

I capped the bottle and set it on my desk. Johnny Cutter popped into my head. Success had pumped up Cutter's ego like a hot-air balloon. The problem child showed up for work late after all-night binges, or didn't show up at all, or caused trouble on the set with rude, erratic behavior. When talkies came in, he'd forget his lines or slur his speech, or curse long and loud for the camera. But Harry tolerated Cutter because Johnny Cutter was top box office and that forgave a lot of sins in Hollywood. A week ago, he failed to show up to shoot the final scenes on a big-budget potboiler, and Harry sent me to find him. I figured he was merely strung out again on illegal hooch or shacked up with another young, willing bit player. A simple job to pry him from her arms, sober him up, get his clothes on, and get him back in front of the cameras. From that point, he was the director's problem.

But it wasn't simple. The Cutter mess opened a deep pit of quicksand and I teetered on the edge while somebody shoveled mud at me. And laughed wickedly while he was shoveling.

The smell of cigarette smoke brought me back to life.

"How you sleepin' at nights, Bo?"

The laughing in my head stopped. The cannon went silent. Wicked thoughts shoved out the morbid thoughts. The bogeyman, in the form of LAPD Detective Sergeant Elmo Jones, loomed at my door.

"How'd you get in here?"

"Man at that boat hadn't shown, Bo, you'd still be sleeping. Way down deep."

He leaned his right shoulder against the door frame. His burning gasper dangled from the side of his mouth, which twisted into a weasel grin from under the glare of rat-mean eyes. His left hand peeled back his suit coat, showing his police shield and his worn service revolver.

"This gets me places," he said, tapping his badge.

"You can't hide behind that buzzer forever. Sooner or later you'll get swept out with the garbage." I was not heeled. No need for guns inside the studio. Until now.

"I ain't hidin', Bo. I'm right out here in the open. You invited me to come check out your melon." His mouth twisted into what might have been a grin. His eyes retreated behind dark slits. "Remember?"

I reached for the bottle and took it by the neck. "You'd have to step a little closer."

Jones noticed and grinned wider. "Where'd you put the body, Bo?"

"Be a little clearer."

"You know what I mean. I left that bruno as a warning to Johnny Cutter. Thanks to you, Cutter didn't get the message. Now it's too late to warn him."

"Didn't think a cake-eater like Johnny Cutter would scare you that much. You're slipping, Jonesy."

Jones stood away from the door, balancing himself on the balls of both feet. He dropped the cigarette on the floor and ground it with his heel, his eyes not leaving mine. His right hand

dipped into his coat pocket. “That body shows up, Bo, I’m gonna tag it to you. Should’ve thought of that in the first place. But I didn’t come here to your cage to talk about a dead torpedo who only thought he was tough. I come to see a walkin’ corpse that knows he ain’t tough. Little Bo Peep. I just wanted to see your pan to tell you that what you got the other night is comin’ back to you, Bo, and you ain’t walkin’ away again.”

“You could have phoned that in and not brought your stink.”

His right hand came out of his coat pocket holding a snub-nosed .38 Special. He squeezed off a shot that shattered the glass in the window behind me, the slug tearing into the Stage One wall. He grinned at me, slipped the gat back into his pocket, and pointed his right index finger at me. “Tick...tick...tick.”

Harsh laughter trailed behind him like oil from a broken engine as he walked down the hallway. The door at the end of the hall clicked shut. I grabbed the bottle and finished it with one long pull. This deep into the bowels of York Brothers Studio, no one had heard the shot. And chasing after Detective Sergeant Elmo Jones just now was a damn fool idea. I dialed the switchboard and told Gertie to send someone to replace a broken window in my office, and keep his yap shut about it. I put my hat on my aching head and went outside.

Sunlight hit me like a scabby fist. Big Bertha fired another salvo inside my skull. Jones was gone but I could still smell him. A hellish image of rat-mean eyes scorched my baked mind. The sidewalk felt like quicksand, dirty and sluggish at my feet. I didn’t know where or how this damned mess would end, only that it wouldn’t go on much longer.

A week ago, Harry sent me to find a missing picture star named Johnny Cutter. But this whole business had started long before that, started with a dirty cop named Elmo Jones, and it didn’t take a genius to see that’s where it would finish...