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Written by Ed McBain

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CUT ME IN

by Ed McBain

A HARD CASE



CRIME NOVEL

A HARD CASE CRIME BOOK

(HCC-122)

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

CUT ME IN

I.

The girl was sitting at the kitchen table in a bra and half-slip, casually puffing on a cigarette. I propped myself up in bed, looking out past the living room and through the half-open kitchen door. A cup of coffee rested before her on the table, the steam rising from it lazily. Her legs were crossed, and she wore high heels with ankle straps. Nylon stockings were stretched taut against the curve of her leg, and I wondered why any girl in her right mind would wear stockings in this kind of weather. I also wondered who she was.

I didn't really give a damn, you understand, because the buzz saw inside my skull and the decaying caterpillar in my mouth told me there'd be plenty I wouldn't remember about last night. But it seemed to me that a gentleman upon rising should at least know who was sitting at his kitchen table enjoying a cup of coffee and a cigarette. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, and the buzz saw went to work on another cord of wood. I tried to spit out the caterpillar, and gave that up when I discovered it was only my tongue. The window was wide open, but there was no breeze. It was going to be another scorcher just like yesterday. I almost wished the damned Stewart deal hadn't come up to cancel my vacation. But then I thought of the money involved in the deal and I forgot all about vacations and heat. I found a rumpled potato sack thrown over one of the chairs, discovered it had legs and cuffs, and put it on.

I was walking out into the living room, tightening the belt around my waist, when the girl spoke.

“That you, Josh?”

“Why, yes,” I answered. “That you?”

“I’ll pour you some coffee,” she said.

I nodded, stopping at an end table to spear a cigarette from a container. I was in my bare feet, but the rug was thick, and I didn’t mind. I got the cigarette going, and then walked into the kitchen as the girl set a steaming cup of coffee down on the table. She was tall, with blonde hair cut close to the oval of her face. Her eyes were a pale blue, with skillfully darkened lashes and lids. She wore a pale orange lipstick that accentuated her blondness and added just a touch of color to her full lips. My eyes studied her face, and the first impression I had was that she modeled. She smiled and lifted one eyebrow, glancing at the coffee cup.

“Oh,” I said. “Thanks.”

“I’ve got to be leaving soon,” she said.

I tried to think of something appropriate, but I only came up with, “So soon?”

She grinned knowingly. “Gal has to earn a living, you know.”

I sipped at the coffee and looked out over the rooftops. Occasionally, I glanced at the girl’s face, and my eyes strayed down to the firm cones of her white bra. The girl’s dress was neatly folded over one of the kitchen chairs, and I imagined she was postponing putting it on because of the heat. The clock on the wall said eight-twenty, and that meant I would have to shave and shower and dress in less than a half hour if I wanted to get to the office on time. And I did want to get there on time. I wanted to get there on time very much. If Friday had been any indication, today would really be a lulu. I wanted to be there the minute the phone started ringing. This was likely the biggest deal the agency had ever...

“...who I am, do you?”

I looked up quickly. “Huh? I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“I said you don’t even remember who I am, do you?”

I grinned and opened one hand in a futile gesture. “I’m sorry, honey, but I was potted.”

She smiled a warming smile. “That’s all right. My name is Janice.”

“Oh, yes, Janice.”

“You still don’t remember.”

“No, I guess I don’t.”

“The Cockatoo? At the bar?”

“Ah, the Cockatoo,” I said, nodding. “A nice bar.”

“*Stardust* and Artie Shaw.”

“A nice song, and a nice band.”

“You were drinking Zombies,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I was?”

She nodded, and the smile got bigger. “Uh-huh. After your third one, you put your hand on my knee and said, ‘Baby, you and I should...’ ”

“I remember,” I said quickly.

The girl stood up and reached over for her dress. Quickly, she ducked her head, and when she stood up straight again, the dress slid down the curves of her body. She pulled it over her hips, smoothed it, and then fluffed her hair.

“My lipstick all right?” she asked.

“Fine. Very nice.”

“Well, I’ve got to run. Monday morning...” She sighed and shook her head. “It’s been real nice, Josh. I enjoyed it.”

“I guess I did, too,” I said.

I walked her to the front door, and she reached up and patted my face, her hand lingering there for an instant. “Goodbye, Josh.”

“Janice,” I said.

I closed the door and stood staring at it for a few minutes. I

shrugged. Quickly, I walked back to the kitchen and gulped down the coffee cooling in the cup. I thought about the Cam Stewart deal all the while I was showering, and I thought about it while I was shaving, too. Del Gilbert, my partner, had gone up to see the author on Friday. By this time, the deal would be cemented on that end. Not that his visit to Stewart's Connecticut home had been really essential. We'd never met the author, though, and a literary agency likes its clients to be friendly as well as profitable. And Cam Stewart was profitable, all right. Cam Stewart was the most profitable thing to come along in a good many moons. The Westerns that flowed from Stewart's pen were the hottest marketing commodity around, and even though we only had permission to handle the radio and television rights to the six published novels, that was enough. It was enough because any movie deal necessarily hinges on the TV rights, and they were snug in our happy little pocket. The Hollywood boys had been barking for the past week, and it looked as if the big deal was ready to go through at last. If we agreed to it. If we didn't, we'd simply queer it, and there wasn't a damned thing they could do. No producer is going to spend a million bucks on a movie and then discover that his potential audience can get the same thing on television for free.

Oh yes, it was very sweet.

And we'd fallen right into it, almost with no effort at all. We'd simply written to Stewart asking for permission to handle radio and television rights, telling the author we had what looked like a good opportunity for their sale. Both Del and I almost keeled over flat when Stewart's return letter arrived. It granted us sole and exclusive permission to handle the rights for which we'd asked, provided a five-hundred-dollar option was paid. We sent our check out in the next mail, and I'd have been willing to deliver it personally. Then we had a photostat made

of Stewart's letter. This was our meal ticket, and we weren't taking a chance on it getting lost or misplaced.

I was excited, all right. I was excited as hell. The Hollywood boys had been talking in terms of fifty thousand per picture, two pictures a year. That's a lot of money no matter how you fold it, and we were in a position to kill the deal unless we got what we wanted out of it. I dressed rapidly, almost forgetting to put on my tie. There was the faint odor of perfume in the bathroom, and I sniffed it appreciatively. It takes a lucky man to pick a winner even when he's souped to the ears. I'd probably have dropped dead if I'd found a dried-up old hag sitting at the table this morning. And considering all I could remember, or rather all I had forgotten, the likelihood was not a remote one.

I left my apartment and took the Buick from the garage under the building. The traffic was thick, and the heat was beginning to pour down out of the sky—a heat that stuck your pants to the seat, and your shorts to your pants, and your skin to your shorts. That kind of heat. Damp and sticky, like sorghum molasses.

I sweated out a red light that took forever to change, and then I was in the Fifth Avenue stream of traffic. I had the top down, but that didn't help at all, and by the time I'd parked the car in a garage on Eighth and caught a cab crosstown, I was drenched to the skin. I took the elevator up to the twentieth floor and walked down to our offices at the end of the hall. We had a suite of six rooms, including a large reception room; a general office; a consultation room; an office for Tim, our executive editor; and two private offices for Del and myself. It was a nice layout, and it had taken us a long time to get where we were. The Stewart deal would shove us one more notch up the ladder, and a few more notches after that would put us in the really big agency bracket. I closed the door to the reception

room behind me, glanced briefly at the big guy sitting on one of the couches, and then headed for the door leading to my office. Jeanette, the brunette receptionist and switchboard operator, smiled pertly as I passed her desk.

“Good morning, Mr. Blake,” she said. The words hardly left her mouth when the big guy sitting on the couch leaped to his feet and started across the room after me. I didn’t turn back, but I smelled writer, even from that distance. When you’ve been a ten-percenter long enough, you can smell a writer at a hundred paces, even if he’s wearing a butcher’s apron. This guy wasn’t wearing a butcher’s apron, though I’m sure he could have slaughtered a steer with his bare hands.

He ran around me and stopped in front of my door, clutching a briefcase to his chest. He was at least six-four, weighing all of two hundred pounds, with straight black hair that fell over his forehead. His shaggy brows matched his hair, and his nose had been skillfully rearranged by someone with big fists. He had a jaw like a pig’s rump, with twice as many bristles protruding from it. He looked like a rundown bookie, or a hired killer, but I knew he was a writer.

“Mr. Blake?” he asked.

I allowed my eyes to roam toward Jeanette, the promise of quick strangulation in them. “Yes,” I said slowly, “I’m Mr. Blake.”

“My name is Gunnison,” he said, his face erupting into a somewhat ghoulish smile. “David Gunnison.”

I nodded pleasantly, waiting for him to say it.

“I’m a writer,” he said.

“Oh?” I asked, interest all over my face.

“I’ve written a novel.”

“That’s nice,” I said. I knew the answer to the next question before I asked it, but I’m a glutton for punishment. “Is it your first novel?”

“Why, yes.”

“Well, if you’ll just have a seat, Mr. Gunnison, one of our editors will be happy to talk to you.”

“Oh, no!” he said, moving over and covering the door with his huge body. “I want to talk to you personally.”

I allowed my glance to find Jeanette again, and this time there was arsenic and a small pinch of cyanide in it

“Well,” I said, gesturing to the couch, “have a seat, won’t you?” I was sure as hell not going to make him comfortable in *my* private office. I expected the phone to begin jangling at any moment, and I didn’t want to be tied up with a budding Shakespeare, even if he *was* a budding Shakespeare—which was extremely doubtful. I’ve read a great many first novels.

“We’ll have to make this short,” I said apologetically. “I’m expecting some very important calls.”

“We won’t take a minute, Mr. Blake,” he answered, unzipping his briefcase. I watched while he reached in and pulled out what looked like forty thousand typewritten pages. He slapped the manuscript down on his briefcase with all the flourish of a magician producing a rabbit from a hat, and then nodded in self-appreciation. “Ninety-five thousand words,” he said. “Is that too long?”

“No,” I said, “That is, it all depends on what type of book it is.”

“It’s based on my life,” he said, and I winced automatically. The phone rang just then, and I craned my neck toward it while Jeanette went through the ritual.

“Gilbert and Blake, good morning.”

“I was born in the South, you see, and this tells all about my family, fictionalized of course, and some of the things that happened right up to the time I was twenty-one.”

“Just a moment, sir, I’ll see if he’s in.”

I watched as Jeanette plugged in and said, "Mr. Gordon on six, Mr. Kennedy."

Kennedy was Tim. I slouched back against the cushions and let out my breath.

"For example, Mr. Blake, one of my uncles was sheriff of Longduck County. Now he's told me some stories which..."

"Uh, Mr. Gunnison, I hate to interrupt you but..."

"That's quite all right, sir," he said. "I've got plenty of time. What do you want to know?"

"Well, as you know, this is Monday morning, and there are a great many things to be done. It's a little unusual to drop in without an appointment, so perhaps I could have my secretary arrange a later appointment for you, and we could sit down and discuss your novel at length then."

"Well..." he started, but I was already on my feet and walking over to the reception desk.

"Jeanette, will you ask Lydia to step outside, please?" I asked.

"She's not in yet, Mr. Blake," Jeanette said. I looked up at the clock on the wall. It was nine-thirty.

"Call her home," I said, my voice getting a little annoyed. "Find out if she's coming in."

"Yes, sir."

I turned and almost slammed into Gunnison, or whatever the hell his name was. A few pages of his manuscript fluttered to the floor and he stooped down to retrieve them. "You needn't go to any trouble on my part," he said, still smiling. "We can talk right now."

"Mr. Gunnison..."

"I know you're being considerate and all, but I really didn't have any place else to go, anyway."

"I think you misunderstood me," I said. He was beginning to really rub me the wrong way, and I was tempted to toss him out by the seat of his pants, except that his six-four gave him almost

four inches on me, and this was Monday morning. If an important call came through while I was sitting here listening to this jackass rave...

"No misunderstanding at all," he said. "Just sit down, and I'll show you what I mean." He put one meaty hand on my shoulder and practically shoved me down through the bottom of the couch.

I pushed myself up and said, "Look, my good friend..."

"Listen to this," he said.

"Mr. Gunnison, can't we..."

The phone rang again, and this time I nearly leaped off the couch.

"Gilbert and Blake, good morning."

"The sky was a pale bowl of inverted blue china. It was early morning, and the sounds of the day were lazy and unclear, as if they'd shaken themselves from sleep and..."

"I'm sorry, sir, Mr. Gilbert is out of town... No, sir, I don't know when he'll return... yes, sir, I will."

Jeanette yanked the plug from its socket and I jumped off the couch. "Who was that?" I asked.

Gunnison had stopped reading and was staring at me with wide eyes.

"He... he didn't say, Mr. Blake," Jeanette stammered.

"Well, why in hell didn't you ask?"

"I... I didn't think..."

"Did you ask him if he'd speak to me?"

"N... n... no, sir."

"What the hell kind of an office is this anyway? Where the hell is Lydia? What did you mean when you told him 'I will'?"

"Sir?"

"That guy on the phone. He said something, and you said 'Yes, sir, I will.' What did he say?"

"He said, 'Will you tell him I called?'"

“Who? Who called?”

“He didn’t say, sir.”

“Oh, for Christ’s...”

“Mr. Blake?”

I whirled and found Gunnison at my elbow again. “What is it?”

“My novel,” he said. “How’d you like that part I read?”

“I didn’t!” I snapped. “It was lousy. Now leave me alone, will you?”

His eyes popped wide, but I didn’t stay to watch them. I turned and walked to my office, slamming the door behind me. Goddamn it, this morning was starting off fine, just fine. A strange girl in the apartment, a lunatic with a novel, a receptionist who can’t get a name straight over the phone...

I sat down behind my desk and pushed a toggle on the intercom.

“Yep.”

“Who’s this?”

“Charlie. That you, Josh?”

“This is me. Is everybody out there?”

“Why, sure.”

“All right.”

I pushed another toggle, and recognized Tim’s voice when it came over the speaker.

“Who called you this morning, Tim?”

“Two calls,” he said. “A sale to Standard, and a pick-up at *Cosmo*.”

“All right. Don’t disturb me for the rest of the morning, Tim. I expect to be tied up.”

“Right, Josh.”

I buzzed Jeanette then, and when she came on I asked, “Did you get Lydia?”

“No, sir.”

"No answer?"

"No, sir. But the switchboard operator there..."

"Yes?"

"The switchboard operator said Lydia is on her way in."

"Send her in as soon as she arrives."

"Yes, sir. And, sir..."

"What is it?"

"That man is still here."

"What man?"

"The man you were talking to. Mr. Gunnison, I believe."

"Tell him to go away."

"I did, sir. He just..."

"Tell him again. I'm busy. Don't bother me."

I clicked off and leafed through the morning mail on my desk, holding the envelopes up to the light streaming through the window, looking for checks. I found a letter with an Arizona postmark, and I recognized Frank Gorman's handwriting. Now what the hell was eating him? I started to rip open the flap of the envelope when I heard excited shouting in the reception room. I was about to buzz Jeanette to ask her what all the noise was about when the door burst open and Gunnison rushed in with his briefcase tight against his chest. Jeanette was right behind him, her face pale.

"I'm s...sorry, sir," she stammered.

"That's all right," I told her. She backed out of the office, and I shoved my chair away from the desk and walked over to Gunnison. "What the hell do you think this is?" I asked. "A gymnasium?"

"Why won't you read my book?" he said softly. His thick black brows were knotted ominously, and his lips were compressed into a tight line through which he forced out his words.

"I didn't say I wouldn't read it," I answered, beginning to get

angry with the guy all over again. "I told you to make an appointment. That was before you came barging in here like Army's eleven. Now you can take your book and..."

"You're all the same," he mumbled. "All of you. Not one of you will give a new writer a break."

"All writers are new writers once," I said. "I think you'd better go."

I was turning to walk back to my chair when his hand clamped down on my shoulder. He yanked his arm back, spinning me around and grabbing my lapels up in his other hand. He gave a vicious jerk that pulled me off my feet, and then, with his face about two inches from mine, he said, "This isn't the end of this, you bastard."

I do not like being called names, and I do not like being threatened. I also do not like the lapels of my suits crushed in anybody's mitts, even if the anybody is six-four. I lifted my foot about six inches off the floor, and then brought the heel down on his instep.

He dropped my lapels, let out a yell, and then grabbed for his foot. I shoved the palm of my hand against his chest and he went flying back, butt over teacups, the briefcase jumping into the air. I reached down, grabbed the seat of his pants and the collar of his suit, and propelled him to the front door as fast as I could. He swore all the way, and he wiggled like a snake when I let go with one hand to open the door. He was ready to turn on me when I shoved him out into the hallway. His shoes hit the waxed floors and he skidded for about four feet, his arms flaying like a comic ice-skater's. He went down, then, all at once, and the building shook a little when he hit the floor.

"Don't come back," I said. "The police are only a phone call away."

“You bastard,” he muttered. “You still have my book.”

“I’ll send it out. Goodbye, friend.”

“You bastard,” he said again.

I closed the door on him, walked straight to my office, and then buzzed Jeanette. When she came in, I handed her Gunnison’s briefcase. “Give this to the gentleman sitting in the hallway,” I told her.

She turned to go, and I said, “Has Lydia come in yet?”

“No, sir.”

When she left, I picked up Frank Gorman’s letter again. Frank was a mystery writer who’d been with the agency for about five years. He wrote pulps mostly, with a few scattered slick tries, but he was a steady producer, the kind of old reliable any agent likes in his stable. I tore open the envelope and pulled out the letter. It was written on yellow lined paper, the way all Frank’s letters were, and it began, “*Dear Josh, I’d like to cancel our contract as of today.*”

That tied it! That bloody well tied it. It was like someone’s own father stabbing him. I read through the letter, getting angrier every second. I crumpled it into a ball and threw it at the bookcase across the room, missing. I buzzed Jeanette.

“Has our alleged secretary shown up yet?”

“No, sir.”

“Have there been any calls?”

“No, sir.”

“All right.”

I got up and walked across the room to pick up Gorman’s letter. I wondered when his contract expired, and then I decided to find out. I’d be goddamned if I was just going to let him walk out on us after five years of building his name and steering him along, I took out my keys and unlocked the door between my office and Del’s. The safe was in Del’s office, and

we kept all our contracts in the safe. I put the keys back into my pocket and swung the door wide.

The first thing I saw almost caused the top of my skull to blow off because I thought it was just another glaring example of office inefficiency. The safe was open and a sheaf of papers was spilled all over the floor. I tightened my fists and barged into the office, ready to start screaming bloody murder.

Then I saw Del, and I had every right to scream just that.