

Garden of Beasts

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Published by Hodder &
Stoughton

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Chapter **ONE**

As soon as he stepped into the dim apartment he knew he was dead.

He wiped sweat off his palm, looking around the place, which was quiet as a morgue, except for the faint sounds of Hell's Kitchen traffic late at night and the ripple of the greasy shade when the swiveling Monkey Ward fan turned its hot breath toward the window.

The whole scene was off.

Out of kilter . . .

Malone was supposed to be here, smoked on booze, sleeping off a binge. But he wasn't. No bottles of corn anywhere, not even the *smell* of bourbon, the punk's only drink. And it looked like he hadn't been around for a while. The New York *Sun* on the table was two days old. It sat next to a cold ashtray and a glass with a blue halo of dried milk halfway up the side.

He clicked the light on.

Well, there *was* a side door, like he'd noted yesterday from the hallway, looking over the place. But it was nailed shut. And the window that let onto the fire escape? Brother, sealed nice and tight with chicken wire he hadn't been able to see

from the alley. The other window *was* open but was also forty feet above cobblestones.

No way out . . .

And where was Malone? Paul Schumann wondered.

Malone was on the lam, Malone was drinking beer in Jersey, Malone was a statue on a concrete base underneath a Red Hook pier.

Didn't matter.

Whatever'd happened to the boozehound, Paul realized, the punk had been nothing more than bait, and the wire that he'd be here tonight was pure bunk.

In the hallway outside, a scuffle of feet. A clink of metal.

Out of kilter . . .

Paul set his pistol on the room's one table, took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. The searing air from the deadly Midwest heat wave had made its way to New York. But a man can't walk around without a jacket when he's carrying a 1911 Colt .45 in his back waistband and so Paul was condemned to wear a suit. It was his single-button, single-breasted gray linen. The white-cotton, collar-attached shirt was drenched.

Another shuffle from outside in the hallway, where they'd be getting ready for him. A whisper, another clink.

Paul thought about looking out the window but was afraid he'd get shot in the face. He wanted an open casket at his wake and he didn't know any morticians good enough to fix bullet or bird-shot damage.

Who was gunning for him?

It wasn't Luciano, of course, the man who'd hired him to touch off Malone. It wasn't Meyer Lansky either. They were dangerous, yeah, but not snakes. Paul'd always done top-notch work for them, never leaving a bit of evidence that could link them to the touch-off. Besides, if either of them wanted Paul gone, they wouldn't need to set him up with a bum job. He'd simply be gone.

So who'd snagged him? If it was O'Banion or Rothstein from Williamsburg or Valenti from Bay Ridge, well, he'd be dead in a few minutes.

If it was dapper Tom Dewey, the death would take a bit longer—whatever time was involved to convict him and get him into the electric chair up in Sing-Sing.

More voices in the hall. More clicks, metal seating against metal.

But looking at it one way, he reflected wryly, everything was silk so far; he was still alive.

And thirsty as hell.

He walked to the Kelvinator and opened it. Three bottles of milk—two of them curdled—and a box of Kraft cheese and one of Sunsweet tenderized peaches. Several Royal Crown colas. He found an opener and removed the cap from a bottle of the soft drink.

From somewhere he heard a radio. It was playing "Stormy Weather."

Sitting down at the table again, he noticed himself in the dusty mirror on the wall above a chipped enamel washbasin. His pale blue eyes weren't as alarmed as they ought to be, he supposed. His face, though, was weary. He was a large man—over six feet and weighing more than two hundred pounds. His hair was from his mother's side, reddish brown; his fair complexion from his father's German ancestors. The skin was a bit marred—not from pox but from knuckles in his younger days and Everlast gloves more recently. Concrete and canvas too.

Sipping the soda pop. Spicier than Coca-Cola. He liked it.

Paul considered his situation. If it was O'Banion or Rothstein or Valenti, well, none of them gave a good god-damn about Malone, a crazy riveter from the shipyards turned punk mobster, who'd killed a beat cop's wife and done so in

a pretty unpleasant way. He'd threatened more of the same to any law that gave him trouble. Every boss in the area, from the Bronx to Jersey, was shocked at what he'd done. So even if one of them wanted to touch off Paul, why not wait until *after* he'd knocked off Malone?

Which meant it was probably Dewey.

The idea of being stuck in the caboose till he was executed depressed him. Yet, truth be told, in his heart Paul wasn't too torn up about getting nabbed. Like when he was a kid and would jump impulsively into fights against two or three kids bigger than he was, sooner or later he'd eventually pick the wrong punks and end up with a broken bone. He'd known the same thing about his present career: that ultimately a Dewey or an O'Banion would bring him down.

Thinking of one of his father's favorite expressions: "On the best day, on the worst day, the sun finally sets." The round man would snap his colorful suspenders and add, "Cheer up. Tomorrow's a whole new horse race."

He jumped when the phone rang.

Paul looked at the black Bakelite for a long moment. On the seventh ring, or the eighth, he answered. "Yeah?"

"Paul," a crisp, young voice said. No neighborhood slur.

"You know who it is."

"I'm up the hall in another apartment. There're six of us here. Another half dozen on the street."

Twelve? Paul felt an odd calm. Nothing he could do about twelve. They'd get him one way or the other. He sipped more of the Royal Crown. He was so damn thirsty. The fan wasn't doing anything but moving the heat from one side of the room to the other. He asked, "You working for the boys from Brooklyn or the West Side? Just curious."

"Listen to me, Paul. Here's what you're going to do. You only have two guns on you, right? The Colt. And that little twenty-two. The others are back in your apartment?"

Paul laughed. "That's right."

"You're going to unload them and lock the slide of the Colt open. Then walk to the window that's not sealed and pitch them out. Then you're going to take your jacket off, drop it on the floor, open the door and stand in the middle of the room with your hands up in the air. Stretch 'em way up high."

"You'll shoot me," he said.

"You're living on borrowed time anyway, Paul. But if you do what I say you might stay alive a little longer."

The caller hung up.

He dropped the hand piece into the cradle. He sat motionless for a moment, recalling a very pleasant night a few weeks ago. Marion and he had gone to Coney Island for miniature golf and hot dogs and beer, to beat the heat. Laughing, she'd dragged him to a fortune teller at the amusement park. The fake gypsy had read his cards and told him a lot of things. The woman had missed this particular event, though, which you'd think should've showed up somewhere in the reading if she was worth her salt.

Marion . . . He'd never told her what he did for a living. Only that he owned a gym and he did business occasionally with some guys who had questionable pasts. But he'd never told her more. He realized suddenly that he'd been looking forward to some kind of future with her. She was a dime-a-dance girl at a club on the West Side, studying fashion design during the day. She'd be working now; she usually went till 1 or 2 a.m. How would she find out what happened to him?

If it was Dewey he'd probably be able to call her.

If it was the boys from Williamsburg, no call. Nothing.

The phone began ringing again.

Paul ignored it. He slipped the clip from his big gun and unchambered the round that was in the receiver, then he emptied the cartridges out of the revolver. He walked to the

window and tossed the pistols out one at a time. He didn't hear them land.

Finishing the soda pop, he took his jacket off, dropped it on the floor. He started for the door but paused. He went back to the Kelvinator and got another Royal Crown. He drank it down. Then he wiped his face again, opened the front door, stepped back and lifted his arms.

The phone stopped ringing.

"This's called The Room," said the gray-haired man in a pressed white uniform, taking a seat on a small couch.

"You were never here," he added with a cheerful confidence that meant there was no debate. He added, "And you never heard about it."

It was 11 p.m. They'd brought Paul here directly from Malone's. It was a private town house on the Upper East Side, though most of the rooms on the ground floor contained desks and telephones and Teletype machines, like in an office. Only in the parlor were there divans and armchairs. On the walls here were pictures of new and old navy ships. A globe sat in the corner. FDR looked down at him from a spot above a marble mantel. The room was wonderfully cold. A private house that had air-conditioning. Imagine.

Still handcuffed, Paul had been deposited in a comfortable leather armchair. The two younger men who'd escorted him out of Malone's apartment, also in white uniforms, sat beside him and slightly behind. The one who'd spoken to him on the phone was named Andrew Avery, a man with rosy cheeks and deliberate, sharp eyes. Eyes of a boxer, though Paul knew he'd never been in a fistfight in his life. The other was Vincent Manielli, dark, with a voice that told Paul they'd probably grown up in the same section of Brooklyn. Manielli and Avery didn't look much older than the stickball kids in front of Paul's building, but they were, of all things, lieu-

tenants in the navy. When Paul had been in France the lieutenants he'd served under had been grown men.

Their pistols were in holsters but the leather flaps were undone and they kept their hands near their weapons.

The older officer, sitting across from him on the couch, was pretty high up—a naval commander, if the gingerbread on his uniform was the same as it'd been twenty years ago.

The door opened and an attractive woman in a white navy uniform entered. The name on her blouse was Ruth Willets. She handed him a file. "Everything's in there."

"Thank you, Yeoman."

As she left, without glancing at Paul, the officer opened the file, extracted two pieces of thin paper, read them carefully. When he finished, he looked up. "I'm James Gordon. Office of Naval Intelligence. They call me Bull."

"This is your headquarters?" Paul asked. "The Room?"

The commander ignored him and glanced at the other two. "You introduced yourselves yet?"

"Yes, sir."

"There was no trouble?"

"None, sir." Avery was doing the talking.

"Take his cuffs off."

Avery did so while Manielli stood with his hand near his gun, edgily eyeing Paul's gnarled knuckles. Manielli had fighter's hands too. Avery's were pink as a dry-goods clerk's.

The door swung open again and another man walked inside. He was in his sixties but as lean and tall as that young actor Marion and Paul had seen in a couple of films, Jimmy Stewart. Paul frowned. He knew the face from articles in the *Times* and the *Herald Tribune*. "Senator?"

The man responded, but to Gordon: "You said he was smart. I didn't know he was well-informed." As if he wasn't happy about being recognized. The Senator looked Paul up and down, sat and lit a stubby cigar.

A moment later yet another man entered, about the same age as the Senator, wearing a white linen suit that was savagely wrinkled. The body it encased was large and soft. He carried a walking stick. He glanced once at Paul then, without a word to anyone, he retreated to the corner. He too looked familiar but Paul couldn't place him.

"Now," Gordon continued. "Here's the situation, Paul. We know you've worked for Luciano, we know you've worked for Lansky, a couple of the others. And we know what you do for them."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"You're a button man, Paul," Manielli said brightly, as if he'd been looking forward to saying it.

Gordon said, "Last March Jimmy Coughlin saw you . . ." He frowned. "What do you people say? You don't say 'kill.'"

Paul, thinking: Some of us people say "chill off." Paul himself used "touch off." It was the phrase that Sergeant Alvin York used to describe killing enemy soldiers during the War. It made Paul feel less like a punk to use the term that a war hero did. But, of course, Paul Schumann didn't share any of this at the moment.

Gordon continued. "Jimmy saw you kill Arch Dimici on March thirteenth in a warehouse on the Hudson."

Paul had staked out the place for four hours before Dimici showed up. He'd been positive the man was alone. Jimmy must've been sleeping one off behind some crates when Paul arrived.

"Now, from what they tell me, Jimmy isn't the most reliable witness. But we've got some hard evidence. A few revenue boys picked him up for selling hooch and he made a deal to rat on you. Seems he'd picked up a shell casing at the scene and was keeping it for insurance. No prints're on it—you're too smart for that. But Hoover's people ran a test on your Colt. The scratches from the extractor're the same."

Hoover? The FBI was involved? And they'd *already* tested the gun. He'd pitched it out of Malone's window less than an hour ago.

Paul rocked his upper and lower teeth against each other. He was furious with himself. He'd searched for a half hour to find that damn casing at the Dimici job and had finally concluded it'd fallen through the cracks in the floor into the Hudson.

"So we made inquiries and heard you were being paid five hundred dollars to . . ." Gordon hesitated.

Touch off.

" . . . eliminate Malone tonight."

"Like hell I was," Paul said, laughing. "You got yourself some bum wire. I just went to visit him. Where is he, by the way?"

Gordon paused. "Mr. Malone will no longer be a threat to the constabulary or the citizens of New York City."

"Sounds like somebody owes you five C-notes."

Bull Gordon didn't laugh. "You're in Dutch, Paul, and you can't beat the rap. So here's what we're offering. Like they say in those used-Studebaker ads: this's a one-time-only offer. Take it or leave it. We don't negotiate."

The Senator finally spoke. "Tom Dewey wants you as bad as he wants the rest of the scum on his list."

The special prosecutor was on a divine mission to clean up organized crime in New York. Crime boss Lucky Luciano, the Italian Five Families in the city and the Jewish syndicate of Meyer Lansky were his main targets. Dewey was dogged and smart and he was winning conviction after conviction.

"But he's agreed to give us first dibs on you."

"Forget it. I'm not a stool pigeon."

Gordon said, "We're not asking you to be one. That's not what this is about."

"Then what *do* you want me to do?"

A pause for a moment. The Senator nodded toward Gordon, who said, "You're a button man, Paul. What do you think? We want you to kill somebody."