind the station. Donny and me, we was in a movie on D Street, and when we come out Angel grabs onto us and gives us the offer.”

“Is Angel going to be at the Howison Tavern?”

“He says no. He says somebody will come by, don't worry, he'll recognize us. We should sit in the booth and drink beer. Schlitz.”

“Where do I find this Angel?”

“I don't know. Honest to Christ. Hangin' around someplace, up around behind the station. In around there, you know.”

It was no good. Parker thought it over, chewing his lip. The meeting couldn't be faked, so there was no way to start a trail from there. And it would take more than an hour and a quarter to find somebody named Angel hanging around the Union Station area somewhere. If Handy was still alive, he'd be alive till one o'clock. Then, when Scorbi and Wilcoxen didn't show up, whoever had Handy would know there was trouble. The easiest thing would be dump Handy.

So it had to be done from the other direction, through the girl.

Parker nodded to himself. “All right, Jimmy,” he said. “You can go. Roll over so I can untie you.”

“You mean it? Honest to Christ?”

“Hurry, Jimmy.”

Wilcoxen scramble away from the wall and flopped over on his stomach.

“You're all right, honest to Christ you are. You know it wasn't nothing personal. There wasn't even supposed to be nobody here, just suitcases and like that. We ain't torpedoes or nothing.”

“I know,” Parker said. He untied Wilcoxen's hands and stepped back. “Undo your ankles yourself.”

Wilcoxen had trouble making his hands work. While he was loosening the belt from around his ankles and putting his shoelaces back in his shoes, Parker got the Terrier out of the suitcase, and he left it casually where Wilcoxen could see it. He left the Beretta where it was; he didn't like .22's much.

When Wilcoxen got to his feet, Parker said, “Scorbi's in the bathroom. Go untie him.”

Wilcoxen suddenly smiled, beaming from ear to ear. “I knew you didn't throw Donny out the window,” he said. He hurried over and opened the bathroom door. “Donny! He's lettin' us go, Donny!”

After a while Scorbi came out, walking lame like Wilcoxen. He looked sullen, not joining Wilcoxen's happiness. Parker said, “Out the way you came in.”

“What about our dough?” Scorbi asked.

“Hurry,” Parker said.

“Come on, Donny,” said Wilcoxen. He tugged at Scorbi's sleeve. “Come on, let s go.”

“Our rods and our dough.”

Parker said, “Go on, Jimmy. Either he follows you or he don't.”

Wilcoxen hurried over and climbed out the window onto the fire escape. Scorbi hung back a second

but then he shrugged and went out the window. The two of them started down the fire escape, making even more noise than they had coming up.

Parker stowed the Terrier away inside his coat and picked up the phone. When the operator came on, he made his voice high-pitched and nervous. "There's somebody on the fire escape! Get the police! Hurry! They're going down the fire escape!"

He hung up while the operator was still asking questions, switched off the light, and left the room. He took the elevator down and crossed the lobby and went outside. A patrol car was parked down the street to the left, with the red light flashing. Hotels get fast service.

Parker stood on the sidewalk, and a couple of minutes later two cops came out of the alley alongside the hotel, pushing Scorbi and Wilcoxen in front of them. So that was that. Because the Scorbis and Wilcoxens never talk to the law, it couldn't get back to Parker. So, no matter how good a story they thought up, they'd miss that one-o'clock meeting, and whoever had Handy wouldn't be warned. It was better even than keeping them tied up in the bathroom.

Parker turned and walked the other way. A block later he hailed a cab.

It was just over the Maryland line, in Silver Spring, a squat, faded apartment building called Sligo Towers. Built of dark brick aged even darker, the bricks widely separated by the plaster, it looked like an old Thirties standing set left over on the Universal back lot. Thirties-like imitations of Georgian Nineties gaslights, containing twenty-five-watt bulbs, flanked the arched entrance to the courtyard.

The courtyard was just concrete, but pink coloring had been added before it set. It was bounded on three sides by the building, rising eight stories and sprouting air conditioners here and there like acorns. On the fourth side was a double arch with a concrete pillar, separating courtyard from sidewalk. Beyond, dark cars slept at the curb, hoods mutely reflecting the street light from down the block. A car purred by, without pausing.

Parker turned the far corner and came striding toward the Sligo Towers. He wore a gray suit and a light-colored shirt, the suit coat open despite the night chill. He looked like a businessman, in a tough business. He could have been a liquor salesman in a dry state, or the automobile-company vice president who takes away the dealerships, or maybe the business manager of one of the unions with the big buildings downtown around the Capitol. He could have been a hard, lean businessman coming home from a late night at the office.

He turned at the double arch and went into the courtyard, his shoes with the rubber soles and heels making no sound on the pink concrete. There were walls on three sides of him, all around the courtyard, with a door in each wall. Each was marked with a letter so rococo it looked like a drawing of an ivy-covered window.

He didn't know which door. Slowing down would spoil the effect, stopping would tip any watchman that he was a stranger here. He kept on toward "B," the door straight ahead. Three brick-lined pink concrete steps led up, and then the door was metal, painted to look like wood. It was a double door and inside there was a metal bar like those found on the doors of schools and theaters. A half flight of metal stairs painted red led up to a hallway running at right angles. There was no interior door, which was a surprise. With no trouble at all, he was already in the building.

Facing the stairs, on the wall, was a double row of brass mailboxes, with name plates. Parker read the names, but didn't find the one he wanted. He looked to right and left, and in both directions the hallway ended short at apartment doors, so the three sections of the building weren't connected at this level. They would be, in the basement. He went back down the half flight to a longer hallway, this one walled with rough plaster and dimly lit. He turned left.

At the end, the hallway made a right angle to the left. Parker followed it, came to another flight of stairs, and went up. He was now in section A, and the name he wanted was under the fifth mailbox from the left on the bottom row. Miss Clara Stoper. Apartment 26.

There were four apartments to a floor, so 26 would be on the seventh floor. The elevator was to the

right of the mailboxes. Parker got out at the seventh floor. Apartment 26 was to the left. Parker moved down that way and listened at the door, but could hear nothing. There was a thin crack between the bottom of the door and the floor, but no light showed through.

Parker rang the bell. There was no peephole in the door, so he waited where he was, in front of the door. Nothing happened for a while, so he rang the bell again. Then he saw light under the door, and a bolt clicked.

He frowned, trying to remember the name Handy was using with her. Pete Castle, that was it.

The door opened a few inches, held by a chain from opening any farther. A chain like that can't keep anyone out; it only serves as an irritation. Beyond was a sleepy-eyed girl's face. She was sleepy-eyed and holding a robe closed at her throat, but her hairdo was in perfect shape without a net.

“Who is it? What do you want?” she said, the voice a good imitation of sleepy blurriness.

But the hairdo had given it away. Parker didn't have to ask questions after all. His right foot went out and wedged in the doorway, so the door couldn't be closed. His right hand reached through and grabbed a handful of hair on the top of her head. He slammed her forehead against the edge of the door. Her hands started to come up toward his wrist, and her mouth was opening wide to shout, so he did it again. The third time, she became a dead weight and collapsed straight downward, leaving several strands of hair in his fist.

It took two high, flat kicks with his heel to pop the chain loose from the doorpost. The door swung open, and beyond the lighted foyer and the dark living room was a bright doorway. The silhouette of a fat man appeared in it and Parker dove for the rug, stabbing into his pocket for the Terrier. The fat man fired over his head. Parker rolled into a wall and came up with the Terrier in his hand. The bright doorway was empty. Parker moved quickly, slamming the hall door and flicking off the foyer light.

The fat man had the same idea. There wasn't any bright doorway any more. The whole apartment was dark.

The fat man knew this place, and Parker didn't. The fat man could sit and wait, and Parker couldn't take the time. The fat man could stay where he was and listen, shoot at the first sound, or just wait for Parker to go away.

In the dark, Parker found the unconscious girl. He dragged her into the living room and knelt beside her on one knee. In a conversational voice he said, “Fat man. Listen to me, fat man. You fired one shot. The light sleepers around here are awake now; they think it was a truck making a backfire. You turn on a light, fat man, and you come out here where I can see you, or I make more noises. I can scream like a woman, and then very slow I can empty this pistol into your girl. Too many backfires, fat man. Somebody will call the police. Before I'm finished, somebody will call the police. Then I will wipe the gun clean and put it down on the floor and beat it. No fingerprints of mine here, fat man. Nothing to connect me. But your fingerprints are everywhere. And somebody'll connect you up with this woman.”

Silence.

“Now, fat man. The next thing I do is scream like a woman.”

“Wait.”

It was a soft voice, and from the left somewhere. Not in the room.

“Hurry.”

“I will not turn on the lights,” said the voice. It had a faint accent, something Middle European

“But it is possible we can talk.”

“Not in the dark.”

“You must be reasonable. We will effect a compromise.”

“Name it.”

“You want something here, quite obviously, else you wouldn't have come. Yet I don't know you. I cannot imagine what it is you want. Your reactions and movements are hardly those of a burglar or a rapist. Either you have come to murder me, at the behest of the opposition, or you are here seeking information of some sort. If murder is your purpose, it would hardly be sensible for me to show myself. If what you want is information, we can discuss it just as profitably in the dark.”

While the fat man was talking, Parker was crawling toward the sound of his voice, moving cautiously across the carpet on hands and knees. When the voice stopped, Parker stopped. He turned his head away, so he wouldn't sound any closer. “I'm here for information. Where's Pete Castle?”

“Ah!” The fat man seemed pleased to have the mystery cleared up. “He *did* have associates.”

“Where is he?”

“Reposing in a safe place, I assure you. And relatively unharmed. I would suggest, by the way, that you come no closer. You are now nearly to the doorway, and I pride myself on my shooting. If you clear that doorway, and then are foolish enough to speak, it will take me no more than one backfire to dispose of you.”

“Why warn me?”

“Curiosity, just curiosity. The same motive that impelled me to have your friend taken away to where he could be questioned at leisure. Our operation is of a complexity and a delicacy. Your friend's presence became, quite naturally, of concern to us. We had to know whether his goal coincided with our own. Now I discover that there are two of you, perhaps more. You might tell me just what it is you want with Kapor. If our purposes are the same, it is possible we could come to an agreement.”

“All I want is Pete Castle. You'll tell me where to find him, or I'll start making that noise—”

A body suddenly fell on him, grappling with him, and the girl's voice shrilled in his ear, “I've got him, Mr. Menlo! I've got him, I've got him!”

Parker struggled with her, hampered by the darkness, and over her shouting he heard the pounding of running feet. ~~He flung her off at the last in time to catch a glimpse of the hall door opening, and the~~ back of the fat man. Parker headed that way, but the girl got him around the ankles, dropping him again. He kicked free, made it to the hallway, and heard the clatter of taps on metal stairs. The fat man was already halfway down.

Parker ran back into the apartment, switching on lights as he went. The girl was slowly and groggily getting to her feet. Her robe was disarranged, and beneath it she was fully dressed except for shoes. Parker ran past her to the first window he found, in the kitchen, but it faced the rear of the building. So he did the bedroom window. No window faced the courtyard.

Parker came back to the living room. The girl was on her feet but weaving, moving at a snail's pace toward the door. Parker came after her, grabbed her by a shoulder, flung her back into the living room. The chain attachment on the front door was broken but the bolt still worked. Parker shot it, and went back to the living room.

The girl was no more than half-conscious. She'd been battered once too often in the last few minutes. She was standing in the middle of the room, frowning and squinting as though not sure what was going on. Parker took hold of her arm and steered her into the kitchen. She moved with no complaint, repeating under her breath, "Mr. Menlo? Mr. Menlo?"

Parker sat her on a kitchen chair and slapped her face to get her attention. "Where have they gone? Pete Castle?"

She frowned up at him, and then rationality came back to her and her face hardened. "You can just go to hell."

Parker shook his head in irritation. He hated this kind of thing, hurting people to make them talk. It was messy and time-consuming and there ought to be a better way. But there wasn't.

He found twine in a kitchen drawer, and tied her to the chair, and gagged her. She fought it, but not successfully. He left her right hand free and put paper and pencil on the table.

"Write the address when you're ready," he said. Then he reached for the kitchen matches.

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