

I CAME TO KILL YOU

BY
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WE WERE up in "Bibben" Tucker's room for our weekly game. Bib and me and Sam Morgan. We were waiting for Joie Wexler, late as usual. The cards and chips were all ready, and Bib had brought out the scotch for the first round of drinks. We heard Joie coming up the stairs then. His footsteps sounded a little hurried, and he slugged us with the news soon's he came in the room.

"Jerry Gait's crashed out! I just saw a paper. Happened this morning, and he had to bump a guard to make it!"

I tightened in my chair. Sam Morgan rose slowly from his. But Bib didn't even look up. Just continued pouring the drinks. All of us were automatically staring at Bib's face,

which was like a piece of brass— that calm, I mean, not that color. His hand was so steady that the drink rose right up to the rim of the glass without spilling a drop.

He placed the bottle on the floor beside his chair.

"Sure," he said. "Sure, I heard about it on the newscast, early this evening." He said it as if he were telling us the results of the fourth race at Hialeah.

I didn't like this at all. Bib shouldn't be acting like this. Not with his life practically at stake.

Bib began the deal. Our minds weren't on it and we played pretty sloppily for a while. We were still pretty quiet, too, but I knew before long someone would make a break.

Only it wasn't going to be me. I don't weaken easy.

It was Sam, as he showed a straight to beat Bib's three queens. "I still can't believe it—little Jerry Gait crashing out. Who'd've thought he had the nerve?"

"The guard got two bullets," Joie said, "right in the belly. That's what the paper says. Yeah, I guess two years up there in the jug changed Jerry plenty."

"Sure, it's changed him. Maybe because he's had plenty of time to think things over."

"You know, I've wondered myself what went wrong with that job! Eighty grand in ice—and where'd it go to? Jerry claims he hardly had a good look at it, before the cops arrived and nailed him."

"Yeah, but he had time to plant it. I'll bet he planted it."

"I don't know...."

It was Sam and Joie doing the chattering. Me, I kept still. I watched Bib Tucker light a cigarette, and I knew it wasn't the smoke that made his eyes narrow the way they did.

Joie said, "What you gonna do, Bib, just sit tight?"

"Yeah, Bib, what are you gonna do? Jerry swore he'd get you when he came out, and I guess now he wasn't kidding...."

Bib exhaled a slow, thin stream of smoke and said, "Deal the cards." There was something very quiet about the way he said it, but I noticed Joie and Sam didn't talk any more as they suddenly concentrated on their card-playing.

BIB had told me once that the reason he liked to have me up for these weekly games was not so much the fact that we had grown up on the East Side together; but rather because, as he put it, I am a very rare specimen of police reporter who knows when not to talk and not to ask questions.

So all I know about that Morison ice job is what Bib himself had told me, and that's little enough. Jerry Gait had cased the job and wanted Bib to come in with him. Bib had thought it over and said no—it looked too easy—a phony. So Jerry had pulled it solo and he bungled it, inasmuch as he had left his trademark and the police had him twenty-four hours later.

But apparently he had gotten away with the ice, for it never showed up again. Jerry had played plenty dumb about it, even going through a grilling. The evidence was pretty slim but even when he drew five years he played dumb. Later there were the usual rumors ... Jerry Gait had sworn he'd kill Bib ... something about a double-cross ... but I didn't believe any of that double-cross stuff, for I know Bib too well and a squarer guy never lived.

I was thinking all of this over, as I sat there playing my cards mechanically. But I couldn't piece any of it together.

Bib looked at his watch at last and remarked, "It's getting late." It wasn't late. It was barely eleven, but the whole evening was ruined anyway. Sam and Joie left, after tossing down another drink apiece. I decided to stay a while. Bib didn't seem to mind.

The room was stuffy and I strolled over to the window. I raised it to let a slight breeze come in. From here, four stories up, I could see out across a few flat roofs toward the river. Everything seemed unusually dark tonight. There wasn't any moon.

I turned back to the brightness of the room and Bib was just pouring the last of the scotch. He suggested we go down to the corner for a few drinks.

AS WE walked down the dim hall toward the stairs—there wasn't any elevator in the cheap joint—we heard someone coming up. Just as we reached there the fellows head appeared. Bib saw him first and jumped back plenty

quick.

But not quick enough. Jerry Gait saw Bib too, and reached for his pocket suddenly. Bib didn't even reach. I knew he'd left his rod back in the room. I never carried one.

Bib said "Damn," softly.

"Right back to the room," Jerry Gait said as he came the rest of the way up with a blue steel automatic in his hand. "Both of you."

We went back.

"Glad your friends left early," Jerry said tonelessly coming behind us. "Saved me a long wait."

Bib didn't answer as he unlocked the door again and turned on the light. Jerry pressed in behind us, slamming the door shut with his foot.

He looked at me and said, "Over there," as he motioned to the bed with his gun. I opened my mouth and he said, "Shut up and get over there." I shrugged, walked over to the bed and flopped down. Bib was standing in the middle of the room. He had Bib and me in a straight line now so he could watch us both. Bib said, "Hello, Jerry. You made good time. I didn't expect you for a couple of days yet."

"Or else you wouldn't've been here, eh?"

Bib shrugged, didn't answer.

I watched Jerry as he cased the room. I'd only seen him a couple of times before but I remembered him pretty well. Dark—small and wiry. But he hadn't had that thin mustache before. I saw his eyes and suddenly remembered them—large and brown in the thin, dark face. They were still as large and still as brown, but now there was a startling difference. And suddenly I knew what it was. Jerry Gait had killed a man, his first man. The guard, as he escaped. And now he knew it didn't matter how many more men he killed.

That was the difference I saw in his eyes, and all at once I began to sweat.

JERRY spoke at last, tonelessly. "Same old room. You don't change things much, do you, Bib?" I remembered then, that Jerry had roomed here in this dump for a while. He nodded toward a far corner. "Same old marble-topped stand. Same mirror, cracked across the top."

Bib nodded, with no expression on his face. Jerry's, gaze shifted to the opposite wall. "And that lousy thing. I always hated it."

I looked around to see what he meant, and saw a faded framed picture of a semi-nude. I started to smile, but looked at the gun in Jerry's hand and didn't feel like it.

He pointed with the gun down at the rug near the bed. "And there's that hole in the rug where I dropped the book of matches that time when the dicks came up. Remember, Bib?" Bib didn't say.

Jerry gave one more sweeping look about the room and laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah, it hasn't changed a bit. Same old dump, just as I remember it. I used to not like this place much, but it sure seems like home after the room I had up there for two years! It was pretty tough up there—Bib."

I was really beginning to sweat now. I didn't like the way Jerry was talking. I glanced at the table over against the wall. I knew Bib kept a gun in that drawer. Apparently Jerry knew it too, for when Bib inched in that direction he said, showing a row of gleaming white teeth, "No, don't try for the gun, Bib; you're not that foolish."

"All right, I'm not. Let's get this over with."

"Good idea. I came up here to kill you, Bib, and I can get that over with pretty quick. First I want to find out a couple things."

"I didn't double-cross you, Jerry. But you put me in an awful spot—a spot so you'd think so, whatever move I made! So I didn't make any."

I didn't know what Bib was talking about. Maybe Jerry did.

“Did you lift that ice from where I told you?”

“Yes, I got it all right. The next day.”

“I thought you did. So why didn’t you do the rest of it like I said? Eighty grand in ice—you could have got a quick fifty grand for it. Ten or fifteen of that would have sprung me in about a year.” He had it all figured, all right. “I was willing to serve a year up there, knowing the rest of that fifty grand would be waiting when I came out. But not five years. Not five years, Bib, and nothing but the old double-X waiting for me!”

“Listen, Jerry—”

“Why didn’t you spring me like we said? Just answer me it, that’s all.” The gun moved imperatively.

I saw Bib’s face kind of twist and I was praying he wouldn’t make any foolish move. I thought for a second he was going to, but he got a grip on himself and said pretty calmly:

“I’ve still got the ice, Jerry. I’ve got it right here. And now you can have it.”

JERRY was surprised, I could see it plain. He’d expected a double-cross—an alibi—anything but that. The gun lowered for a moment but darted up again. His eyes narrowed as he said, “You get ’em then. No tricks!”

“Okay.” Bib turned slowly, stepped over to the old-fashioned stand in the corner,

Right in this room! I remembered the time two years ago when detectives had searched this room. I could swear there were no diamonds here then.

Bib pulled the stand out. It was plenty heavy because of the thick marble top. The legs were of oak, large and square. One of ’em must have been hollow, though, for Bib bent down and fumbled around behind it.

“Come up slow!” Jerry snapped, watching him.

Bib did. He turned around carefully.

He was holding a black velvet jewel case. Without a word he handed it to Jerry.

Jerry motioned him over to the center of the room again before he opened it. I’d even forgotten the gun now, and was standing up on my feet when the lid of the case came open. I saw the ice perfectly.

A platinum-linked necklace. A score of perfectly matched, flawless Wesselton blue-white diamonds. They almost knocked my eyes out as they lay there against the black plush.

Jerry stared for a couple of long seconds. I think the sight was enough to make him forget the two years he’d served. He almost forgot Bib standing there. I think I’m the only one in that moment who still remembered Jerry was a killer.

Then he snapped the spring lid shut and thrust the case into his pocket. “Sure, Bib. Sure. The stuff looks all right to me. But they make awfully good imitations these days. I know you won’t mind if I check on these—just to be sure you didn’t make a switch.”

I heard Bib exclaim loudly, “*What?*”

A tight little suspicious smile was around Jerry Gait’s lips.

Then I heard the small sound outside that broke the stillness; it was a footstep on the stairs. There came others, slowly—coming down the hall outside.

Bib thought plenty fast just then. I didn’t realize until later that he must have known just what Jerry would do. “That must be Sam and Joie coming back,” Bib said so calmly that I almost believed him myself.

JERRY leaped toward the door—flattened himself against the wall, gun in hand.

“No,” said Bib, “the fire escape, Jerry!”

“Yeah!” said Jerry. “Forgot about that!” He backed to the open window, still keeping Bib covered.

“This time you’re lucky,” he snarled.

“I was gonna let you have it, regardless, but now I’ll just check on this ice first. If they’re okay maybe your luck’ll hold. If they’re not....”

One hand was on the sill. He turned his back for about one second as he sprang, expertly, sideways, through the window. At the same time Bib leaped toward him.

Then Bib’s feet seemed to get tangled up and he sprawled on the floor. Bib’s big and he’s sometimes clumsy, but never that clumsy; I didn’t see a thing there that he could have stumbled over. A good try, but Bib didn’t fool me at all. ...

In that same second I saw the sharp whiteness of Jerry Gait’s face against the black night sky. He seemed to hang there, his feet trodding nothingness. Then his startled face disappeared. I heard the frantic clawing of his nails against the wooden sill as they slipped off. I heard the little gurgling sound he gave that was half a scream, fading away. Then came the thud of his body in the cement alley four floors below.

NOT until then did I realize that the footsteps in the hall was only the guy next door coming home. I heard him fumbling around his door out there with a key....

Bib picked himself up slowly, wearily, from the floor. His face was white. He saw the horror in my eyes and he saw he hadn’t fooled me.

“All right,” he said wearily, “I didn’t try to stop him. I didn’t want to. I knew it had to be him or me.”

I still didn’t quite understand. As we went down the stairs and around to the alley Bib explained.

“Poor Jerry. He—he used to not be like we saw him tonight. Bumping that prison

guard’s made him plenty mean, a real killer. That’s the way it happens sometimes. You—you see this is the best thing that could have happened, don’t you?” Bib sounded like he was trying to convince himself, as well as me.

“Sure,” I said. “The best thing.”

“Poor Jerry, He was right, of course, about the room. Everything the same, just as he remembered it. Nothing changed at all. Except the fire escape. I remember a couple times when Jerry had to make a quick exit by it, when some dicks came up. How was he to know it got so rickety that the building inspector ordered it down just last week—and the owner of this dump’s been pretty slow about getting another one up.”

I didn’t look at the body lying there very still, but Bib said the neck was broken. I glimpsed the black velvet case, though, that had slid out of the pocket.

Bib didn’t touch it.

“What about the diamonds?” I said.

“Oh, Jerry had the right hunch about those. They’re phony. That’s why I had to think fast, and I had to let him go out that window. It was him or me. He would have got me sure, soon’s he had a test made of those phony rocks. He’d have sworn I pulled a switch.”

“But—”

“No. I didn’t. This is the same stuff he lifted from the Morison mansion. I always said that job looked too easy. Well, I thought of trying to get word through to him, up there, but how could I with every cop and guard watching him like a hawk, knowing those diamonds hadn’t been recovered? It would have made me an accomplice. Anyway you see now why I couldn’t peddle this stuff for the forty grand, as Jerry’d planned it. Come on—let’s phone the cops.”