

Chapter Two

Times Johnny Oxford felt like quitting the business altogether. The goon had now bumped Freda Volkinski. She'd been asleep in her pull-down bed when someone had pressed the button and she'd flown up into the wall and suffocated. Oxford gazed down at her poor, wretched body, still wearing her pink nightgown. The girl had died dreaming, and now dreams were all she had.

Lieutenant Baines said quietly: "The closet door was wide open, as was the door to the apartment. The bed was folded up against the wall and the lights were off. Her body was discovered by the cleaning lady at 9 a.m."

Oxford inched his way around the bed, no detail too small for him. He came to Freda's nightstand, mahogany, and found a vase of white lilies on top.

Oxford quickly asked: "Baines, you dusted this?"

"Sure, it's clean."

Oxford seized the handle of the nightstand drawer and pulled hard.

"It's locked," Baines informed him.

"No kidding." Oxford stood up straight. "But don't sweat it, man. Every lock has a key..."

He stepped over to Freda's dresser, heading straight for the jewelry box. He started rooting thru the doll's pearls, her diamond earrings, stuff that was probably worth a small fortune, tho a currency that held no value where poor Freda had gone.

It didn't take Oxford long to find the key to the nightstand. It didn't take him long to open the drawer, either. And there was a small book inside, bound in red leather.

"Well I'll be...!" Baines gasped. "That looks like a diary...!"

Oxford picked it up. "Well it ain't a bedtime story..." he quipped, starting to flick thru, his eyes scanning all the key details. She talked a lot about her U.N.O. friends - Jocelyn, Elsie Brannigan, Dolly Delamare... Seemed she had a couple of boyfriends as well. Then he came to the last entry, which really caught his attention. It had been written in Russian.

"I can get you an interpreter..." Baines assured him.

"No sweat man, you've already got one. She says Lance Bishop threatened to kill her again, so she called some guy Misty on account of his swell advice. He told her to bolt the door and sleep easy."

"Lance Bishop? That name's real familiar..." said Baines, trying to sound thoughtful.

"It should be. The punk runs a gambling racket in Brooklyn - Bishop's Casino - only that's not the name above the door..."

"That would be Bishop's Last Chance Bar and Grill," Baines recalled. "We raided it two years ago. Tho nothing dirty could be proved."

Oxford risked a smile. "Lance Bishop is so dirty that he stinks," he told him. "He sure is a smooth article, Lieutenant."

"Smooth enough to break in here and bump Miss Volkinski?"

"Nobody broke in here," Oxford reassured him. "The killer probably entered while Miss Volkinski was using the bathroom, and concealed himself inside the closet. When she locked the main door and went to sleep, he came outta the closet and hit the switch for the pull-down bed."

"But do you think it was Bishop that killed her?" Baines asked.

"Trust me, Lieutenant. If Lance Bishop murdered Freda Volkinski, I'll sure make him sing about it."

Oxford left the apartment block and crossed the street to where his white 47 Buick was parked. He took out a Diamond Crown cigar, then searched for his matches. He was clean out.

"You need a light, honey?" said a husky female voice.

Oxford turned. The lady was small, quite old, dressed in black and wearing a veil, with a cigarette that she smoked thru a shiny Bakelite holder.

"Do you make a habit of offering favors to strange men?" Oxford jibed.

"Only handsome ones," the lady replied, handing him a box of matches. "Here..."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Oxford, grateful. He struck the match, lighting the cigar behind the lapel of his coat. Then he turned to hand the box back, but the old lady was gone.

It didn't matter. Old broads were not Oxford's concern. He climbed into his 47 Buick and sped down the gloomy Long Island streets towards Brooklyn. Something told him Bishop would talk for the right price. And when it came to dirty crooks like Bishop, Oxford had unlimited credit.

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The Last Chance Bar and Grill was on Grand Street - not exactly hard to find. Oxford recalled the address from the police report on the raid, and wasn't surprised they found nothing. Bishop was far too thorough for that.

Inside, the joint was dimly lit, and the air thick with tobacco smoke. Oxford's eyes were drawn to a stunning doll sitting alone at the bar, her lips sucking on a jade cigarette holder, with a cool Martini to one side. He'd buy her a drink later.

Oxford made for the back, checking over each shoulder as he walked, arriving at a chipped wooden door right next to the restrooms, which he carefully nudged open. There was a flight of stone steps that led down into the cellar, known to some as Bishop's Casino.

Getting down there wasn't difficult, and getting out would be just as easy.

Then Oxford felt a .38 revolver press against the side of his skull, recognizing the feel of the barrel. A goon snarled at him: "If I was you I'd take it on the heel and toe before I throws lead..."

Oxford paused, his mouth curling into a smile. "There ain't enough lead in the world, stranger..."

He seized the guy's wrist, and the gun went off, missing him by inches. Oxford nimbly wrestled it from his hand and watched with satisfaction as it tumbled away. Fortunately he knew judo, having trained for ten years, and made the best of his skills as he grabbed the goon under each armpit and swung him to the floor - not a difficult maneuver. And now the bum was out cold, his face pressed against the hard stone slabs.

Oxford panted, sorted of elated, and caught his breath real quick. Perhaps he enjoyed his job a little too much...

That's when Lance Bishop came out of hiding, clapping his hands together like a rabid dope fiend. He was tall, thin, wearing an expensive suit with a face that was furrowed and austere. "Johnny Oxford," he said, grinning. "Martial arts class ain't 'til Tuesday..."

"That's just dandy by me, Bishop. I got nothing else to learn..." said Oxford, stepping closer, not intimidated by this bum. "I wanna talk to you Lance. About the murder of Miss Freda Volkinski..."

Bishop stopped smiling. "Freda Volkinski's dead?"

"Don't act so surprised," Oxford replied, sharp. "I know you threatened to kill her, several times. Now if you didn't bump her then I figure you know the guy that did."

Bishop slumped into a chair, looking a little lost. He started shuffling a deck of cards.

But Oxford had no time for games. "Start talking, Lance," he ordered.

The guy looked at him, with a sort of sadness in his eyes. "Freda was crazy, Mr. Oxford. She always thought someone was gunning for her."

"That a fact? Can't say I got that impression when I met her yesterday."

"That's coz you didn't know her like I did..." Bishop flipped a card on to the table - the six of hearts. "She was my doll. Only she figured different..."

"She wasn't interested...?"

"Sure, she was interested. In some guy Misty in California, and some other guy O'Donnell in the Navy, somewhere near Japan. I figured I was somewhere near the bottom of that deck..."

Oxford narrowed his eyes. "If your doll was fooling around, Lance, that'd be a pretty swell reason to have the curse on her..."

"I was mad at her, sure..." Bishop admitted, flipping a four of clubs on to the pile. "But I could never croak her, Mr. Oxford. I loved her too much..."

"And yet she mentioned your death threats in her diary..."

Bishop shrugged. "Trying to blacken my good name, I guess..."

"If I wanted to tarnish your impeccable character Lance I wouldn't write it in my diary, in Russian, in a locked nightstand," Oxford retorted, taking a card from the pile and turning it over - the ace of diamonds. He smiled. "So unless you've got an alibi for last night you'll be coming outta this dive in bracelets."

Bishop smiled back at him. "That sounds awfully like a threat, Mr. Oxford..."

"Don't it just. So where were you?"

"I was here," said Bishop, frank. "Serving drinks. Your pal Baines can sure tip a few..."

Oxford frowned. "Lieutenant Baines was here...?"

"You mean he didn't tell you? Say, I'm surprised to hear that, Mr. Oxford. A cop in his good standing an' all..."

Oxford turned, starting to walk away. "You're a dirty liar, Lance," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be back..."

"It's no lie I could make you a small fortune," Bishop shouted after him. "Drop in sometime. This house favors the gambler..."

"Russian Roulette ain't my style," said Oxford.

And then he left.

Elsie Brannigan scuttled out of her apartment. It was almost 8 a.m. If she hurried she might just make it to the subway. Her scarlet dress flapped in the breeze, showing off her swell silk hose as she trotted down the hallway.

Elsie patted her locks of curly blond hair, always wanting to look her best. Times she'd attract the occasional wolf-call from rich mugs with expensive taste, and that was just dandy by her. Elsie longed to be held in strong arms, to be kissed on her full red lips.

She called up the elevator, and the doors opened right away. Elsie was pleased. Day before, the elevator had been out of order.

It still was. The killer had removed the warning sign. Elsie stepped forward, right over the edge, plummeting six floors to the bottom of the shaft.

She never came back up.