Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

So Nude, So Dead

Written by Ed McBain

Published by Titan Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

So NUDE, So DEAD

by **Ed McBain**



A HARD CASE CRIME BOOK
(HCC-120)
First Hard Case Crime edition: July 2015

Published by

Titan Books
A division of Titan Publishing Group Ltd
144 Southwark Street
London SE1 0UP

in collaboration with Winterfall LLC

Copyright © 1952, 1953, by Hui Corp. Copyright renewed.
All rights reserved. Novel originally published as
The Evil Sleep! by Evan Hunter and reprinted in 1956
as *So Nude, So Dead* by Richard Marsten.

Cover painting copyright © 2015 by Greg Manchess

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher, except where permitted by law.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Print edition ISBN 978-1-78116-606-2
E-book ISBN 978-1-78329-361-2

Design direction by Max Phillips
www.maxphillips.net

Typeset by Swordsmith Productions

The name "Hard Case Crime" and the Hard Case Crime logo are trademarks of Winterfall LLC. Hard Case Crime books are selected and edited by Charles Ardai.

Printed in the United States of America

Visit us on the web at www.HardCaseCrime.com

The new ones, the old ones, they're all now dedicated to the love of my life—my wife, Dragica.

SO NUDE, SO DEAD

Chapter One

There was the jangling, of course. It wouldn't be morning without the jangling. It was as if someone deliberately gathered up every nerve end in his body and tied them together every night. And in the morning—this morning, every morning—he'd sit up in bed with the ache in his body. It was almost delicious, especially when he knew he had the stuff waiting for him. It was painful too, but painful in a sweet way, almost as if the wanting were too exquisite to bear.

God, he needed a shot.

He sat up in bed, the sheet forming a little tent over his bent knees. He was big in a sinewy, leather-thonged way. His shoulders, bare against the backboard of the bed, were broad and muscular. His hair was almost blond, that light shade of brown that streaks gold in the sun. He wore it cut close to his head on the sides, fuller on top. A widow's peak cut into his forehead pointed to a straight nose, a firm mouth and jaw. Only his eyes did not fit the rest of his face. They were gray, recessed deeply on either side of his nose, pocketed in shadow.

They pinpointed with light now as he stared around the room. It was a strange one, but that didn't surprise him. He'd wakened in plenty of strange rooms since he'd been on the stuff. The rooms were all alike, so long as he had a shot waiting. He yawned, covering his mouth with his hand. He was beginning to tremble already.

That was when he noticed the blonde beside him in the bed. Her hair was spread out over the pillow like a golden fan, mistlike, glistening under the rays of the sun that streamed through

the open blinds. She was pale, her skin drawn taut over high cheekbones.

He scratched his head. Beneath the jangling that was becoming more insistent in his blood stream, he began to remember. As if to check his memory, he looked down at the girl again.

She had a strong chin, and a neck that swept away from the chin in a smooth, clean line. The sheet reached to just below her breasts. His eyes dropped to her arm, lying over the sheet palm upward.

The marks were there. The marks that looked something like healed burns or old scars. The hundreds of puncture marks, one over the other, blended together into a telltale smear. The addict's coat of arms. Yes, this was the girl, all right.

He looked down at his own arm, his eyes fastening on the identical marks. Again the revulsion seized him, the knowledge that slapped him in the face whenever he saw the marks, or whenever he looked into his eyes in a mirror. And yet, in spite of the revulsion, there was anticipation as he stared at the needle scars.

Somewhere in this room, there were sixteen ounces of heroin.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, careful not to disturb the girl. Sixteen ounces of heroin! His tongue ran over his lips excitedly, as he thought greedily of the drug. He would wait, yes, he would hold it off until the need grew unbearable. But first he would find it, get it all ready for when he really needed it, when he couldn't stand it any longer.

He put on his pants, excited now at the thought of teasing himself, pleased because he knew the stuff was waiting for him. And a cold analytical part of his mind told him he was behaving like a fool. *Yes, yes, he knew that, dammit. He knew it.* He shut his mind to the glimpse he'd had of himself. He glanced at the girl on the bed. Man, she was really out. How much of the stuff had they taken last night?

He tightened his belt and began thinking of the events that led to this moment.

He was sitting at a table. Yes, he remembered that quite well. What was the name of the place? Johnny's? No, he hadn't been to Johnny's since… Ace High, that was the name. It was late, and she was singing. She sang well, sort of deep and throaty, from way inside her. She wore a long-sleeved blouse and he remembered wondering why she covered her arms—the addict looking for another addict, the blind seeking the blind. Christ, how had he gotten into this? What had happened to the guy he used to be? Where had he lost himself?

He opened a door, discovered a closet, and walked to another door on the opposite side of the room. It was the bathroom, and he walked inside, turned on the hot water and let it run for several moments. At the back of his mind was a thought that sent shivers of anxiety down his back. Heroin.

"You're cute," she said. She was slightly looped, he thought, and her voice sounded deep and throaty even when she spoke. "I noticed you while I was singing, and I said to myself, He's cute. I was right." She looked better close up, much better than she did on the bandstand. She had her hair pulled back tight over her ears, clipped at the back of her neck with an amber clasp, fanning out over her shoulders. The blouse she wore had a deep V sweeping down from her shoulders, terminating in a shadowed cleft between high breasts. He remembered staring at the soft whiteness of her skin as she leaned over the table.

"You're very cute," she repeated, and he said, "You're not bad yourself."

She blew smoke across the table. "Sparkling dialogue," she said dryly. "Refugees from a Grade-B stinkeroo."

"Pardon me. I'm not dressed for repartee."

"It doesn't matter, sweetheart. You'd be cute if you spoke Burmese."

"Thanks. You're not bad—"

"I know. I know. I'm not bad myself."

They laughed then, and she covered his hand with hers on the table.

He dried his face with a towel he found in the bathroom. There was lipstick on the towel and the words "Hotel Stockmere" in blue script embroidered in the left-hand corner. It was almost time. He was really beginning to need it. His hands shook as he replaced the towel on the rack. It was time to start looking for the stuff. Let's see, where had they put it?

"What's your name?" she asked, gripping his hand tighter.

"Ray."

"That's all?"

"Ray Stone."

"Eileen Chalmers." She squeezed his hand again. Then she looked up into his face, her mouth unsmiling, "When did you get your last fix, Ray Stone?"

He looked at her suspiciously. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Don't you?"

"Not the faintest idea."

She pulled her hand back across the table, her fingers moving to the small pearl button on her left sleeve. Deftly, she undid the button and shoved the sleeve back abruptly. She held it up only long enough for him to see the marks. Then she pushed the sleeve down and fastened the button again.

"I thought girls used their legs," he said.

"My legs are too nice to mark." She swung her feet out from under the table, pulled her skirt back to the tops of her stockings. He saw the sleek roundness of thigh and calf, the slender ankle. Then the skirt came down again, covering her knees.

"See?" she asked.

"I see."

He started searching in the bureau drawers because he seemed to remember her putting the stuff there. The top drawer held his wallet, his cuff links, and a half-empty package of Camels. He closed the drawer and opened the middle drawer. Two towels were neatly folded there. Otherwise, it was empty. His face twitched as he opened the bottom drawer. Empty. He took a deep breath, the demand for the drug growing stronger now, and looked anxiously around the room. Perhaps he should wake her? No, he'd find it. It had to be around somewhere. Sixteen ounces of the stuff didn't just get up and walk away. How many fixes were there in sixteen ounces of pure heroin?

"I asked about your last fix," she said.

"I heard you."

"Well?"

"I don't remember. About ten o'clock, I guess."

"Man, that's a long time ago."

"I suppose so."

"How would you like a real *fix?"*

"Maybe."

"Heroin," she said, almost tasting the word.

"Sounds interesting."

"Or aren't you on hero—"

"I said it sounded interesting," he interrupted quickly.

She grinned, her lips parting like an opening flower.

"You're cute, Ray Stone. Maybe we'll share more than a fix."

"Maybe."

"This is the last set," she said. "I sing two more numbers. Wait for me, Ray." She rose, her fingers lingering on his arm. She turned then and walked toward the bandstand, her hips straining against the tight skirt.

He searched the closet frantically. All right, he told himself. All right, this is far enough, I want it enough now, I want it pretty damn bad, I want it very much, too damn much, I need

it right now. Where is it? Where the hell did she put it? How much longer does a guy have to stand this? Jesus, how much longer do I have to wait for the day to begin? Where is it? Where did she put it? Sixteen ounces. Jesus, where did it go?

He slammed the closet door in a frenzy and stalked into the bathroom.

There in her room, they clung together, trembling with the discovery of their bodies, and trembling with the promise of the drug waiting for them.

That was when she showed it to him. She opened the bureau drawer and took out a small tin candy box.

"Chocolates?" he asked.

"Better than candy, Ray. Much better."

She lifted the lid, and his eyes opened wide. He looked down, his hands almost reaching for it.

"Is—is that—"

"That's what it is, baby. Sixteen ounces of it."

"Sixteen ounces! Jesus, where'd you get—"

"Is it enough, do you think?" She smiled teasingly.

"Enough? Jesus, it must be worth a fortune."

"We're going to have a real fix, Ray baby. No scrimping this time. We can use all we want. We can fly, baby, we can really build wings."

He took her into his arms, kissing her warmly.

He slammed the door of the medicine chest shut. His hands trembled and there was a lurching pain in his stomach. He scratched his cheek nervously, scratched his temple, scratched his cheek again. In desperation, he looked in the shower stall, found only a bar of soap, threw this against the wall in fury. Where the hell is it? his mind screamed. He scratched his cheek again, not knowing what his hands were doing anymore. The muscles along his back began to quiver. He had to have it! Where was it, damn it, where was it?

They did it slowly. They measured out only enough of the white powder to give them wings, just enough to blow off the tops of their heads. Not too much. Not the big fix, the lethal dose an addict never woke up from. Just enough to give them a kick, a kick with an iron shoe behind it.

Each holding a loaded hypodermic, they walked to the bed, and emptied the syringes into their arms.

"Man, this is one big shooting gallery," she shrieked.

"The biggest, the biggest," he screamed with her, the drug beginning to take hold.

"I'm pulverized! I'm swinging. Man, I'm stoned!"

"Flying, flying, flying up there! Man, watch out, watch out for me in my brand-new Cadillac."

The Cadillac dream had taken over then, with Ray behind the wheel. That was all he remembered. It had been one hell of a fine fix.

He went through the bureau again, the closet, the bathroom, even the shower. He went through her purse, scattered her underwear all over the floor, tossed his own clothes off the chair, his shirt, his socks, looking for the elusive candy tin with the white powder in it.

"Eileen!" he called, unable to contain himself any longer, wanting to wake her, needing the shot now as a man on a desert desperately needs water. No kicks this time, no kicks involved at all. This was life and death. This was the difference between being able to breathe, and dying.

"Eileen! Wake up, wake up. Help me."

He was shivering now, barely able to keep his body steady. He walked rapidly across the room and stooped over the bed.

"Eileen!" he said, his voice a hoarse whisper, a light sweat covering his body with a cold film. "Eileen."

He reached down and touched her shoulder gently, his fingers trembling. "Eileen. Eileen, snap out of it."

He shook her more violently, his lips moving frantically, gulping great gulps of nothing in his throat. "Come on, kid," he pleaded, "come on now, let's go, come on."

With a sudden violent movement, he ripped back the sheet, exposing the length of her body relaxed against the whiteness of the bed. He shook her again, and his eyes traveled down to the hollow of her navel.

He noticed the holes then.

They were small holes, just to the right of her navel. They were rimmed with red, and there was a dried river of red across the flatness of her stomach. The redness stretched out beneath her, staining the sheet in gaudy brilliance.

Her shoulders were quite cold.

A horror that was worse than the drumming need for the drug seized him. He realized then that Eileen Chalmers wasn't breathing.