

A Shakedown Squeeze by Dot the Cop

Blue Leon Howard and I sat in the front booth of the Brass Rail Bar on Forty-seventh Street, Southside Chicago. I felt that thrilling complacency that a con man has after a clean fat score. I couldn't know a messenger of death would join us within minutes.

The Westside mark had been sweet as honeysuckle. He had blown ten grand on our slick version of the rocks.

I looked out the panoramic front window as we waited for our steaks. I felt sorry for the passing parade of hunched chumps buffeted by the December barrage of freezing winds screaming off Lake Michigan.

A gaunt car prowler paused and peered into my sparkling new 'fifty-nine Fleetwood at the curb. A squad load of Eleventh Street detectives cruised through the twilight. The prowler faded into the parade. I thought about Aunt Lula's crazy cathouse in Indiana Harbor. I'd slip up there later tonight.

I figured it was cheaper and smarter to simply rent a dame's machinery for a few hours. My fountain of romantic love was dust dry. The Goddess had cured me permanently. Old Blue was of a different opinion. He had to have a marriage lock on his dame. I turned toward him. His ebony face was almost invisible in the dimness. His processed white hair gleamed like burnished silver.

I said, 'Blue, that score this morning just put us under the wire. Christmas is only a week off. I bet you make Cleo the happiest fluff in town. I bet you go down to Rothschild's and plank down your five-G end on a sable coat for her.'

'A guy has to keep his wife happy, you know. The young fancy ones get itchy feet in a hurry.'

His eyes flashed white lightning. His eyebrows zoomed up his brow like frosted boomerangs. Blue couldn't stand the needle into his love life. Believe me, if I had known this was

to be our last time in the Rail together I wouldn't have ribbed him about the nineteen-year-old Cleo.

I had pricked him to the tender quick, because he blew air through the gap in his front uppers. His thick lips opened and closed over the dazzle of his chalky teeth like banging shutters in a windstorm.

In that whispery rich voice of his, he said, 'White Folks, please don't worry about what happens to my end of that score. If I stepped out on that street and played chump Santa Claus to my last deemer, that would be Blue's happiness, not yours.

'And, White Folks, please, for Christ's sake, don't forget that twenty years ago I had my foot on the gaff in my flat joint when I turned you out on the grift as a belly-stick. You blow your end your way. I'll blow mine my way.'

He was an old man really hooked by a pretty tramp. I had seen Cleo sneaking around with several young punks. She'd even wiggled her fabulous rear end in my direction. I couldn't tell Blue. I couldn't tear him to pieces.

The waitress with our steaks stamped out the blaze. I noticed when she leaned over to place our plates, her orange hair was loaded with glitter dust. I remembered Roxie at that cathouse in Indiana. I had found several of the glamour dots sparkling in my navel the morning after.

I had sliced off an aromatic piece of the filet with my fork. I started to chew the succulent hunk. I was enjoying the delicious juices flooding my taste buds when a fearful silence crushed down on the crowded room.

I swung my eyes to the bar. The hustlers were like mute crows still-lifed on a mahogany fence. Blue was staring toward the door. He was hissing air through that gap like a berserk steam boiler. Then I saw him! He was standing in the gloom near the door. Blue turned his head away and dug into his salad.

He just stood there like a polka-dotted mummy. Only his crafty, hazel eyes moved. It was Dot Murray, and those frigid eyes were locked on us.

I was mesmerized. Blue stomped on my instep. I came out of the trance and glued my eyes to my plate. The steak

tasted like the charcoal that had cooked it. The savory well went dry.

Blue whispered, 'Play the chill for him. Remember, son, he's not bunco, he's only robbery detail. Just play the chill for him.'

My right leg twitched and bumped Blue's thigh. Blue groaned in disgust. I was thinking about how, years ago, Murray had clubbed the Memphis Kid into a slobbery vegetable with the butt of his thirty-eight special. The Kid's partner said Murray grinned like a hyena all the while.

The Kid and his partner, St. Louis Shorty, had made a smack score near the bus station at Sixty-third and Stony Island Avenue. They were blowing off the mark when Murray showed. He wasn't bunco then, but he had a fine eye for the grift in play. He had gone mad dog. In his frenzy he accidentally smashed the mark's nose. He had a big hate for grifters all right.

The raucous crows resumed their cawing. I wondered why. Had he gone? To cover my gander, I trembled my water glass off the booth top. I raised it high and pointed it toward the aisle.

Murray was standing at the edge of our booth grinning down at us. Through the watery screen his jagged teeth made his mouth look like the open jaws of a famished shark.

In the velvet tones of a psychiatrist soothing a manic-depressive, Blue said, 'Ah, Mr Murray. Please, won't you sit down and join us? Have a drink, or perhaps a steak.'

Dot bent his knees and slithered over the leather seat facing us. He sat there silently with that sneering grin on his face. His spotted hands were splayed out on the table top. Puddles of dirty yellow had started to wash out the brown pigment. It was hard to believe they had once been dark brown.

Our waitress came toward him to take his order. He waved her away. Finally in a fruity, soprano voice, he said, 'Blue, you knew I was going to join your party, didn't you? You really didn't have to give me an invitation, now did you?'

Before Dot's mouth could remold that awful grin, Blue said, 'Now, Mr Murray, how could Blue know you had a social

interest or any other kind in him. You never have in the thirty years I've known you. So, since I'm a courteous gentleman, I couldn't just let you stand there in the aisle, now could I?

Dot whipped his mottled hands off the table and spanked his palms together. His narrow grin closed shop. His hands were out of sight in his lap. I wondered if he had eased his rod from a waist holster.

Then his grin reopened as a wide corporation. He said, 'Now, Blue, it's true we've never been friends, but it's the Christmas season. Maybe in my old age I'm getting sentimental. Suppose I told you it would be a wise practical gesture for us to exchange Christmas gifts this year.'

I took a huge drink of water. Perhaps I could cool those hot spasms in my gullet.

Blue leaned toward him and said, 'Mr Murray, I appreciate your sentiments. Unfortunately, I don't share them. Christmas is just another day to me. Besides, wouldn't it be at least slightly out of line for a robbery detective and a mere carny spindle-man to exchange gifts?

'In my opinion, such a gesture would not be wise, but stupid to the extreme. After all, I'm not a heavy gee. Cheer up, Mr Murray, you have almost a week to find a heister or safecracker to share your Christmas sentiments.'

Blue glanced at his wristwatch, turned to me, and said, 'Son, we better hurry. I'm afraid we'll be late for our appointment.'

Blue took a saw buck from his raise and put it on top of our eight-dollar check. He started to rise. I rose with him. We made it to the aisle. I stood behind Blue. He reached for our hats and coats on the chrome rack at the top of the booth.

He looked down at Dot and said, 'Well, Mr Murray, the chances are I won't see you again before Christmas, so best wishes to you for the holidays.'

Dot still sat there grinning. He looked straight ahead as we struggled into our coats. Then, without turning his head, he casually said, 'Blue, I can't miss seeing you again soon. I'll duck into the homicide bureau and enjoy your morgue shots, maybe as soon as tomorrow. I'll count the ice-pick holes in

your black lard ass. You and your trick baby partner could be walking corpses.'

I cut in. I was hot as hell. I said, 'Goddamnit, Mr Murray, I was no trick baby. My mother was no whore. She married a white man. Do I have to pin her marriage license on my chest? And Blue and I haven't done anything to wind up dead.'

He said, 'I'll believe a license when I see it. I'm bullshit proof. Get wise and sit down. You high-powered grifters could save your lives. You two greedy bastards took off dangerous dough today.'

'Like I said before, old sentimental Murray just wants to exchange early Christmas presents. Now you're interested as hell, I betcha.'

Before the blast Blue was handing me my hat. Now, he was crushing it lopsided. He turned and looked up at me. His face had turned gray. His big nose was dewy. For an instant I didn't get it.

Then I thought, *Icepick stabs! We took off dangerous dough! Mary, Mother of Jesus! It just couldn't be! It couldn't be true! The cop was kidding us. Yes, that was it. The outfit, the syndicate wanted us dead? It had to be hokum. We weren't idiots. We would never cross them.*

Blue stood silently looking down at the top of Dot's head. His eyes were almost closed like a condemned man in prayer. I wondered why his magic tongue was taking such a long vacation. I fell into the booth. Dot's eyes stared into space over my head.

I said, 'Mr Murray, somebody's sold you a phony steer. Neither Blue nor I are in outfit trouble. It's impossible. Only a rank sucker would gamble against that kind of fate. We're smarter than that. We like steaks, clothes, dames and breathing too much to commit suicide.'

He didn't say anything. The waitress came to clear our plates away. She gave Blue a warm two-dollar smile as she brushed by him in the aisle.

Blue sighed and floated his right hand before my face. He rippled his fingers through the air like a kid making waves in a creek.

The seat of my pants was damp. My wet plams oared across the cool leather. Blue dropped heavy anchor beside me. We waited for Dot's lead.

He said, 'Boys, I had to be the luckiest sonuvabitch in the department today. There I was cruising down Roosevelt Road. I felt lousy as hell. I had a hangover and six dollars in my pocket a week before Christmas.

'I stopped for the red at Kedsie, near Roosevelt Road. Who should go roaring across the intersection but old man Frascati. You know, the old dago fence who owns the secondhand clothing shop. Guess who his passenger was?'

Dot paused and chortled. I was paralyzed. Blue was rigid beside me. Frascati was the mark we had played for the ten grand. Dot had seen Blue lugging the old man to me for the kill.

He continued his fun, 'It didn't register until I passed the old man's shop on Madison. It was closed. Frascati had to be awfully excited to do that in midday.

'It was too late to pick up the trail so I staked out the shop. I figured the old man would come back on the send for his money. I knew he hated banks. He kept a bundle stashed inside his shop somewhere.

'All the Westside heisters knew about the stash. But the old man's loot was safe. Ten years ago two foolish heisters from out of town raided his cash register. Two days later they were found in an alley. They were ice-picked from head to toe. Their butts had been sliced off to the bone. The Westside heisters knew what you dough-crazy grifters were too stupid to find out before you played for Frascati. Do you know who the old man's sister happens to be? The mother of Nino Parelli, that's who! Nino loved the old man. He set him up in the clothing shop.'

He gaped his mouth open and bucked his eyes wide in mock terror. He just sat there with that creepy look frozen on his face. I didn't need his grim clowning to chill my blood.

Blue looked at me. I looked at Blue. There wasn't a hustler on the Southside who hadn't heard of Nino Parelli.

He was a fast rising talent of terror and murder in the outfit.

His dominion was the lush policy wheels and dope operations on the southside. His spine-tingling reputation kept the black figureheads in a state of trembling honesty.

Blue's usually silky voice was ragged. He said, 'Mr Murray, on the face of it I admit things do look dark for me. Believe me, White Folks was not involved in the Frascati affair. In fact, I was a mere dupe myself.

'But I've got connections. My position is reversible. I'll make a phone call tonight, and walk in the sun again. Give me a solid reason why I should hold still for your shakedown?'

Joy lighted Dot's face. He said, 'Blue, I thought you'd never ask. The greatest connection on earth couldn't get you a stay of execution once I fingered you. Listen carefully and I'll give you rock-hard reason.

'When the old man got back to his shop he rushed to the phone in the front window. I could tell he was happy and excited as he talked. He hung up. Then he did an odd thing. He scrambled into that heap of his and drove toward the Loop. I tailed him to hockshop row at Van Buren and State.

'He was beginning to really puzzle me now. The old man never fenced anything but whiskey from hijackers and clothes from smash-and-grab store burglars. He had been a former tailor in Rome. He was smart to traffic in items he knew.

'He parked his jalopy three feet from the curb in a red zone on State. I parked maybe fifty feet in front of the jalopy on State. I kept watch in my rear-view mirror.

'He hustled into Jerry Profacci's joint. I knew that Jerry was Chicago's top hot-ice dealer. Blue, at that instant I got the thought that you had stepped into the heavy rackets.'

Dot paused and stuck his index finger into his ear. He rapidly jiggled it like an itchy mutt scratching at fleas. He rolled his eyes in the ecstasy of it all like a dame in orgasm. With that squeaky, high voice of his and all, a fellow would have to wonder about him. Even so I could pity the fruit hustler who tried to put the strong-arm on him.

Blue shifted his bulk and glanced nervously at his watch.

I looked over Dot's head at the frostbitten chumps passing

the window. I envied them now. They would go on living and at least die a natural death.

Dot was sharp for a juice head. He sensed out tenseness. He said, 'Now, Blue, don't get jumpy. Nino's not wise, yet, that you are the dirty bird who fouled up the old man.'

'Anyway, after ten minutes or so, I got restless and walked by Jerry's to the corner. There was only a clerk at the counter. I knew the old man was in the rear transacting business with Jerry.'

'On my way back to my car, the old man staggered out to the sidewalk. He was in a bad way. He was in a shocked daze. He looked right into my face. His eyes were blank. It was spooky because he had known me fifteen years. I walked by him. I went back to my car to take up the tail when he pulled out.'

'The gears screeched when his heap careened into traffic. A southbound streetcar skidded a shower of sparks. I knew it couldn't stop in time. The streetcar crushed in the driver's side of the jalopy. The old man flew through the window like he had been shot from a cannon.'

'His head busted wide open against the street. It sounded like an ax splitting a two-by-four. I sat there helpless. I knew he was dead.'

'I was sitting there long after they took him away. Blue, I knew that in some way you were responsible. At first I couldn't tie you in. Then when it hit me, it was easy. The old man had gotten bad news at Profacci's.'

'He had been in high spirits when he left you. What was the news that put him into that fatal daze? Profacci bought hot rocks. I knew then it was rocks, phony rocks that he thought were real!'

'I was sure you had swindled him on some twist of the rocks con. Profacci had broken the bad news to Frascati. Boys, I believe that score was no less than fifteen gees. I want five gees no matter what it was.'

'A million dollars couldn't cool Nino if I tipped him. But you're lucky at that. I'm the only one who can put a finger on you. Give me the five gees now and walk out that door. Don't give it to me and I rush my finger to Nino.'