DANGER ...WITH A HARD G

written by

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FADE IN:

INT. POLICE STATION - BASEMENT - PROPERTY ROOM - NIGHT

A police CLERK (female, late 20s, sturdy) in uniform stands behind an open-top Dutch door.

CLERK
(chipper despite the hour)
I can help who's next in line.

REVERSE ANGLE - HARRISON BENNETT

This is our hero, HARRISON BENNETT, late 30s, a good-looking gumshoe in the classic mold -- although just now he appears less-than-sheveled. He is the only one in line. He is the line. He steps forward.

BENNETT
(exhausted but polite)
Bennett. Harry.

CLERK
You won't mind if I ask to see some identification, I'm sure. It's precinct policy.

Bennett places an ID card on the door ledge. The clerk picks it up and looks it over with the diligence of the newly-hired.

CLERK (CONT'D)
Private investigator.
(beat)
"Harrison <u>Danger</u> Bennett?" Your middle name is literally "Danger"?

BENNETT
<u>Danger</u>. With a hard gee. It's a family name.

The clerk turns aside to find Bennett's revolver, which she then places on the ledge. His ID card is no longer in sight.

CLERK
No bullets?

BENNETT
Never use 'em.

CLERK
(dubious)
You pack cold heat?

BENNETT
I don't really want to shoot anyone. This way, I probably won't.

CLERK
(amused)
Sure. But what's it people say? "Better to need 'em and...." No, wait. "Better to have 'em and not need 'em than to need 'em and not have 'em"?

BENNETT
That's what people say. But what can I say? I prefer to live dangerously.

He pronounces the last word with a hard gee. The clerk looks askance at him, then ruins the catchphrase moment.

CLERK
So is it like "Baker"? Or... "Miller"? Your middle name, I mean. Has it been in your family a really long time?

BENNETT
You're asking if I have an ancestor who was a professional danger?

CLERK
I guess so. Someone who... danged?

BENNETT
(after a thoughtful pause)
I really couldn't say. But maybe I do.

Bennett tips his hat.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Have a good night, ma'am.

Slipping his revolver into the holster under his arm, Bennett walks out of the police station basement through a large door.

EXT. MIDTOWN STREET - NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett walks down the sidewalk of an empty street, passing under street lamps at regular intervals.

BENNETT (V.O.)
The misty face of my watch told me it was just shy of three a.m. Time for a hot cup of coffee, a slice of pie, and some sleep. I'd get the food at a diner, but I'd wait until I was home to grab the shut-eye. In the morning -- maybe the afternoon -- I'd tackle the paperwork for this most recent job well done.

INT. DOXIE'S DINER - MOMENTS LATER

A BELL on the door TINKLES, heralding the arrival of Bennett at his favorite all-night refuge. Bennett takes a seat at the counter away from the others present, placing his hat on the next stool.

BENNETT (V.O.)
Despite the unholy hour I wasn't alone at Doxie's. There were three other nighthawks -- two men and a woman -- but I made a point of noticing only that much about them. If a person's haunting an eatery at that time, they're not looking for company or attention. Besides, no one was paying me to pry into anyone else's personal life just then, so I minded no more than my own business.

DOXIE (wizened, weather-beaten, wearing a filthy apron) appears behind the counter with a cup of coffee for Bennett.

DOXIE
Whoo! Did ya get the number, Harry?

BENNETT
The number, Doxie?

DOXIE
Of the truck that fell on ya. You look like hell, Harry.

BENNETT
Just wrapped up a case. What's your excuse?

DOXIE
I'm ancient! Pie?

BENNETT
Please. Apple. Neat.

DOXIE
And how!

Doxie steps away. Bennett takes a pen from inside his coat, clicks it, and starts jotting notes on a paper napkin.

EXT. DOXIE'S DINER - LATER

The door BELL TINKLES again as Bennett steps out of the diner into the night once more.

BENNETT
(over his shoulder)
I'll be seeing you, Doxie.

DOXIE (O.S.)
Here's hopin'!

Bennett take a couple of steps, then pauses. Under a streetlamp, he looks over the notes he's made on the napkin.

ON THE NAPKIN

In Bennett's handwriting:

newspapers
barber
airplane
concussion
amnesia
identical twin
assassination attempt
uniforms
ducks
radio

BENNETT

grimaces, crumples the napkin, tosses it in a wire garbage pail on the curb. Then he starts walking uptown. Then he stops.

BENNETT
Damage.

Bennett turns around and starts walking downtown.

INT. POLICE STATION - PROPERTY ROOM - LATER

CLERK
(MORE)

CLERK (CONT'D)
(still cheerful)
Nice to see you again, Harrison Danger Bennett. I've been expecting you.

On the door ledge is Bennett's ID card. Bennett pockets it.

BENNETT
Good night again.

He turns to go, again, but:

CLERK
So why carry a heater at all?

Bennett stops, musters his strength, stands up a bit straighter, turns back.

BENNETT
The other guys, the guys who aren't the nice guys, they expect a private eye to be armed. If you're not, they figure something's up and they give you a harder time because of it. They frisk you a little longer. And a little rougher. So I carry a gun to save everybody some trouble.
(beat)
Now, if you're wearing a gun, the assumption is it's loaded. I've been relieved of my piece once or twice. The other guys didn't look in the cylinder. They just stashed my gun out of my reach.

CLERK
But... but those other guys will have guns. <u>And</u> bullets.

BENNETT
I count on it.

CLERK
And?

BENNETT
Well, as it happens I've got a disarming smile.

He tries to demonstrate, but all Bennett can manage is a yawn.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Now, if you'll excuse me, Sergeant, I'm going to get forty winks. And maybe a couple more for good luck.

Bennett finally leaves. The clerk starts humming Christmas tunes.

EXT. CITY STREET - OUTSIDE BENNETT'S OFFICE BUILDING - DAY

It's a bright, brisk winter mid-morning. People are hustling on the sidewalks. Some are even bustling. Many carry wrapped gifts, while they themselves are wrapped in overcoats, etc.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - HALLWAY OUTSIDE BENNETT'S OFFICES

On the frosted door glass is painted "HARRISON BENNETT & ASSOCIATES."

BENNETT (O.S.)
Betsy, how do you spell "perpetrator"?

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - MORNING

Bennett sits behind a desk, hunched over a typewriter, hunting and pecking letters as his secretary calls them out from the next room.

BETSY (O.S.)
P-U-R-P-A-T-R-A-T-E-R.

Bennett stops typing, looks carefully at the page, squints.

BENNETT
No, that's not right.

BETSY (O.S.)
You asked how I spell it. That's how I spell it.

Bennett rises from his seat, steps out from behind his desk, and walks from his private office to the outer office.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

BETSY (very early 20s, blond, plenty pretty) sits behind her own reception desk.

BENNETT
Puffin, remind me why I let you work here?

BETSY
Because I'm delightful. Because I'm adorable. And because I'm your niece.

BENNETT
Fair enough. What are we having for lunch today?

Betsy picks up an alarm clock from her desk to confirm that it's only 9:30 a.m -- when the TELEPHONE RINGS. Betsy lifts the handset to her head.

BETSY
(into the phone)
Harrison Bennett Investigations.
(beat)
Oh, good morning, Mr. Hammond.
What's that?
(coyly)
Oh, Mr. Hammond!

Bennett returns to his private office.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett enters, walks toward his desk, sits on the corner.

BETSY (O.S.)
Uncle Harry. Nathaniel's on the line for you.

BENNETT
(nonplussed)
<u>Nathaniel</u>?

BETSY
Mr. Hammond.

Bennett sighs and picks up the extension on his desk.

BENNETT
Nat.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
(beat)
Today? I suppose. Sure. Agnes' Deli? I'll see you there.

Bennett hangs up his phone and gets up from his desk to find Betsy in the doorway.

BETSY
Am I on my own for lunch?

BENNETT
I'm afraid so, kid. Nat wants my advice about something.

BETSY
Will Nat -- Mr. Hammond be coming by the office?

BENNETT
(mock-sternly)
No, young lady, he will <u>not</u> be. I will be meeting Mr. Hammond at the restaurant. And I will <u>not</u> be bringing him back here with me afterward. I'm afraid you will <u>not</u> have the pleasure of being distracted from your work by my friend, who is old enough to be your father.

Betsy pouts.

BENNETT
(off her reaction)
But I'll make it up to you tomorrow. We'll have two lunches. Okay, Puffin?

BETSY
Okay, Uncle Harry.

EXT. BENNETT'S OFFICE BUILDING - SIDEWALK - AFTERNOON

Bennett emerges from the building bundled up. He walks.

BENNETT (V.O.)
After several hours of typing and retyping, all of which would have taken a lesser man much less time, I stepped out to meet Nat.

Bennett crosses a street, tipping his hat to a driver who nearly runs him down.

BENNETT (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Betsy would lock up the office for an hour.

Bennett reaches into his coat pocket for his gloves... only to pull out his ID card. He considers it, deciding to put it where it belongs. He reaches into his coat for his wallet...

BENNETT (V.O.) (CONT'D)
When she and I had both returned, I was going to surprise her with an offer to close the office early and catch a double-feature --

Bennett stops -- talking and walking -- when he doesn't find his wallet where it should be.

BENNETT
Damage.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Approaching the outer door of his office suite, Bennett finds a SUITOR (late 20s, corn-fed and lanky with sleeves just too short) sniffing around. Bennett wrinkles his nose at the other man's cologne.

BENNETT
Can I help you?

SUITOR
(startled)
Ah... Liz? I mean... Liz. Liz Bennett. I'm looking for Liz Bennett.

BENNETT
(bemused)
Liz Bennett? No one here by that name.

The suitor is confused, and he looks from Bennett to the door... and back. Then:

SUITOR
Are... are you Harrison Bennett?

BENNETT
I am.

SUITOR
But you don't know Liz?

BENNETT
Is she a friend of yours?

SUITOR
Sort of. Not yet.
(off Bennett's side-eye)
I... I met her recently. I was hoping to ask her to lunch.

BENNETT
(softening)
Liz Bennett <u>might</u> be my niece, Betsy. Betsy Bennett.

Bennett finds his keys and selects the one he needs.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
I presume, because you're here, that she gave you this address, since the business is listed in the phone book under my name, not hers. And if she did give you this address, then one of two things is true: Either she hoped that you'd turn up and ask her to lunch sometime, or she hoped you'd turn up when I could size you up.

Bennett opens the outer door and motions for the suitor to enter first. He does; Bennett follows.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Well, things being what they are, I've taken your inventory, and you don't seem too bad. Your shoes could use a shine, but that's easy to fix.

The suitor looks down at his shoes. Bennett points to an invisible blemish on one.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Now, I don't know a lot about women, but I can tell you this much: They do like to be surprised, but they also like a man with a plan.

Leaving the suitor behind, Bennett steps into his private office.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

BENNETT (CONT'D)
(calling out of the room)
So rather than just showing up at her place of employment on a Monday at one-fifteen to ask if she might like to join you for lunch, call her on a Tuesday to ask about Thursday. Have a place in mind. Not too pricey, but not too cheap.

Bennett picks up his wallet from his desk and pockets it, then returns to the outer office.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The suitor hasn't moved.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
And if she agrees to have lunch with you, when you come to pick her up, bring two chocolate sinkers.

SUITOR
Does... does Liz, or Betsy, like doughnuts?

Bennett takes a business card from a tray on Betsy's desk.

BENNETT
Those'll be for me.

Bennett hands his card to the suitor.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
The office number's on there. Don't call between ten and eleven. That's when we listen to "The Lone Ranger."

INT. AGNES' DELI - AFTERNOON

The place is crowded and full of activity. The front door opens to admit NAT HAMMOND (late 30s, fair-haired, intelligent). Nat looks around until he spies a man hiding behind a tall menu. Nat slides into the booth across from that man.

NAT
Sorry I'm late, Harry.

Bennett lowers the menu.

BENNETT
Don’t give it a second thought. But I ordered for you.

NAT
Roast beef on rye?

BENNETT
I don’t remember.

Bennett takes a pickle from a plate.

BENNETT (CONT’D)
What else can I do for you, Nat?

Nat takes a quick look around, then:

NAT
A pal of mine is in a bit of a jam, Harry.

BENNETT
Another writer?

NAT
(distracted)
What’s that? Oh, sure. Another writer.

BENNETT
And is this jam your pal’s in real or on the page?

NAT
It’s real. I mean, it’s for a story. But my buddy’s problem is that his character doesn’t know what to do. That is, he doesn’t know what to have his character do.

BENNETT
Right. I follow.

NAT
So my buddy’s being blackmailed.

BENNETT
His character is.

NAT
Right.

BENNETT
Listen. Before we get too confused, why don't we give this character a name? Why don't you, I mean. You're good with character names.

NAT
All right. That's a good idea. So we don't get confused. Let's call him... "Mickey."

BENNETT
Is that his real name?

NAT
What do you mean?

BENNETT
Is that the name your buddy, the other writer, gave his character? Or is that just the name you're giving your buddy's character?

NAT
No, that's the name my buddy gave him. Mikey.

BENNETT
Mickey.

NAT
Mickey, yes.

BENNETT
And can we call your buddy "Buddy"?

NAT
Sure.

The waiter brings two plates and sets them on the table. The waiter then hands Harry a paper bag, which Harry takes and puts aside on the table. The men eat but continue to talk:

BENNETT
Okay, so Buddy's Mickey is being blackmailed. And Buddy doesn't know how to have Mickey handle that.

NAT
Right.

BENNETT
Well, I'll tell you what I know about blackmail, Nat. Generally speaking, there are only two effective ways to deal with a blackmailer. Neither is ideal, but one way is definitely uglier than the other.

NAT
(engrossed but still distracted)
Two ways.

BENNETT
Two effective ways. But before we get to those, let define our terms. Party A knows something about Party B that Party B does not want generally known. Put another way, Party B is trying to keep a secret, but Party A threatens to tell all. Unless Party B pays up to keep Party A quiet. The problem, at least for Party B, is that even if he pays up, there's no guarantee that Party A won't take the cabbage and still spill the beans. Information isn't something you can get rid of. Once you know something about somebody, you'll know it as long as you live.

NAT
(catching on)
And that's why --

BENNETT
And that's why I said there are two <u>effective</u> ways to deal with a blackmailer. Because paying isn't effective.

NAT
What is?

BENNETT
Murder. Or cutting the legs off a blackmailer only in a manner of speaking: by going public with one's own compromising information. Or as public as one needs.

Bennett takes a long drink. Nat waits as patiently as he can.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Say I discover that you stole the plot of your bestselling novel from a story that ran in some obscure amateur sleuth rag. If that got out, you'd be ruined. So I tell you what I know and demand ten large to keep quiet. You pay and then I tell you that was just for the first year. Every time you pay what I ask, I'm going to figure you can afford to pay more, so I'm going to ask for more.

NAT
So paying you is a mug's game.

BENNETT
Exactly. But to end it, you have to eliminate either the carrot or the stick.

NAT
Which is the carrot, and which is the stick?

BENNETT
I'm not sure. <u>You're</u> the writer.

NAT
I understand. Listen, I'm not feeling so hot all of a sudden. I'm gonna head home by way of the pharmacy. Sorry to drag you out and run like this. Let's catch up soon, okay?

Before Bennett can protest or offer to escort his friend home, Nat rises and leaves. Bennett watches Nat go, pops a last bite of pickle in his mouth, then exits the booth himself. His brown bag remains on the table.

EXT. AGNES' DELI - MOMENTS LATER

It's snowing lightly now. Bennett comes out of the restaurant, hands in his coat pockets. He walks just a few steps and the CAMERA PANS to follow him, until he's in front of the next establishment -- a coffee shop/jazz club called *Café & Sound* -- when Bennett stops, shakes his head, then goes back whence he just came.

We remain for half a minute in front of the coffee shop, and beyond its large glass façade we can see in profile Nat Hammond sitting at a table. ANOTHER MAN -- a serious-looking man -- sits facing Nat.

Bennett finally comes back INTO FRAME, now clutching his paper bag, and walks right past the café and off.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - OUTSIDE BENNETT'S OFFICES - LATER

Bennett approaches the door to his office suite and hears voices inside. He pauses to listen, then opens the door and enters.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett enters and finds Betsy conversing with another woman, SHARON FIELDING (early 30s, toothsome, smartly dressed).

BETSY
Uncle Harry, this is Ms. --

SHARON
Mrs.

BETSY
Mrs. Sharon Fielding. She's interested in retaining your services.

BENNETT
Is that so?

Bennett gestures toward his private office, and Sharon heads in. Then Bennett hands the paper bag to Betsy.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Put this in the safe, please?

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Sharon is seated in a client chair. Bennett enters and doffs his coat and fedora, hanging them on a rack. Eventually he sits behind his desk.

BENNETT
How might I be of service?

SHARON
I'm looking for my brother.
(MORE)

SHARON (CONT'D)
I haven't seen or heard from him in several years. A friend wrote me recently to say that my brother might be here, in the city.

BENNETT
And why are you looking for your brother now? And why haven't you seen him in several years? Answer those in any order you like.

SHARON
He moved away from the family. We never knew why. He just up and left without telling anyone where he was going. I figured that if he could do that, he must have his reasons, and if he needed to leave us behind I wouldn't try to stop him. When he was ready to come back, maybe he would.

BENNETT
But he hasn't. And you've changed your mind about waiting.

SHARON
My brother and I have been left a substantial amount of money by a relative. But the condition is that we both receive our bequests or neither of us does.

BENNETT
So you're not here to find your brother because you miss him. You're looking for your brother because without him you'll miss out on an inheritance. Without him your windfall will be gone with the wind.

SHARON
I do miss my brother, Mr. Bennett. I miss him dearly. He stands to inherit as much as I do. Exactly as much. If he wants to disappear again after our relative's estate is settled, I'll respect his wishes. I'll try to talk him out of it, of course. I'll try to convince him to come back home, or at least to stay in touch.
(MORE)

SHARON (CONT'D)
But if he insists on being on his own again --

Noticing Sharon tearing up, Bennett offers her a handkerchief. While she composes herself:

BENNETT
My standard terms of employment include a daily rate, allowances, incidentals, and snacks. If that sounds acceptable to you, Mrs. Fielding, I will try to locate your brother. You wouldn't happen to have a photograph of him, would you?

SHARON
I brought the most recent picture the family has. It's several years old, of course.

Sharon produces and hands over a photograph.

INSERT - PHOTO

of a younger Nat Hammond.

BENNETT (O.S.)
(revealing nothing)
Hm.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. NAT HAMMOND'S BUNGALOW - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Nat sits in an armchair, gathering wool, looking worse for the wear.

BENNETT (O.S.)
Mind if I pour us a couple?

Bennett prepares two drinks at a sideboard, then hands Nat one tumbler and the photo he borrowed from Sharon.

NAT
(perking up)
Where'd you get <u>this?</u>

BENNETT
So that is you. A bird claiming to be your sister came by today. She hired me to find you.

NAT
(sighing)
Sharon?

BENNETT
You know her too.

NAT
Technically, Sharon's not my sister. She's my cousin. But we were raised like siblings by her parents, who took me in after mine were.... Well, my aunt and uncle took me in.

BENNETT
Well, then, your cousin is in town. She says you've got some money coming to you. To you both, as long as you both collect.

NAT
Is that what she said? An inheritance? Did she say who bought the farm?

BENNETT
Come to think of it, she didn't. A relative is all she volunteered.

NAT
Did Sharon tell you where she's staying?

BENNETT
She didn't mention that, either. She did mention having a friend in the city, but that was a blind item as well.

NAT
That's okay, Harry. I have an idea who that friend might be.

BENNETT
So what's the play, Nat?

NAT
What do you mean?

BENNETT
What I mean is this: I was hired to find you. I already knew where you are.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
We're friends, so I came to you before I went back to your cousin. If you say so, I'll tell her I can't help her. But that doesn't mean some other private eye won't. It just might take him a bit longer.

NAT
(nodding)
Let me sleep on it, Harry? I'll call you tomorrow one way or the other.

BENNETT
That's fine, Nat. And if you want to be sure to get me in the office, call between ten and eleven.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - NEXT MORNING

Bennett arrives to work; Betsy is already at her desk.

BETSY
There's a lady here to see you.

BENNETT
It doesn't rain but it pours, Betsy.

BETSY
Isn't it snowing, Uncle Harry?

BENNETT
Where is she, Puffin?

BETSY
In your office.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett enters to find a woman sitting in his chair: VICTORIA (early 30s, dark-haired, olive complexion, hazel eyes). Bennett grimaces.

BENNETT
(calling out of the room)
This is no lady, Betsy.

VICTORIA
(calling out likewise)
Are you going to let him talk about me that way, Betsy?

BETSY (O.S.)
Play nice, you two.

BENNETT
Hello, Victoria.

VICTORIA
Hello, Harry. You're looking well.

BENNETT
Well what?

VICTORIA
No, that's it. Just well.

BENNETT
I'll take that as a compliment.

VICTORIA
I meant it as one. How's business?

BENNETT
Intriguing. I was hired yesterday to find one Nathaniel Hammond.

VICTORIA
Just one? And how is Nat?

BENNETT
I'm not sure. He's either being blackmailed or he isn't.

VICTORIA
That's unfortunate. Or it isn't.
(beat)
I read his last book. I enjoyed it. When you speak to him next, tell him I thought the name "Joyce Hobson" was a groaner.

BENNETT
If I remember, sure.
(beat)
Is there anything else I can do for you, Vic?

VICTORIA
There is, Harry. I might be getting married again. I wanted to tell you in person.

BENNETT
I appreciate that. Or I might not.

VICTORIA
I also might want you to look into my fiancé-to-be's past, if we do indeed decide to tie the knot.

BENNETT
You don't trust him? Why would you even think of marrying him, then?

VICTORIA
It's not that I don't trust him, Harry. It's that being cautious is an occupational hazard -- one I picked up from your occupation.

BENNETT
I understand. I'm sorry about that. I really am.

VICTORIA
It's all right. But you will let me know if he has any skeletons up his sleeve, won't you?

BENNETT
If you ask me to, doll, I will. Of course.

BENNETT
Thank you, Harry.

Victoria stands to leave; Bennett walks her out of his office.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

VICTORIA
Betsy, I would be delighted if you'd join me for a cocktail this evening.

BENNETT
(half-scandalized)
Hey, now. My secretary is off-limits.

VICTORIA
I'm not asking your secretary. I'm asking my niece.

BENNETT
She's my niece.

VICTORIA
Harry, we agreed to joint custody of Betsy. It's in the settlement papers. Look it up if you don't believe me.

BENNETT
I just might.

Victoria pecks Bennett on the cheek.

VICTORIA
Great. And while you're doing that, Betsy and I will be getting a drink.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - LATER

Bennett and Betsy are sitting in chairs near the Philco radio on a side shelf.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
"The Lone Ranger" has been brought to you by General Mills. The program, carried by the National Broadcasting Company, originated in the studios of WXYZ in Detroit, and featured Brace Beemer as the Lone Ranger, and John Todd as Tonto. Your announcer was Fred Foy.

Bennett turns off the radio.

BENNETT
That's odd.

BETSY
It wasn't their best adventure, but I enjoyed it.

BENNETT
Not the radio, Puffin. The telephone.

BETSY
The telephone didn't ring.

BENNETT
That's what's odd. I was expecting Mr. Hammond to call. Do me a favor? Call him and then put him through inside?

Betsy goes to her desk phone.

BETSY
Sure, Uncle Harry.

Betsy dials, listens, then hangs up the handset. She shakes her head at her uncle.

BENNETT
Betsy, what's on my calendar for today?

BETSY
What calendar?

BENNETT
Don't you keep a calendar for me? Of my appointments?

BETSY
What appointments?

BENNETT
Grab your coat, kid. We're going out.

EXT. NAT HAMMOND'S BUNGALOW - FRONT DOOR - AFTERNOON

Bennett and Betsy are looking around and into windows. Snow blankets the ground.

BETSY
(re: the front door)
You gonna break it down?

BENNETT
I could. Or I could open it like a civilized person who doesn't want to have to pay for a new door jamb.

Bennett produces a set of three keys on a ring.

BETSY
You have keys to Mr. Hammond's house?

BENNETT
I do, Puffin. I water his plants when he goes out of town.

BETSY
You think he's out of town now?

BENNETT
Maybe he is. But he didn't ask to me water his plants. So you can understand why I'm a bit concerned.

Bennett unlocks and opens the front door, peers inside.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Hang back for a minute. I'll call you if the coast is clear.

Bennett palms his pistol and follows it into the house.

INT. NAT HAMMOND'S BUNGALOW - CONTINUOUS

Bennett looks around. The coast appears clear.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
(calling back)
Come on in, Puffin.

Betsy joins him inside.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Close the door.

Betsy does.

BETSY
Maybe he's just at work.

BENNETT
Nat doesn't go anywhere to work.

BETSY
Maybe he's... well, he could be anywhere.

BENNETT
That's a fact. He could be anywhere. But I suspect he's somewhere specific.

At a desk, Bennett executes the classic detective maneuver: rubbing the tip of a pencil on the top sheet of a pad he finds near a telephone. Then he replaces the pad and pencil.

Bennett steps out of the room. Betsy steps over to the desk to look at the pad, which reveals nothing at all.

EXT. NAT HAMMOND'S BUNGALOW - CONTINUOUS

Bennett steps outside.

BENNETT (V.O.)
I looked in each room of the one-story bungalow before stepping out the front door again. Nothing inside looked amiss, and nothing outside looked amiss either. It had been snowing all morning, so either my friend hadn't come home the night before or the snow had covered his exit tracks.

INT. BENNETT'S CAR (MOVING) - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett drives, deep in thought. He is alone.

BENNETT (V.O.)
Driving back out of the Valley, I went over in my head what I knew: Several people wanted Nathaniel Hammond's attention. One was a man I didn't know anything about but didn't have a good feeling about. Another was his cousin, who thought of herself as his sister, and who needed to bring him back to the family homestead in order to collect an inheritance left to them jointly but not severally. And then of course there was me, who didn't want anything from my friend other than to know he was safe and sound, and whether I could tell his cousin that I knew him.
(beat)
Nat was probably fine, I told myself as the freeway on-ramp came into view, but I couldn't help thinking that I was overlooking something all the same.

Bennett reaches into his jacket to check for his piece.

BENNETT
Dam --

BENNETT (V.O.)
No, I'd remembered to take my gun...

BENNETT
Damage!

Bennett makes an abrupt U-turn.

INT. NAT HAMMOND'S BUNGALOW - BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett enters again, finds Betsy, none the wiser.

BETSY
Talking to Mr. Hammond's neighbors?

BENNETT
I tried. Couldn't find any.

Betsy offers Bennett a sheet of paper.

BETSY
Did you see this?

Bennett takes the paper, reads what's on it, then pockets it.

BENNETT
I see it now.
(beat)
You hungry?

BETSY
A little.

BENNETT
Wanna get lunch?

BETSY
There are sandwiches in the safe at the office.

BENNETT
Still? We should probably throw those out.

EXT. NAT HAMMOND'S BUNGALOW - FRONT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

Bennett closes and locks the front door again.

BETSY
That reminds me of a riddle. Do you like riddles?

BENNETT
It depends.

BETSY
Well, you'll like this one: Why does no one starve in the desert?

BENNETT
Why?

BETSY
Because of all the sand which is there!

They walk to Bennett's car.

BENNETT
That's pretty funny, Puffin, but that's a joke. Here's a riddle: A man is found dead in the desert, face down, wearing a backpack. How did he die?

BETSY
Well, I know he didn't starve.

EXT. HOTEL CHANDLER - EVENING

It's snowing harder now and getting dark.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - LOBBY

The spacious foyer of the hotel is warm and inviting. The people walking about seem happy to be there, rather than outside.

Bennett hails a BELLHOP (young and gawky but wearing a crisp uniform) and hands him a tip he's about to earn.

BENNETT
I'm looking for a Benny Smith. He'd have arrived earlier today.

The bellhop nods, then steps away. Bennett finds an overstuffed armchair in the lobby. He drops into it and lowers the brim of his fedora. Moments later, the bellhop sidles up to him.

BELLHOP
Sorry. Got someone with the last name Bennett, initials H.D., but no Benny Smith. Want me to check another name?

BENNETT
Not necessary. My guy must be at an inferior inn.

The bellhop leaves and Bennett gets out of his chair to relocate to the hotel bar, off the lobby.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - BAR - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett bellies up to the bar and places a bill on the bar top, along with the photo of Nat. The BARTENDER (old, bald with a laurel of hardy white hair) appears, takes the money, glances at the photo, and shakes his head.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - LOBBY - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett crosses the room to enter one of the revolving doors.

EXT. HOTEL CHANDLER - CONTINUOUS

From the outside, we watch Bennett coming around in the enclosure, roll his eyes, and continue all the way around.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Bennett steps out of the enclosure back into the lobby.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - BAR - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett returns to the bar, where the bartender returns Bennett’s photo of Nat.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - LOBBY - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett is once more headed for the doors when he notices someone who looks familiar -- the SERIOUS MAN he saw with Nat the day before. Bennett watches the Serious Man make a beeline for the elevators.

Bennett begins to follow the Serious Man when something else catches his eye -- stepping out of an elevator into the lobby is Victoria, wearing the same smart outfit as that morning. Bennett looks away from his ex-wife to find the Serious Man in an elevator cab as its doors close.

Then Bennett looks away from the Serious Man to find Victoria again... but now she’s out of sight.

Bennett heads to the hotel bar for a third time.

As he crosses the lobby, Bennett notices Betsy entering the hotel.

Bennett lowers his head and slips behind a tall potted plant. He looks at his watch, then looks up again to find that now his niece is nowhere to be seen.

EAKLEY
Harrison Bennett?

Bennett, behind the plant, is startled. Someone has not just discovered him there... but recognized him? Bennett steps out from behind the plant, gingerly. The stranger (bookish, pale, gaunt, with a white mustache and beard) doesn't seem to find it strange that Bennett is standing behind a tall potted plant. Not even a bit.

EAKLEY (CONT'D)
Bennett, it's Roger Eakley! Funny running into you like this!

Bennett extricates himself, from the plant and from he conversation he doesn't have time for just then.

BENNETT
(distracted)
Is it? Anyway, I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. I need to see a man about leading a horse to water.

INT. RESTAURANT - EVENING

Bennett sits at a booth, where a waitress brings him dish after dish as he eats and collects his thoughts.

BENNETT (V.O.)
Over dinner, I tallied up the people I was acquainted with at the Hotel Chandler around the block and came up with four, possibly five.
(beat)
Besides my niece and my ex-wife, there was the man I'd now seen twice in two days, and both times in the same place as my friend Nat Hammond -- and then there was Nat himself, the reason I'd gone to the Chandler in the first place.
(MORE)

BENNETT (V.O.) (CONT'D)
(beat)
I'd given the bellhop the name "Benny Smith" because "Smith" is not only the most common surname in the country, it's also the most common fake name given by those who want to stay at a hotel without being found there. The bellhop would know this, I knew, and he wouldn't bother searching the register for Smiths. He'd look for "Benny," a much less common name... and he came back to report the presence of a Bennett, initials H.D.
(beat)
I'm H.D. Bennett. And since I wasn't staying at the hotel, I understood that the address I'd found at Nat's home was where I'd find Nat, who knew I'd be looking for him, and who didn't want to be found by anyone but me.

Bennett wipes his mouth with a napkin, then gets out of the booth.

INT. RESTAURANT - BACK - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett finds the payphone, to make a call.

BENNETT (V.O.)
So then all I had to do was let Nat know that I knew where he was, even if I didn't yet know why.

BENNETT
(on the phone)
Put me through to the room of H.D. Bennett, please.

After a moment:

NAT (O.S.)
Yes?

BENNETT
Is Joyce Hobson available?

NAT (O.S.)
I'm afraid someone's made the wrong connection.

The call ends with a CLICK. Bennett hangs up.

INT. RESTAURANT - BOOTH - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett drinks a cup of coffee. A busboy clears the many dishes accumulated at the table.

BUSBOY
(sotto voce)
Tricky out tonight. Sidewalks are crowded. Might be better to go out the back.

The busboy leaves Bennett to take a final slow drink from his cup before getting out of the booth.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

A door at the rear of the restaurant opens and Bennett steps into the alley behind. Bennett looks around but sees no one. Then a voice speaks from the shadows:

SHADOW VOICE
Don’t look. Just listen. Your friend at the hotel has a message for you: Go where you’re safe.

BENNETT
I understand. One question: How did you know you’d find me here?

SHADOW VOICE
Your friend said to try the nearest place where the soup is good.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Bennett walks briskly toward his office building.

BENNETT (V.O.)
“Go where you’re safe.” Clever. I confess that it had taken me a few minutes to tease out the meaning of the message. Why would Nat be warning me to get myself out of harm’s way? And in what harm’s way could I have been that he’d have known of?

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - HALLWAY

Bennett walks briskly down the corridor.

BENNETT (V.O.)
But I wasn't meant to take the warning literally, I soon realized. And in fact it wasn't a warning at all. It was a suggestion that I should go where my safe was. My office, in other words. Because there was something in my safe that I needed to see.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - OUTSIDE BENNETT'S OFFICES

Bennett approaches the outer door to his office suite, taking out his keys in anticipation.

BENNETT (V.O.)
Very clever, Puffin, I thought... because Nat hadn't sent me the message, Betsy had. She'd seen me at the Chandler, though I hadn't seen her see me.
(beat)
And better than anyone else in the world, my niece knows how much I love soup.

Bennett arrives at the outer door to discover that it is ajar. He pockets his keys and withdraws his revolver. Bennett pushes the door fully open...

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Sharon Fielding is here.

SHARON
Don't shoot!

Bennett enters and lowers his gun.

BENNETT
Mrs. Fielding. To what do I owe this entirely unexpected intrusion?

SHARON
I apologize, Mr. Bennett. The door was unlocked.

Bennett furrows his brow but does not contradict her.

BENNETT
Well, you've found me, anyway. Was there something you wanted to discuss?

SHARON
Actually, I came back looking for something I might have dropped. A handkerchief.

BENNETT
My handkerchief, you mean? I haven't seen it since you left here yesterday. I was just going to add the cost to your final bill.

SHARON
Oh, no. A handkerchief of my own. But I must have lost it somewhere else.

Something occurs to Bennett, and it starts to show on his face.

BENNETT
Just a moment, Mrs. Fielding.

He walks to the floor safe in the corner, dials the combination lock, and opens the heavy door, standing so that Sharon Fielding can not see inside.

INSERT - SAFE INTERIOR

On a shelf at eye level is a lady's handkerchief. In one corner are stitched the letters "SH." Bennett's hand reaches in and takes hold of it.

BACK TO SCENE

Bennett removes the handkerchief from the safe and hands it to Sharon Fielding, closing the safe door nimbly with his foot.

BENNETT
This must be yours.

SHARON
Yes. Thank you! I'm so sorry to have bothered you so late. I know it could have waited until tomorrow, but I was still in the neighborhood.

BENNETT
Don’t give it another thought. Now, since you’re here, and I’m also here, would you like an update on the progress of your case?

SHARON
Certainly.

BENNETT
Well, I haven’t found your brother yet.

SHARON
No?

BENNETT
Not yet. But I’ve got a solid lead, I think. I’ll just need another day to follow it up. Maybe two days. Do you have that kind of time? And money?

SHARON
Yes. But of course the sooner, the better.

BENNETT
Of course. That’s almost always how it is. I’ll tell you what: My solid lead is actually two leads. Normally, I wouldn’t do this, but you’re looking for family. I’ve got two addresses to check on. Why don’t I give you one and take the other. We can cover twice as much ground in half the time that way. What do you say?

SHARON
I like that idea.

BENNETT
I thought you might.

Bennett finds a slip of paper and a pen on Betsy’s desk, jots an address onto the page for Sharon Fielding, hands it to her.

BENNETT (CONT’D)
Here’s yours.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
I recommend popping by in the daytime just in case your brother doesn't live there, and whoever does isn't one for visitors. And if you change your mind about going on your own, just give me a call tomorrow and I'll go myself. Unless I've already found your brother, I mean.

SHARON
All right. Thanks very much, Mr. Bennett. I'll be in touch either way.

BENNETT
I'm sure. Good luck. And good night.

SHARON
Good night. Will you be working late?

BENNETT
(sighing)
Probably. Paperwork. It never seems to do itself.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - LATER

Bennett sits behind his desk, feet up, drink in his hand. He is decidedly not doing paperwork.

BENNETT (V.O.)
There was no second lead to follow. There was no first lead to follow, for that matter. I knew who Sharon Fielding's brother was, and I knew where my friend Nat Hammond was. And they were still one and the same.

EXT. SUBURBAN ROAD - NIGHT

Bennett's car pulls around a corner and finds a place to park. The headlights go dark.

BENNETT (V.O.)
My big idea was to send Sharon Fielding to a place where I could observe her if she took the bait and some initiative. I've made a career of not making a habit of trusting every client, and I'd started to get a suspicious feeling about this one. It didn't help that Nat himself, her own brother, or cousin, seemed not to want to be found by her.

INT. BENNETT'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Bennett slides down in the driver's seat, watching a house across the street. All he sees is snow falling.

BENNETT (V.O.)
The address I gave Sharon Fielding was the home of a cop who owed me a favor. If she knocked on his front door, he'd answer and tell her she'd gotten a bum address. If she tried anything funny at the house, on the other hand, he'd probably have to arrest --

Bennett's thoughts are interrupted abruptly by the shattering of his window and a large, gloved hand reaching in to open the car door. That same hand and its partner drag Bennett out of his car and throw him unceremoniously into the trunk of another car parked on the same road. The trunk is slammed shut.

CUT TO BLACK

BENNETT
(muffled)
Damage.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - GRAVEL LOT - NIGHT

The trunk of the car pops open and a roughed-up Bennett squints as the thuggish hands grab him and pull him brusquely out of the enclosed space.

There are two THUGS, each bigger and thuglier than the other.

BENNETT
Nice night for a joyride. Next time, can I drive?

The thugs don't respond, but lead Bennett between them toward the warehouse. Bennett looks around as they walk. When they reach the nondescript entrance to the nondescript warehouse, one thug opens the door; the other pushes Bennett inside. They don't follow, and the door closes behind Bennett.

INT. WAREHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

An empty room, dimly lit. A wooden chair.

SERIOUS MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Sit.

Bennett sits.

SERIOUS MAN'S VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Harrison... Danger Bennett.

He pronounces it wrong.

SERIOUS MAN'S VOICE (O.S) (CONT'D)
(amused)
You don't say.

BENNETT
I don't. It's <u>Danger.</u> With a hard gee. It's a family name.

SERIOUS MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
In any event, Mr. Bennett, you're probably wondering why I had you dragged out here tonight.

BENNETT
Among other things. But why don't we start with a proper introduction? You know my name. What's yours?

The Serious Man -- STAFFORD LOHNES (50s, stocky, dressed mildly flamboyantly) -- steps into view.

LOHNES
Stafford Lohnes. Agent.

BENNETT
(dubious)
<u>Agent</u> Stafford Lohnes. Are the two apes outside agents as well?

LOHNES
Associates.

BENNETT
And what's <u>your</u> association with Nat Hammond?

LOHNES
So you do know why I brought you out here tonight.

BENNETT
No, not yet. But I know that I've seen you more than once in the orbit of a man I've been keeping an eye on.

LOHNES
It's very interesting that you should say that, Mr. Bennett, because I could say the very same of you.

BENNETT
So what's your connection to Hammond?

LOHNES
What is <u>yours</u>?

BENNETT
(sighing)
Listen, we could do this all night, Lohnes. But why don't we move on to the next point of order. I assume your intention was to tell me to stay away from Hammond.

LOHNES
Just so.

BENNETT
And if I don't agree to that?

LOHNES
Well, Mr. Bennett, there's a reason I didn't just call you and ask you politely. That is, there's a reason why we're here, quite far from where you were sitting comfortably in your automobile, for whatever reason you were sitting in your automobile on a dark suburban road on a snowy winter night. On a stakeout, perhaps? It's really of no moment.
(MORE)

LOHNES (CONT'D)
What's important is that you're here, now, without your car, and nowhere near Hammond.

BENNETT
Do you just want the guy to get a good night's sleep? Is that it?

But Lohnes is walking away from him. Bennett remains seated... and then Lohnes returns to Bennett's chair and extends his hand. Bennett's revolver is in it, turned around. Lohnes is returning it.

LOHNES
I have no need for this, Mr. Bennett. I hope you make it home safely, eventually. And I hope never to see you again.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT ROAD - LATER

It's the middle of the night when Bennett crests a hill in this desolate area of the city and spies the first payphone booth he's seen in a while. He makes a beeline for it, then drops a coin into the slot.

BENNETT
Hotel Chandler. Front desk.
(beat)
H.D. Bennett, please. I'll hold.
(beat)
No, that's all right. Thanks.

Bennett hangs up the phone and massages his neck.

EXT. SUBURBAN ROAD - DAWN

As the sun rises, Bennett rounds the corner on foot. He walks to the spot where he'd left his car. His car is not there. There is broken glass on the street, though, he sees. He looks at his watch, then walks across the street toward a specific house -- his cop friend's house.

EXT. JIM CONLEY'S HOUSE - FRONT - CONTINUOUS

Bennett looks at his watch again, then walks around to the back of the house.

EXT. JIM CONLEY'S HOUSE - REAR - CONTINUOUS

He looks in windows, then tries one. It's locked. So is a second window.

EXT. JIM CONLEY'S HOUSE - FRONT - CONTINUOUS

Bennett comes around front again and finds a pair of uniformed POLICE OFFICERS (one stringy and sallow, one pudgy and ruddy) waiting for him.

BENNETT
(optimistic)
Officers, allow me to explain.

P.O. BECK
Of course we will. Down at the station.

BENNETT
That won't be necessary. If you'll just take a look at my identification.

Bennett reaches into his coat for his wallet, which of course isn't there. Bennett pats himself down, and in the process gives the officers a glimpse at the iron under his arm. He notices that they notice.

BENNETT
Don't worry. It isn't loaded.

P.O. FIRTH
Sure it isn't.

BENNETT
Do me a favor and take a look?

Officer Beck takes Bennett's gun and opens the cylinder.

P.O. BECK
Whaddaya know? It's not loaded.

P.O. FIRTH
Whaddaya know.
(to Bennett)
Still have to run you in, though.

BENNETT
(resigned)
I figured. Either of you gentlemen know Jim Conley?

P.O. BECK
What if we do?

BENNETT
That's his house.

P.O. BECK
And if we don't?

BENNETT
Still his house.

P.O. FIRTH
That you were trying to break into?

BENNETT
That I wasn't. Conley's a friend. I was supposed to meet him at home tonight. Last night.
(beat)
You mind if I ask what brought you to this particular block of the suburbs on a quiet snowy morning at just the moment when I looked the most felonious?

P.O. BECK
Precinct got a call. Suspicious individual.

BENNETT
Caller give a name?

P.O. FIRTH
Anonymous tip. Any more questions before we get going?

BENNETT
Just one. You guys know where my automobile is?

The policemen start leading Bennett toward their squad car -- then into the backseat of it.

P.O. BECK
Funny thing. Another anonymous tip came in about an hour earlier. Suspicious vehicle with a broken window. Possibly abandoned.
(beat)
Watch your head.

INT. POLICE STATION - OUTSIDE A HOLDING CELL - MORNING

A middle-aged uniformed flatfoot walks over, consults a clipboard.

FLATFOOT
Harrison Bennett?

In the cell, Bennett stands up from the bench, walks to the bars.

BENNETT
Still here.

FLATFOOT
You decide who you want to call?

BENNETT
That depends. Have you been able to reach Detective Conley?

FLATFOOT
Not yet.

BENNETT
Then I'd like to call my lawyer.

FLATFOOT
Probably a good idea.

INT. POLICE STATION - BULLPEN - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett sits in a chair on one side of a detective's desk. There's no detective present. Bennett uses the phone.

BENNETT
Ted, it's Harry Bennett. My apologies for calling so early, but it's important. I'm at the Seventeenth Precinct.
(beat)
Yes, but I'm not calling about that. Any hour now I'll be out on my own or someone else's recognizance. Meanwhile, I'm trying to plan my next move.
(beat)
Client's looking for a runaway brother so they can inherit some dough. It's a both-or-neither deal, according to the will, according to her.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
I want to talk to the lawyer who's handling the estate. Client's name is Sharon Fielding. Can you get me the lawyer's name?
(beat)
I appreciate it, Ted. I'm sorry I can't give you more business, but I'm only one man with very few worldly possessions and just one niece.

Bennett hangs up. The solicitous flatfoot is now standing nearby.

FLATFOOT
You're free to go. Jim Conley vouched for you.

BENNETT
Where's he been? He was supposed to have the night off.

FLATFOOT
Got called out, as I understand it. There was a break in a case he's on. Or else he was just avoiding you.

BENNETT
I'm not such bad company, am I? Anyway, thanks for your hospitality.

FLATFOOT
Any time. Property claim is in the basement. I'll call down, since you don't have any identification.

INT. POLICE STATION - PROPERTY WINDOW - MOMENTS LATER

CLERK
Well, look who it is!

Bennett smiles, recognizing the chipper woman.

CLERK (CONT'D)
Solve another one already?

BENNETT
I'm not that good. It's nice to see a friendly, familiar face, though.

CLERK
Same here, Mr. Bennett.

BENNETT
Call me Harry.

The clerk places his gun on the ledge of the window. Bennett takes it, starts to holster it, stops. He opens the cylinder, confirms that he hasn't been visited by the Bullet Fairy, then finally puts his piece away.

CLERK
You haven't changed a bit.

BENNETT
In forty-eight hours? No, I don't imagine I have.
(beat)
Can you tell me where I might pick up my vehicle?

CLERK
If it's impounded, you won't be able to get it until tomorrow.

BENNETT
That figures. Use your phone?

CLERK
It doesn't dial out.

BENNETT
All right. Until next time.

INT. POLICE STATION - BULLPEN - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett returns to where the detective's desks are. He's looking for the flatfoot from earlier when he sees someone else he knows.

BENNETT
(calling)
Jim!

JIM CONLEY (30s, short brown hair graying at the edges, mustache the same; plainclothed) turns at the sound of his name and walks over to meet Bennett. They shake hands.

CONLEY
Harry. What happened to you last night?

BENNETT
Nothing good. You?

CONLEY
It was a bum lead. I'm afraid that if your lady friend rang my doorbell, I wasn't there to hear it. I'm sorry about that, Harry.

BENNETT
It's okay. But if you want to make it up to me, find out if an agent named Stafford Lohnes is on the local Bureau office payroll or is just a figment of my imagination.

CONLEY
I'll make a call. Meanwhile, is your car still parked on my block?

BENNETT
As luck would have it, it's in impound. At least I think it is. To be honest, I'm not sure where it is.

CONLEY
Then I'll see if I can track down your car, too. It's the least I can do after letting you get collared on my front lawn.

BENNETT
I might have scared a neighbor's cat while I was trying to break into your house, Jim.

CONLEY
Don't give it another thought, Harry. That tabby and I have never seen eye to eye.

INT. BENNETT'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - LATER

Bennett comes home. He's barely inside when his phone rings. He drops into an easy chair and answers it.

INTERCUT TELEPHONE CONVERSATION.

INT. NAT'S HOTEL ROOM - SAME TIME

NAT
Harry!

BENNETT
Nat?

NAT
Yes. It's me. How's everything?

BENNETT
Everything? Everything's making very little sense at the moment. What's been going on with you, Nat? Why aren't you home? Why are you at the Chandler?

NAT
I can explain.

BENNETT
Please do.

NAT
You remember when I asked you about blackmail?

BENNETT
Of course.

NAT
Well, I wasn't being completely honest with you then, and I'm sorry now.

BENNETT
I had a feeling. And I forgive you. I didn't want to press the matter at the time. Just please tell me that you haven't killed anybody since.

NAT
Of course not, Harry. But as you suspected, it wasn't the character of a friend of mine who was being blackmailed. It was my own character.

BENNETT
Not... you?

NAT
Not me.

BENNETT
Then why were you so keyed up, Nat?

NAT
Because I was staring down a deadline that was approaching fast, and if I didn't write my character out of the situation I'd written him into, I was going to miss that deadline. And that would have meant breaching my contract and having to return a sizable advance, not to mention souring my professional relationships and blemishing an otherwise spotless record of delivering manuscripts on time.

BENNETT
I appreciate that. A man's reputation is important.

NAT
Exactly, Harry. So I holed up in the Hotel Chandler to devote my complete attention to this caper on paper. And I'm pleased to report that once I had no distractions, the resolution came to me pretty quickly.

BENNETT
That's great, Nat. I'm sure Vickie will enjoy this next one as much as she enjoyed your last. She asked me to tell you as much.
(beat)
But now I have to ask you a difficult question on a separate topic entirely: What have you done to catch the attention of the FBI?

NAT
The FBI?

BENNETT
An Agent Stafford Lohnes went to great lengths last night to make sure I was nowhere near you, I can only assume because he wants to be the only one keeping an eye on you.

NAT
Wait. You met Stafford Lohnes?

BENNETT
You know him?

NAT
Yes. And he introduced himself as “Agent Stafford Lohnes”?

BENNETT
More or less. How do you know him? Why do you know him?

NAT
(laughing)
Harry, Stafford Lohnes isn’t a government agent. He’s my agent. My literary agent. When I thought I was going to blow my deadline, I called him. It was Lohnes’s idea to relocate me to a hotel. Did you come looking for me there?

BENNETT
(mildly irked)
I did. When I couldn’t find you at home, but I found the address of the Chandler on a piece of paper.

NAT
You were at my house? How are my plants?

BENNETT
Green. Some of them. So Stafford Lohnes isn’t a G-man?

NAT
Stafford Lohnes runs Stafford Lohnes Literistic.

BENNETT
That’s a mouthful.

NAT
And he can be... theatrical.

BENNETT
That’s an understatement.
(beat)
You say you’ve finished your book?

NAT
It’s all over except the typing. Tomorrow morning, I’m checking out, taking my notes home, tapping out the final pages, then bringing the thing to my editor.
(MORE)

NAT (CONT'D)
And then I'm going to have lunch with my cousin.

BENNETT
Your cousin? You mean Sharon Fielding?

NAT
That's who I mean, Harry. I presume she's still looking for me and that you're still engaged to find me for her. I'm giving you my permission now to call her this morning and give her my home address. Please tell her that I'll expect her at one p.m.

BENNETT
I'll do just that, Nat. I'm glad you were able to work everything out.

NAT
Thanks, Harry. And, listen, I'm sorry if my agent or I gave you any trouble the past couple of days. I hope you weren't worrying about me much. I'm alive and well. Let's grab sandwiches again soon, yes?

BENNETT
Sure thing, Nat.

INT. BENNETT'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bennett hangs up the phone, then closes his eye and falls asleep in the armchair.

Except he doesn't. Something's on his mind. So he opens his eyes again. He gets up and removes his outerwear, hanging it up.

BENNETT (V.O.)
Exhausted as I was, something was keeping me from sleep. Something nagging at me, tugging on a back corner of my mind. Something... or someone.

Bennett makes his way to his bathroom.

INT. BENNETT'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bennett looks at himself in the mirror, grimaces. He finds shaving cream and lathers up. Looking at his reflection again, it dawns on him:

BENNETT
Well. Funny running into you like this.

INT. BENNETT'S APARTMENT - STUDY - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett relocates to where his bookshelves are, still lathered up. As he pulls a selection of paperbacks down, he thinks:

BENNETT (V.O.)
As soon as I'd thought of Roger Eakley -- the man on the other side of the potted plant at the Chandler -- I knew that was the answer. Or, rather, the question.
(beat)
Who was he?

Bennett spreads an armful of BOOKS out on the desk. Each has a sensational cover illustration and the same byline: "NATHANIEL HAMMOND." Their titles speak volumes: "MULTIPLE INDECENCY." "SEATTLE SECRETS." "THE QUICK BROWN FOX MURDERS THE LAZY DOG." "X IS FOR EXTORTION."

Bennett thumbs through each quickly in turn.

BENNETT (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Nathaniel Hammond the writer specializes in tales of what they call "true crime." In other words, he writes fanciful stories about guys like me. And sometimes, when he can't think of what a guy like me would do, he asks a guy exactly like me what I would do, or have already done, as the case may be. More than one of my cases has appeared in print under my friend's byline. Of course, Nat takes only the broad strokes from my accounts. He fills in the details, with plenty of liberties and embellishments, because no one would want to read a strictly factual account of my day-to-day activities for very long.
(MORE)

BENNETT (V.O.) (CONT'D)
(beat)
And of course Nat changes the names of those involved.

Bennett hasn't found what he's looking for... but then he remembers --

INT. BENNETT'S APARTMENT - ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett walks to a console table where mail has piled up. He crouches to the floor and slides out a final paperback book from under one of the legs of the table. "DEATH BE NOT FRAUD" is the title. He brings it to the next room.

INT. BENNETT'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bennett sits in the armchair he started in and reads from the back cover.

BENNETT
"Robert Oakley is missing, presumed dead...."

BENNETT (V.O.)
That's all I needed to read to bring it all back. Some years earlier, I'd been hired by an insurance adjuster to find a policyholder who'd been declared dead by his beneficiary. That policyholder was Roger Eakley. I did find him, and he was indeed still alive. Instead of going to his grave, Eakley went to prison. So I guessed he'd gotten out, and I guessed he wasn't holding a grudge.

Bennett turns to the beginning of the novel and reads:

BENNETT
"Chapter One..."

Then Bennett reads silently for a moment, until he lets the book drop onto his chest. Still lathered up, he begins to SNORE lightly.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - LATER MORNING

Bennett is seated, awake and clean-shaven, behind his desk. Sharon Fielding appears on the threshold, knocks gently on the door.

BENNETT
Come in. Good morning.

Sharon enters and takes a seat.

SHARON
Good morning to you, Mr. Bennett. You're in fine spirits, aren't you?

BENNETT
It's always a good day when I can wrap up a case, Mrs. Fielding.

SHARON
You mean...?

BENNETT
I have located your brother, yes. Even better, he has asked me to extend an invitation to you to meet him at his home for lunch today. I've written his address down for you.

Bennett hands her a slip of paper; she takes it. They stand. Sharon hugs Bennett. Bennett lets her.

SHARON
Oh, Mr. Bennett! I don't know how to thank you!

BENNETT
Sure you do. Just pay my bill within thirty days. Where should I have my secretary mail it?

SHARON
If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon settle up now. What do I owe you? And can I pay in cash?

Sharon hands over an envelope. Bennett takes a quick peek inside, then pockets it.

BENNETT
Write you a receipt?

SHARON
Not necessary.
(beat)
Oh, I hope he'll be glad to see me after all this time. I'm not sure I even brought something nice enough to wear to a reunion. I have to confess that I wasn't sure this would end happily.

BENNETT
If I may be so bold, Mrs. Fielding, you look lovely in what you're wearing now. And I'm glad I was able to help.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - LATER

Bennett is poking around Betsy's desk, not looking for anything in particular. Betsy is not there... until she bursts through the front door and gets settled.

BENNETT
Are you okay?

BETSY
I'm sorry I'm late, Uncle Harry.

BENNETT
Rough night?

BETSY
Long night. Rough morning. How about you?

BENNETT
Hard night, better morning. Sharon Fielding was just here.

BETSY
Oh! So that's done?

BENNETT
All wrapped up.

BETSY
What time did she show?

BENNETT
Nine-thirty.

BETSY
(surprised)
And you ran her in already?

BENNETT
(confused)
Ran her in? No, I gave her Nat's address. He gave me his blessing to last night.

BETSY
(concerned)
Uncle Harry, didn't you see what was in the safe? Didn't you get my message?

BENNETT
I got your message, Puffin. And I saw the handkerchief. And I returned it to Mrs. Fielding last night.

BETSY
Last night...? But what about the monogram?

BENNETT
I saw the monogram. And at first it triggered my silent alarm as well. But then I realized that Mrs. Sharon Fielding must have had that handkerchief since before she was Mrs. Sharon Fielding, when she was Miss Sharon Hammond. That's why the monogram read "SH."

BETSY
But it didn't read "SH," Uncle Harry.

BENNETT
(growing uneasy)
Didn't it? Being a private investigator might not require any fancy degrees, Betsy, but I do know the alphabet.

BETSY
You had the handkerchief the wrong way, Uncle Harry. Look.

Betsy takes a sheet of paper from her desk, folds it in half, then in half again. Then, with a pen, she jots on a corner. Finally, she places it deliberately on the desk.

BETSY (CONT'D)
That's how I left it in the safe for you. Is that how you found it?

BENNETT
(unsure)
Probably. If that's how you left it.

He takes the paper from the desk, holding it so that the monogram is at top, and reads:

BENNETT (CONT'D)
"Ess Aitch." Sharon Hammond.

Betsy takes the paper from his hand and turns it 180 degrees, so the monogram is at bottom.

BETSY
You're holding it upside down. A monogram doesn't face in. It faces out. This one reads, "Aitch Ess." I don't know what those initials stand for, but I don't think the woman they belong to is who she said she is.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - LATER

Bennett's behind his desk again, staring at the faux-kerchief, turning it around in his hands every so often. The PHONE RINGS outside.

BETSY (O.S.)
(via intercom)
Ted Shoemaker for you, Uncle Harry.

Bennett picks up his extension.

BENNETT
Good morning, Ted. What do you know?

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
I've got a name and a number for you, Harry --

BENNETT
That's terrific, Ted.

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
-- but you might not need those.

BENNETT
Why not?

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
Because I got a copy of the will, too.

BENNETT
Did you? Have you read it?

SHOEMAKER
I took a look, yes. Pretty standard stuff. Nothing out of the ordinary. And the provision you mentioned is there, all right. Sharon Hammond and Nathaniel Hammond stand to receive a significant bequest, but only if both are present at the reading of the will.

BENNETT
And when’s that?

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
In four days.

BENNETT
All right, Ted. Thanks very much.

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
You want that name and number?

BENNETT
I think you’re right that I don’t need it.

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
Should I send someone over with the will?

BENNETT
I don’t think I need that either, Ted. At least not yet. Hold on to it for me?

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
Sure thing, Harry. Holler if I can do anything else for you.

Bennett hangs up his phone. Then picks it up again and dials.

BENNETT
Ted.

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
That was quick, Harry.

BENNETT
Whose will is it?

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
What's that?

BENNETT
Who made out the will? Who's giving Nat and Sharon Hammond money if they both show up to claim it?

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
You mean you don't know? It's a Eugenia Smith.

BENNETT
Smith? Really?

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
Why not? It is the most common surname in the country, after all. Half of my own clients are named Smith.

BENNETT
Any of them actually work with metal? I'm just curious.

SHOEMAKER (O.S.)
I don't think so. But who am I to judge? I don't make shoes.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - NOON

Bennett and Betsy are conversing when a NEW WOMAN (average height, chestnut hair, looks not unlike she could be related to Nat Hammond) enters the outer office.

NEW WOMAN
Good afternoon? I... I'm hoping you can help me locate my brother.

BENNETT
Seems to be the week for that. Come in.

NEW WOMAN
Thank you.
(beat)
My name is Sharon Fielding. Originally Hammond.
(MORE)

NEW WOMAN (CONT'D)
My brother -- actually my first cousin, but we were raised as siblings by my parents -- is a man named Nathaniel Hammond.

Bennett looks from the woman to Betsy -- who's looking from Bennett to the woman -- and back. More than once. Eventually:

BENNETT
I'm sorry. What?

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

The trio has relocated to Bennett's private office. Bennett is behind his desk, the real Sharon Fielding is in a client chair, and Betsy is standing. Bennett is on the phone.

BENNETT
Ted, I need a copy of that will after all. Can you send someone over with it?
(beat)
Never mind. I'll send my girl.

He hangs up.

BENNETT
(to Betsy)
Run over to Shoemaker & Bookbinder. Ted'll have an envelope waiting for you. Bring it right back. Don't stop to pick up cinnamon rolls.

Betsy exits.

REAL SHARON
Is something wrong?

BENNETT
Maybe. Probably. Possibly. Please forgive the minor commotion. Things aren't usually so hectic here, but this week has been... unusual. If you don't mind, I'd like to review a couple of things. You said that Nathaniel Hammond, the writer, is your cousin.

REAL SHARON
That's correct.

BENNETT
Your first cousin?

REAL SHARON
Yes. My father and Nathaniel's father were brothers.

BENNETT
And...

REAL SHARON
(naturally)
Their father -- Nathaniel's and my common grandfather -- had a sister, who had a daughter. That's who passed away and left us money. Conditionally.

BENNETT
And her name? Your grandfather's sister's daughter?

REAL SHARON
Eugenia. Eugenia Smith.

Bennett closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, in... and out.

BENNETT
And you said that a friend of yours....

REAL SHARON
Who lives here reported to me that she thought she'd seen Nathaniel recently, though she wasn't sure it was him. That's my only lead, however, so I had to act on it... but I doubt very much that I could find my brother just by looking around this city myself for three days.

Bennett is about to ask another question when the front door of the suite opens. He steps out from behind his desk.

BENNETT
(calling out)
Puffin?
(beat)
Betsy?

SUITOR
(calling in)
Liz?

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett enters the outer room to find Betsy's would-be beau. He looks tired.

BENNETT
I remember you. You looked much better last time you were here. Rough night?

SUITOR
Long night. Rough morning.

Bennett starts to scowl, but then the suitor produces a WAXED BAKERY BAG.

SUITOR (CONT'D)
These are for you, Mr. Bennett. Two chocolate sinkers.

Bennett takes the bag.

BENNETT
Betsy's out on an errand, but she should be back soon. I imagine you've come to take my niece to lunch?

SUITOR
Yes, sir.

BENNETT
That's fine. You can have a seat out here. If you'll excuse me, I've got to step back inside.

He does.

BENNETT (O.S.)
Mrs. Fielding, can I offer you a doughnut?

The inner DOOR closes with a CLICK.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

We're back with the Real Sharon Fielding, seated. Bennett paces and eats a doughnut.

REAL SHARON
Mr. Bennett, I get the feeling you know something germane that you're not telling me.

BENNETT
Mrs. Fielding, I happen to know several Germanes, and I would be more than happy to introduce you to all of them.

Bennett smiles, but Sharon Fielding doesn't, so Bennett sits.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. You're correct. I do know something. Unfortunately, it's something you aren't going to be happy to hear. Nathaniel Hammond, the writer, is a friend of mine. He might be my best friend. Whether or not it was just dumb luck that brought you here, I happen to be the perfect man for the job of finding him.

REAL SHARON
But that's <u>good</u> news!

BENNETT
Sure. The bad news is that a woman claiming to be you hired me to do the same job two days ago, and I sent her Nat's way about three hours ago.

REAL SHARON
(scandalized)
Another woman? Pretending to be me? Who?

BENNETT
Well, that's difficult for me to say. For the obvious reason.

REAL SHARON
But... but why?

BENNETT
That might be an easier question to answer. The first Mrs. Fielding told me the same story you did, down to the details, which means she knows about the will of your... of Eugenia Smith.

REAL SHARON
My first cousin once-removed.

BENNETT
Are you sure?

REAL SHARON
I'm sure. I'm the keeper of our family records. I took a correspondence course in genealogy.

BENNETT
Rocks?

REAL SHARON
Roots.

BENNETT
Ah. Then I'll trust you on that point. And since your impostor knows about the will, the logical conclusion is that the will isn't incidental. The will is the key to her identity.

REAL SHARON
How so?

BENNETT
Before I answer that, I'd prefer to have the will in front of us. Fortunately, I think it just arrived.

Betsy enters Bennett's private office and hands over an envelope to her uncle. He takes it.

BETSY
Do you want me to stay, Uncle Harry?

BENNETT
No, Puffin. You've got a lunch date. Have fun. I'll bring you up to speed later.

Bennett extracts a document from the envelope and skims it.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Mrs. Fielding, does Eugenia Smith have any children?

REAL SHARON
Yes. She has a daughter. They've been estranged for years.

BENNETT
The will doesn't mention a daughter.

REAL SHARON
That’s not surprising.

BENNETT
Actually, it is. I’m no lawyer, but I know how wills work. When you want to leave something to someone, you name them. And when you want to leave nothing to someone, you name them.

REAL SHARON
I’m not sure I understand.

BENNETT
If Eugenia Smith specifically didn’t want her estranged daughter to receive any part of her estate under any circumstances, the will would provide exactly that.
(beat)
As things are, if the condition for your inheritance isn’t met, if you and Nat do not attend the reading of the will in person in three days’ time, then the substantial amount of money intended for you will, by operation of law, be given to Eugenia Smith’s next of kin, her estranged daughter.

REAL SHARON
(with furrowed brow)
I see, I suppose.

BENNETT
Now, please tell me that Eugenia Smith’s estranged daughter’s first name does not begin with the letter H.

REAL SHARON
It’s “Harriet.” How did you know that?

Bennett lowers his head into his hand... and in doing so notices something in the wastebasket near his desk. He extracts it -- the “monogrammed” handkerchief facsimile.

BENNETT
A little birdie tried to tell me.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
(beat)
Why did Eugenia condition your inheritance on your joint presence with Nat at the reading of her will? If she wanted to leave you money, why make you find Nat and bring him home?

REAL SHARON
Why, that's exactly why. Eugenia was heartbroken by her own daughter's alienation. When Harriet's father died, Eugenia hoped that might prompt a reconciliation, but it didn't. She knew that my parents raised Nathaniel like a son, and she didn't want them to go through what she'd gone through. She must have figured that if filial affection and gratitude wasn't going to bring Nathaniel back home, maybe money might.

BENNETT
(nodding slowly)
And then, once he was home....

REAL SHARON
Yes. The healing could begin.

BENNETT
You know, Nat's been my friend for years, and I had no idea. If it isn't rude of me to ask, what made him leave home without looking back in the first place?

REAL SHARON
Oh, the usual.

BENNETT
Ah. The usual. Sure.

The PHONE in the outer office RINGS.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Would you excuse me?

He heads to the next room.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett answers the phone.

BENNETT
Doxie's Diner.

CONLEY (O.S.)
Very funny, Harry. It's Conley.

BENNETT
Jim! Find my car?

CONLEY (O.S.)
I did. It's here. You can get it anytime. I had it put on the street with a precinct card in the windshield. I even had the motor pool replace your window.

BENNETT
That's aces, Jim. Thank you.

CONLEY (O.S.)
Least I could do, Harry. And there's more.

BENNETT
You don't have to tell me. You couldn't turn up anything on any Agent Stafford Lohnes.

CONLEY (O.S.)
That's right.

BENNETT
Not to worry. He pulled the wool over my eyes, but I'm sure I've seen the last of him.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett returns and resumes the conversation.

BENNETT
So the new good news is that Harriet Smith isn't due to arrive at Nat's house for another half an hour.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
The new bad news is that Nat was going to be typing up the last pages of his latest novel this morning at home, then delivering them to his editor to meet a deadline. And then he was planning to return home to prepare to meet... well, you. So I don't think we're going to be able to warn him that it isn't you but your mutual...

REAL SHARON
Second cousin.

BENNETT
-- second cousin who's going to show up. He's probably driving back right now.

Bennett looks at his wristwatch and rubs his chin.

REAL SHARON
But what do we have to warn Nathaniel of, exactly?

BENNETT
Mrs. Fielding, Harriet Smith didn't hire me to find Nat so she could have lunch with him. She didn't pretend to be you and hire me to find my friend and your cousin who was like a brother to you even so that she could convince him not to attend the reading of Eugenia's will with you in order that she, Harriet, could inherit from her estranged mother money she considers rightfully hers. No, Harriet Smith came to town with every intention of making sure that Nat will be indisposed three days from now.

REAL SHARON
She's going to murder him?!

BENNETT
No! No. I mean, probably not, anyway. There's no need for Nat to be dead three days from now. He just has to be out of circulation.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Harriet Smith intends to kidnap Nat.

REAL SHARON
So we'd better get to him as soon as possible.

BENNETT
Agreed. Did you drive?

REAL SHARON
I didn't.

BENNETT
That's too bad. I'm afraid my car is parked nowhere near here. So we'll take a cab to Nat's. Let's go.
(calling out)
Betsy?
(beat)
Oh, that's right.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE

Bennett and the Real Sharon Fielding enter the outer office from the inner office, coats on. Stafford Lohnes enters the outer office through the front door.

LOHNES
(breathless)
Mr. Bennett, thank heaven you're here. I need your help immediately. Nathaniel Hammond is missing, and so is his manuscript!

BENNETT
(with disdain)
<u>Mister</u> Lohnes, if you don't mind, we need to get to your client's house to keep him from being kidnapped, and we're in a bit of a hurry. And since you made sure that my automobile would be impounded, we have to hire a car. I don't suppose you want to lend us your vehicle. That would be a good start toward making amends for last night.

LOHNES
But Hammond is not at his home!
(MORE)

LOHNES (CONT'D)
Nor is he still at the Hotel Chandler. And, most troubling of all, he didn't turn his manuscript in to his editor this morning. Hammond has vanished.

While Bennett considers Lohnes:

REAL SHARON
(to Bennett)
Who is this?

BENNETT
This is Stafford Lohnes, Nat's literary agent. He moonlights as a troublemaker.

LOHNES
(contrite)
I meant well.

BENNETT
And when he loses his client, he expects me to let bygones be bygones and help him.

LOHNES
Wait. You were already on your way to Hammond's home? Why?
(re: Real Sharon)
Who is this?

BENNETT
This is Sharon Fielding. Née Hammond. Nat's cousin. Also his sister. She just hired me to find Nat. I'm tempted to make you pay her bill, though. Speaking of, you wouldn't happen to have my wallet, would you?

Lohnes produces Bennett's wallet from his coat and hands it over. Bennett takes it.

LOHNES
Actually, I do.

BENNETT
So you say Nat didn't turn in his manuscript?

LOHNES
No.
(MORE)

LOHNES (CONT'D)
And it was due to the editor today. Hammond has never missed a deadline.

BENNETT
Though he was afraid he was going to miss this one. That said, he told me early this morning that he'd finished his work on this book. Which means....

LOHNES
Which means...?

REAL SHARON
Which means?

BENNETT
(to Real Sharon)
Which means that I don't have to feel bad that my friend -- your relative and his client -- was kidnapped while you and I were leisurely talking about your family for the past hour. Because Nat was kidnapped several hours ago.

REAL SHARON
How do you know that?

BENNETT
Because it was several hours ago that I told Harriet Smith where to find him.

REAL SHARON
Oh!

LOHNES
And who is Harriet Smith?

BENNETT
The woman who kidnapped my friend -- her relative and your client.

LOHNES
But for what reason?

Bennett closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

BENNETT
If you don't mind, Lohnes, that explanation is going to have to wait. I can't go through it all again right now. For the moment, you're just going to have to trust me when I tell you that I know who wants Nat Hammond on ice and why. And you can both believe me when I say that I'm going to find him, and he's going to be okay.

Lohnes and the Real Sharon Fielding nod.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Good. Now, let's go to Nat's house.

LOHNES
But he isn't there!

BENNETT
And we're not going to look for him there. We're going to look for clues.

REAL SHARON
Shouldn't we call the police?

BENNETT
We will. Just not yet.

The trio makes for the front door of the office when it opens and Betsy enters the room.

BETSY
And where are you all going?

BENNETT
Nat Hammond's place. You wanna come?

BETSY
(shrugging)
Sure.

LOHNES
(to Betsy)
Stafford Lohnes. Charmed.

BENNETT
(to Lohnes)
Don't.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - OUTSIDE BENNETT'S OFFICES - MOMENTS LATER

The foursome steps out from the building. Just as Bennett is about to hail a cab, one pulls up to the curb. The rear door opens and Roger Eakley steps out.

EAKLEY
Bennett! I was just coming to see you. But you appear to be headed off.

BENNETT
Guilty as charged, so to speak. And we're in a bit of a hurry, too. You won't mind if we steal your hack, would you?

EAKLEY
Go right ahead, Harry. I'll try you again soon.

BENNETT
Looking forward to it.

Eakley holds the door open so the Real Sharon can climb in.

LOHNES
Gonna be crowded with three in the back.

BETSY
I'll stay behind.

BENNETT
All right. Keep warm, Puffin. I'll be in touch.

EAKLEY
(to Betsy)
Roger Eakley.

As Eakley introduces himself to Betsy, Bennett leans in close to her ear.

BENNETT
(whispering)
Don't.

Then Bennett gets into the front seat of the cab.

INT. CAB - CONTINUOUS

CABBIE
(re: Real Sharon)
The lady gave me the address. You want me to step on it?

BENNETT
Not necessary. Better if we get there in one piece.

INT. NAT HAMMOND'S BUNGALOW - LATER

Bennett, Lohnes, and the Real Sharon enter, splitting up to look around. Bennett examines the living room. After a moment, from the study:

LOHNES (O.S.)
It's here! It's right here!

Lohnes then bounds in holding a typescript.

LOHNES (CONT'D)
Where's Nat's phone?

BENNETT
You calling the editor?

LOHNES
I sure am. But first I'm calling for another cab.

Bennett jerks a thumb toward the kitchen.

BENNETT
Leave the pages with me, though.

Lohnes hands the pages over, then steps out of the room.

Bennett considers the typescript.

INSERT - TYPESCRIPT

The title reads: "THE POSTMAN ALWAYS BRINGS SPICE"

REAL SHARON (O.S.)
What's it about?

BACK TO SCENE

BENNETT
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
No idea. I don't think this one's based on any case of mine.

Sharon rejoins Bennett.

REAL SHARON
Does Nathaniel do that? Base his stories on your cases?

BENNETT
Sometimes. Sometimes he just picks my brain for ways to get his characters out of trouble. Or into trouble, for that matter. You find anything in the bedrooms?

REAL SHARON
No. But I don't know what I'm looking for.

BENNETT
I'll be honest: Neither do I. If Harriet Smith -- or her proxy -- came here to take Nat away, the smartest way to do it would've been to simply knock on the door... and when Nat opened it, stick a piece in his ribs and tell him to get moving. Nothing fancy, nothing complicated. And nothing left behind to point a finger at anyone.

REAL SHARON
Then why are we here?

BENNETT
Because it's the scene of the crime. And you always start at the scene of the crime.

REAL SHARON
Because the criminal always returns there?

BENNETT
No. That's a myth. But if nothing else, at least Lohnes found this.

Bennett waves the sheaf of pages in his hand. As if he'd rung a dinner bell, Lohnes returns and snatches back the typescript.

LOHNES
Cab'll be here in a minute. Do you want a ride back?

BENNETT
Thanks, but I think we're gonna keep looking around here for a bit. If we find Nat under his sofa or in a closet, I'll be sure to call you.

From outside we hear a CAR HONK-HONK. Lohnes leaves the house.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Did you look under the sofa?

REAL SHARON
Should I?

BENNETT
We're here. We might as well be thorough. We can divvy up the closets.

INT. NAT HAMMOND'S BUNGALOW - SECOND BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The real Sharon Fielding is looking around. Bennett enters, a puzzled look on his face.

BENNETT
Mrs. Fielding, do you and Harriet Smith have any friends in common?

REAL SHARON
I don't imagine we do.

BENNETT
Who's your friend in the city? The one you said told you she thought she'd seen Nat?

REAL SHARON
Her name is Margaret McMoughin. People call her Peg.

BENNETT
Peg McMoughin. Have you seen her since you got to town?

REAL SHARON
I came straight to you.

BENNETT
Then maybe we should go see Peg together. If you wouldn't mind, I'd just like to ask her a question or two. Then I'll scram and you ladies can have tea.

INT. PEG MCMOUGHIN'S HOME - LATER

Bennett and the Real Sharon Fielding are seated on a busy sofa in a room with entirely too many tchotchkes -- on the walls, on shelves, on unnecessary tables.

BENNETT (V.O.)
I was taught to say nothing about another person's appearance if I can't find a way to say something nice, so I'll say that of all the other persons I've encountered in my years, Peg McMoughin was one of them. She had the usual number of arms, legs, and head, none of which warrant further comment. She wore clothes.

PEG McMOUGHIN (plain leaning toward homely) enters.

PEG
I'm afraid I can't be of much help in locating Nathaniel, Mr. Bennett. The one time I thought I saw him was probably a year ago. Maybe even more, come to think of it.

BENNETT
That's all right. You've already been a great help to Mrs. Fielding in just putting her on to her... to Mr. Hammond in the first place. As it happens, he's a friend of mine.

REAL SHARON
We were wondering, Peggy, if you've been in touch with Harriet Smith. You must have met her when we were girls.

PEG
I remember Harriet, I think. But, no, I haven't seen or spoken to her in forever.
(MORE)

PEG (CONT'D)
Are you trying to arrange a family reunion, Sharon?

REAL SHARON
Something like that.

BENNETT
Well. Thank you for your time, Ms. McMoughin. I'll toddle along now. You two must have a lot to catch up on.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - LATER

Bennett enters, cramming the last of a well-dressed hot dog into his face. He wipes his mouth with a paper napkin.

BENNETT
Puffin, any calls?

BETSY
Not one. But Mr. Eakley said he'd stop by again later this afternoon. Maybe this evening. He seems nice enough. Old buddy of yours?

BENNETT
Not exactly. I helped put him behind bars.

BETSY
Well, he doesn't appear to be holding a grudge, anyway. He walked me all the way upstairs and asked plenty of questions about you.

BENNETT
(distracted)
Yeah?
(beat)
Betsy, would you ring up Jim Conley for me, please? I'll be inside.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett behind his desk, phone to his ear.

CONLEY (O.S.)
Are you ever coming for your car, Harry? It's gonna be sold at auction if it's out front much longer. And in the meantime, the birds are using it for bombing practice.

BENNETT
I'm hunting down a missing person, Jim. A friend, no less.

CONLEY (O.S.)
Wouldn't it help to have an automobile?

BENNETT
It would. But at least I can stick my client with the cab fare. I won't, but I could.

CONLEY (O.S.)
Same client?

BENNETT
Same case. Different client.

CONLEY (O.S.)
How's that?

BENNETT
I traded up. But now the man I was hired to find really is missing.

CONLEY (O.S.)
Well, that's convenient. How can I help?

BENNETT
I don't know. I'm going to sit very quietly in my office and rack my brain for the clue I've overlooked until I have a flash of brilliant insight. Then I'm going to talk to someone I haven't yet talked to. Depending on what he says, he might be a prime candidate for incarceration.

CONLEY (O.S.)
You already know it's a man?

BENNETT
I don't.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
But the first person to steer me wrong this time around was a woman, so I figure the odds are in favor of the second one being male. It's like flipping a coin, Jim. When it comes up heads first, it has to come up tails second. That's simple science.

CONLEY (O.S.)
I'm pretty sure that's not how it works at all, Harry.

BENNETT
We'll see. In any case, do me a favor and don't go undercover before you hear from me again.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett enters, paces. Betsy sits behind her desk.

BENNETT
Betsy, I think I'm going to think out loud for a bit.

Betsy picks up a pen.

BETSY
Should I take notes?

BENNETT
Only if I say something smart.

Betsy puts down her pen.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Sharon Fielding comes to town. She's looking for her brother, who's really her cousin, except she's not really Sharon Fielding. She's Harriet Smith -- and if I haven't yet complimented you on that nifty piece of detective work with the handkerchief, Puffin, consider yourself complimented now.

BETSY
Do I get a raise?

BENNETT
Probably not. To continue: Harriet Smith is trying to find Nat Hammond -- not to get him to the reading of her estranged mother's will on time, but to keep him from it. If she succeeds, she inherits the money meant for Nat and the real Sharon Fielding. She comes here because a friend of hers reported seeing Nat, or someone bearing a resemblance to him, in the greater metropolitan area.

Bennett walks to the floor safe, spins the dial, tries the handle. It doesn't budge, of course. Bennett shrugs.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Nat disappears briefly, but for an unrelated reason. Nat reappears and gives me the go-ahead to tell Mrs. Fielding where to find him, which I do, which I wish I hadn't. But this is not the time to dwell on our regrets.
(beat)
Then, right about the time the real Mrs. Fielding arrives in town, looking for Nat, soon after her cousin, Nat is being stolen away by Harriet Smith.

Bennett takes a breath.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Does that about cover it?

BETSY
I think so.

BENNETT
Any questions?

BETSY
Who's her friend?

BENNETT
That's a very good question. Unfortunately, she's no one important. She's not the key to cracking the case I'd hoped she'd be. She hasn't spoken to Harriet Smith in years and years.

BETSY
That can't be. Her friend told her to come to town to find Mr. Hammond.

BENNETT
No, Puffin. Mrs. Fielding's friend told Mrs. Fielding to come to town.

BETSY
That's not who I mean. Who is Harriet Smith's friend?

BENNETT
She doesn't have one, kiddo. She was just feeding me the real Sharon Fielding's story, only before the real Sharon Fielding could --

Bennett screws up his face in agony as he realizes the ridiculousness of what he's saying.

BENNETT
(pained)
Betsy, please call Ted Shoemaker. Tell him I need that other lawyer's name now. And there's a chocolate donut in my office for you. You just earned it.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - SIDEWALK - LATER

Bennett is looking down the road for a cab to hail... when he has a spasm of realization.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett walks through. Betsy is not at her desk. The RADIO is playing MUSIC.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett enters and is about to take a slip of scrap paper from his desktop when Eakley steps from the shadow to press a gun against Bennett's flank.

BENNETT
Listen, pal, could we possibly do this another time?
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
I was just on my way to put the screws to a learned man of the law about possibly having aided and abetted a kidnapper, and it's pretty important that I get to him before he goes home for the day, because tomorrow morning might be too late.

EAKLEY
(exasperated)
No! You're always going somewhere. You're never available. I've tried to be reasonable and accommodating, but the fact is I'm on a tight schedule, too. So I'm afraid I must insist that you have a seat now so we can get this over with already!

BENNETT
(realizing)
Eakley?

Bennett walks around his desk and sits in his chair. Eakley keeps his heater trained on Bennett.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
I thought you'd forgiven me!

EAKLEY
What gave you that impression?

BENNETT
You've been pretty friendly to me since you got back to town.

EAKLEY
Well, I couldn't tell you that I'm going to knock you off before I was ready to do it.

BENNETT
That does make sense. Would it do me any good to try to talk you out of taking me out?

EAKLEY
Probably not, but I wouldn't deprive you of the opportunity. I thought you said you were in a hurry, though.

BENNETT
You make a very good point.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Betsy is at her desk, nodding her head along with the MUSIC playing on the RADIO. Eakley comes out from Bennett's private office, shaking his head... and keeps walking out the front door, which he leaves open.

Bennett follows a moment later, calling after Eakley:

BENNETT
The next time you drop by, bring Danish. Or Scotch. Or both!

Bennett closes the front door, locks it, then turns to Betsy.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Betsy, there's a pistol in my desk drawer. Be a dear and put it in the safe. Try to keep your fingerprints off it unless you want a criminal record. I've got to head out. Hold down the fort.

BETSY
Was that just Mr. Eakley leaving?

BENNETT
The one and only, Puffin.

BETSY
What did he want?

BENNETT
To shoot me in cold blood.

BETSY
Did he?

BENNETT
He did not.

BETSY
Why not?

BENNETT
You're familiar with my disarming smile, aren't you, Puffin? Well, now Roger Eakley is, too.

BETSY
(dubious)
Uh huh. Are you sure there's a gun in your drawer?

BENNETT
Of course. Why would you doubt that?

BETSY
Because the doughnut you told me was there earlier most definitely wasn't!

INT. LAW OFFICE - RECEPTION DESK - LATER

Bennett approaches and hands the woman behind the desk his business card.

RECEPTIONIST
(officiously)
Do you have an appointment?

BENNETT
I don't. But I think Mr. Nash will grant me an audience.

The receptionist looks Bennett over, then picks up her phone handset.

RECEPTIONIST
A Harrison Bennett to see you, Mr. Nash.
(beat)
Yes, sir. All right.

She returns Bennett's card to him.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
Go ahead back.

INT. LAW OFFICE - CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett passes several closed doors until he finds the one with the name "Arthur Nash, Esq." on it. He KNOCKS, then opens the door and proceeds inside.

INT. NASH'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

ARTHUR NASH (early 40s, trim, suited) sits behind his desk. Bennett enters and drops his card onto Nash's desk.

Then he settles into a client chair. Nash looks at the card.

NASH
(amused)
“Danger”?

BENNETT
Danger. With a hard gee. It’s a family name. Speaking of family names, I’ve got one for you, Mr. Nash: “Smith.” As in Eugenia Smith. As in the late Eugenia Smith, whose estate your firm represents and whose file I understand you’re handling for your firm.

NASH
(no longer amused)
I’m afraid I’m not permitted to discuss client matters, Mr. Bennett. I’m sure you understand that as well. I imagine you have the same or a similar rule in your line of work.

BENNETT
I’m not here to ask you to divulge anything in your case file. Instead, I’m going to tell you what’s in it. At least the stuff I find interesting. And then you’re going to tell me where Nathaniel Hammond is being kept out of sight.

NASH
Nathaniel Hammond... the writer?

BENNETT
Nathaniel Hammond the writer and first cousin once removed to the late Eugenia Smith. Nathaniel Hammond who stands to inherit, with his cousin Sharon Fielding, from the estate of Eugenia Smith, as long as they appear together at the reading of the will. Nathaniel Hammond, who was kidnapped from his home this very morning by one Harriet Smith or someone doing her dirty work.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Because if he's unavailable for just long enough, then Eugenia Smith's estate falls to her estranged daughter, the aforementioned Harriet.

NASH
I don't know anything about any of that.

BENNETT
Do me a favor, Nash. Interrupt me or lie to me, but don't do both at the same time.

Bennett stands and walks around the room.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Now, here's what I figure happened: A week ago, Eugenia Smith went the way of all flesh and someone called here to let the partners know. I didn't notice your name painted on the shingle outside, so I assume you're not sharing in the profits of this operation. But you did get picked by your bosses to see to this matter, so you pulled Eugenia Smith's file and familiarized yourself with the contents. And as you were doing that, you discovered something unusual, tragic, and fraught with potential. Namely, a prior will that revealed a disinherited daughter. But, lo and behold, she wasn't entirely without recourse. If Harriet Smith could just keep her cousins from reuniting, she could keep them from coming into what had been hers to inherit.

Bennett takes two books from a shelf, then replaces them in the opposite order.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
So you called Harriet Smith first and apprised her of the situation, advising her that her disinheritance was not ironclad. She blew in as fast as she could and came to see me.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
But not before she came to see you. Because you hadn't offered your services merely as an advisor but as an accomplice. You'd agreed to hold off calling Sharon Fielding for as long as you could before your bosses would expect a status report, but three days was all you could give Harriet to find, abduct, and hide Nat Hammond. And that's why Sharon Fielding showed up three days later and in danger of coming up well more than three dollars short.

Bennett notices an alarm clock, looks at his wristwatch, frowns at what he sees, shakes his wrist, then:

BENNETT (CONT'D)
Now, I'll be straight with you, Nash: I don't care one way or the other who inherits what. If Harriet Smith had come to town and talked Nat Hammond out of joining forces with Sharon Fielding to get some money, I'd have had no truck with that. It's dirty pool, but the table is still level. Sharon could always make her own case to Nat and may the best cousin win. But kidnapping a man, and a man who happens to be my friend, that's a whole other ball of wax.

Bennett sits again, finally.

BENNETT (CONT'D)
So I'm here to ask you where Nat Hammond is right now, and I'm not leaving until you do.

NASH
I'm afraid you'll have to. Because, and I say this without admitting the truth of anything you just said, I don't know the current whereabouts of Mr. Hammond.

The room is quiet for a moment, as the two men stare at each other across Nash's desk. Then Bennett reaches into his coat and draws his unloaded revolver, pointing it Nash.

BENNETT
(evenly)
I don't think I heard you, Mr. Nash. Would you repeat that address, please?

NASH
He's in Room 312 at the Hotel Chandler.

Bennett stands.

BENNETT
Thank you. I'll see myself out.

NASH
(quivering)
You can't do that, you know.

BENNETT
Sure I can. I'll just go back the way I came in.

NASH
(regaining composure)
I mean you can't go around sticking guns in people's faces. I'm going to call the cops.

BENNETT
Not guns. Just one gun. And not people's faces, just yours. And you don't have to bother calling the cops, because I brought some with me. They're just waiting for me to whistle.

Bennett opens the door to Nash's office, then whistles as he exits. Almost as soon as he's left, two uniformed police officers enter to arrest Nash.

INT. LAW OFFICE - RECEPTION DESK - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett is about to walk past the receptionist and leave the suite when he stops, turns around, and speaks to her:

BENNETT
I'm sorry. I forgot something.

The receptionist, on the phone, doesn't acknowledge him.

INT. NASH'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Nash's office is now empty. Bennett enters and heads directly to the wide veneered file cabinet on one side of the room. He opens a drawer and begins to flip through files... until he stops. He straightens up, giving the impression that he's gotten the feeling that he's being watched. He looks around the room for the eyes on him...

...and then he finds those eyes in a photograph in a silver frame on another bookshelf. Bennett steps over to get a better look at the photo. It is a photo of his ex-wife, Victoria.

BENNETT
Ah, crap.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - CORRIDOR - OUTSIDE ROOM 312 - EVENING

Bennett, Lohnes, the Real Sharon Fielding, Conley, P.O. Beck, P.O. Firth, and the HOTEL MANAGER are at the hotel room's outer door. The cops, guns drawn, are closer to the door than the civilians. In a rough line behind Conley stand the Hotel Manager, Bennett, Lohnes, and Sharon, in that order.

CONLEY
Is everyone set?

P.O. BECK
On your say-so, sir.

Firth nods in agreement.

CONLEY
Like we discussed it. On three:
One... two... three.

On three, Beck and Firth stay right where they are, but the Hotel Manager steps forward to unlock the door with his master key. Then Beck pushes the door open and steps inside, followed by Firth.

P.O. FIRTH
Police! Nobody move!

P.O. BECK (O.S.)
(calling out)
All clear.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - ROOM 312 - CONTINUOUS

Everyone else files in to find Nat and one of the thugs from the warehouse at a small table playing gin rummy.

NAT
(relieved)
Oh, thank heaven. I can't win a hand with this guy!

REAL SHARON
Nathaniel!

NAT
Sharon!

Nat gets up from the table and the cousins embrace. Meanwhile, Beck and Firth take the thug into custody and lead him out of the room, passing Bennett and Lohnes as they proceed.

BENNETT
(to Lohnes)
That had best be nothing more than a coincidence.

LOHNES
Completely. They're independent contractors.

BENNETT
Conley, better tell the boys to look for another one like the first.

NAT
Harry! I knew you'd find me.

BENNETT
What made you think I was even looking for you?

NAT
(laughing)
Stafford, I'm sorry about this.

LOHNES
Not to worry, my boy. As it happens, and thanks again to Mr. Bennett, I was able to deliver your manuscript only slightly past when it was due.

NAT
You were? That's terrific.

BENNETT
It’s nothing. We can’t deprive the people of “The Postman Always Brings Spice.”

NAT
(ashen)
How’s that, now?

BENNETT
Lohnes found it in your study.

LOHNES
And I delivered it posthaste.

NAT
(with difficulty)
That... that was not the right manuscript.

LOHNES
What do you mean?

NAT
That was a different project entirely. An untraditional story. Less black and white and meant to be read all over, as it were. More a horse of a different color, and that color is a shade of blue, if you catch my draft.

LOHNES
Oh.

BENNETT
Ah.

LOHNES
Well, the good news is that I’ve already heard from your editor, and he loves it, so there’s nothing to worry about on that account.

NAT
Except that it’s based on a true story. And I hadn’t yet changed the names.

BENNETT
Ah.

LOHNES
Oh. Then perhaps I should speak to your editor as soon as possible, in that case.

Lohnes hightails it from the room. Conley steps over.

CONLEY
Mr. Hammond, I'm Detective James Conley. I'll want to speak to you at length about your ordeal, but I understand that you need to leave town on some urgent business.

NAT
I understand the same. Harriet explained the situation to me by telephone.

BENNETT
By telephone? So she never did show up at your house. Just her thugs?

NAT
Don't call them thugs, Harry. They're decent men and they kept me good company. Other than not letting me leave this room, they saw to my comfort and entertainment. That one's a terrific card player, and the other one is just crackerjack with a harmonica.

BENNETT
You don't say. Well, it's good to see you, Nat. But as Conley mentioned, you do have business out of town. So let's catch up when you get back. And if things go off without a hitch from here on in, you're paying for lunch from now on.

NAT
Is it that much money?

BENNETT
I saw the will. It's enough.

CONLEY
Please come see me when you're back, Mr. Hammond.

Bennett and Conley exit the room, leaving Nat and the real Sharon behind.

INT. HOTEL CHANDLER - CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Bennett and Conley walk until they reach the elevators.

BENNETT
You didn't bring my car by any chance, did you, Jim?

CONLEY
As a matter of fact, Harry, I did.

BENNETT
That's swell.

CONLEY
The problem is that we didn't account for the number and size of the men we need to take back with us. They're not both fitting in the back of the cruiser, which means I've got to drive one of them back in a second car. And that means <u>your</u> car, Harry. I'm sorry.

As they get into an elevator cab:

BENNETT
Oh, it's fine. I've got nothing going on tomorrow. I'll come by for it then.

The elevator doors close.

INT. BENNETT'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Bennett rises, shines, and gets dressed for the new day.

BENNETT (V.O.)
I would have liked to sleep late the next morning, or at least stay in bed longer than usual, or at the very least not be in the office at nine, but I had a strong feeling I'd be needed to hold up my end of a difficult conversation.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - OUTSIDE BENNET'S OFFICES - LATER

Bennett strolls up the street.

BENNETT (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I showered, put on a clean white shirt, a navy blue suit, and a lavender tie with a dark purple flower pattern, had a cup of strong coffee at home, then headed in to the office. I made sure to pick up a box of twelve chocolate cherry cordials on my way.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - LATER

Bennett is behind his desk. An open box of chocolates is on the desk; one is missing. Victoria enters and sits in a client chair. She removes her scarf and gloves.

VICTORIA
I need your help after all, Harry.

BENNETT
Chocolate cherry?

She takes one.

VICTORIA
Thank you.
(beat)
I can't get Arthur on the phone, at his home or at his office. We were supposed to see a movie last night, but he didn't show.

BENNETT
Arthur?

VICTORIA
My fiancé.

BENNETT
So he asked you to marry him? Chocolate cherry?

VICTORIA
Thank you. Not quite yet, but I really do expect him to. Any day now. And it's just easiest to call him my fiancé.

BENNETT
How about we call him by his name. "Arthur," you said?

VICTORIA
Arthur Nash, yes. He's a lawyer.

BENNETT
Chocolate cherry? Take two.
(beat)
Listen, Vickie, there's something I need to tell you.

VICTORIA
Oh, Harrison -- please don't.

BENNETT
Don't?

VICTORIA
Please don't. I know this must be hard for you, but I just don't think that you and I could ever again --

BENNETT
Victoria. That's not it at all.

VICTORIA
Then what?

BENNETT
Finish the chocolate cherries and I'll explain.
(beat)
Actually, let me pour you a real drink first.

Bennett produces a glass tumbler and a bottle of something strong. He pours Victoria a drink and places a handkerchief where she can get at it easily, then:

BENNETT
Victoria, when a man and a woman love each other very much... but that man is a lawyer who has been asked to administer the will of a woman with an estranged daughter who kidnaps her cousin so that he and his sister won't receive their inheritance from the decedent's estate....

INT. AGNES' DELI - AFTERNOON

Bennett and Lohnes sit at a booth.

LOHNES
It's been quite a week, hasn't it?

BENNETT
It's been only four days, Lohnes. Maybe fewer.

LOHNES
Ah. Well, time flies when you're solving a mystery, doesn't it?

BENNETT
It can. Lohnes, listen, I appreciate your taking me out to lunch to apologize again, but it wasn't necessary. I've already forgiven you. I still don't have my car back, but at this point, that's on me. You and I are square.

LOHNES
I'm gratified to hear that, Mister Bennett, but I didn't come to apologize. Not to apologize again, I mean.

BENNETT
Then what? To hire me?

LOHNES
Just the opposite.

BENNETT
The opposite of hiring me? You came to fire me, Lohnes? Or just not hire me? I'm confused.

LOHNES
I came to see if I could make you a client of mine, Mr. Bennett. I represent writers, as you know. Men and women with interesting stories to tell.

BENNETT
I've got stories to tell, sure. But I doubt I'd be very good at telling them. Not on paper anyway. I don't know very many adverbs.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
And you wouldn't be able to see what I'm doing with my hands. Or my eyebrows.

LOHNES
You've got wit, Bennett. All my favorite writers do. Why don't you see what you could do with the events of the past three or four days. I'll take a look and tell you what I think. And if I think it's got merit, I'd be happy to try to sell it.

BENNETT
And what's your cut?

LOHNES
Fifteen percent. A little more if we can interest a movie studio.

BENNETT
You've got me writing movies now?

LOHNES
Why not?

BENNETT
You know that Nat gets my help with his yarns from time to time, don't you?

LOHNES
I didn't know that before I met you, but then I put two and two together.

BENNETT
I wouldn't want to horn in on his livelihood.

LOHNES
There's room for another gumshoe in print. In any case, competition breeds excellence.

BENNETT
And familiarity breeds contempt. And I've got an uncle who breeds alpacas, but I don't see what he's got to do with anything. But all right, Lohnes, I'll take a shot at it.

LOHNES
Terrific! Just give me a call when you've got something for me to read. I'll be looking forward to it. And, Harry, I'm sorry again about the other night.

BENNETT
Forget it. It's water under the fridge.

LOHNES
Isn't that "water under the bridge"?

BENNETT
Editing me already, Lohnes?

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - LATER

Bennett is at his desk, typing.

BENNETT
(calling out)
Betsy, how do you spell "exacerbate"?

SUITOR (O.S.)
(calling back)
E-X-A-C-E-R-B-A-T-E.

BENNETT
Did you catch a cold, Puffin?

Bennett gets up to see what the gag is.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett enters to find Betsy and her suitor.

BETSY
Uncle Harry, have you met Peter?

BENNETT
Not formally. Should I?

BETSY
Yes, Uncle Harry. Peter is... my beau. Peter, Uncle Harry is... my uncle.

PETER extends a hand. Bennett shakes it.

PETER
Peter Gilmartin, sir.

BENNETT
Harrison Bennett. Why are you such a good speller?

PETER
I work for a dictionary.

BENNETT
No kidding. What do you do for a dictionary?

PETER
For now, filing, mostly. On occasion I help with a definition.

BENNETT
Does your boss ever ask to have a word?

Peter Gilmartin doesn't laugh, but he smiles.

BETSY
Uncle Harry, leave Peter alone.

BENNETT
Not a chance, Betsy.

Betsy and Peter share a glance.

BETSY
(tentative)
Uncle Harry, I think I'd like to be called "Liz" from now on.

BENNETT
Really, Puffin? Liz? Not Betsy?

BETSY
I think so.

BENNETT
Can I still call you "Puffin?"

BETSY
Of course, Uncle Harry.

BENNETT
Fair enough, then. I presume you two have lunch plans that don't include me.
(MORE)

BENNETT (CONT'D)
I suppose I'll take the opportunity to fetch my car, in that case.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - OUTSIDE BENNETT'S OFFICES - LATER

Bennett comes out the front door... then immediately turns around and goes back inside.

INT. BENNETT'S OFFICE - OUTER OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Bennett enters the outer office, which is now empty. The PHONE RINGS. Bennett heads into his private office.

INT. BENNETT'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Bennett reaches into a desk drawer for his car keys, then picks up the phone handset.

BENNETT
Harrison Bennett Investigations. Please speak slowly, as my secretary is out to lunch.

INTERCUT TELEPHONE CONVERSATION.

INT. HAMMOND CASTLE - SAME TIME

REAL SHARON
Mr. Bennett, it's Sharon Fielding. The genuine article. I didn't get to thank you properly yesterday evening.

BENNETT
That's quite all right, Mrs. Fielding. Seeing Nat at liberty again, and evidently glad to see you, is all the thanks I need. And the money Harriet Smith paid me.

REAL SHARON
Well, thank you all the same. Nathaniel would like to speak to you as well.

BENNETT
Put him on.

At the house, Nat takes Sharon's place on the phone.

NAT
Harry!

BENNETT
Hello, Nat. How's the family?

NAT
Everyone's looking well, Harry.

BENNETT
I trust they're glad to have you among them?

NAT
They are. You should come out to Hammond Castle sometime. Plenty of spare bedrooms.

BENNETT
Alligators in the moat?

NAT
Not for years.

BENNETT
I'll consider it. You haven't run into Harriet, have you?

NAT
No. I wonder if she has any idea.

BENNETT
She may not, Nat. Jim Conley tells me that Nash didn't try to contact her from the clink. So she might be in for a rude shock at the reading of her mother's will. A rude shock and no dough.

NAT
Speaking of which: It's not a small amount of money I'll be getting, but I wouldn't be getting any of it if it weren't for you. Sharon and I agree that we'd like to do something for you.

BENNETT
That's not at all necessary, Nat.

NAT
I'm not talking about buying you a house, Harry. But maybe a new suit.

BENNETT
I could use a new suit.

NAT
I know you could, Harry. That's why I suggested it.

EXT. POLICE STATION - STREET - AFTERNOON

It's nicer out than it has been for days. Bennett is unlocking his car.

CLERK (O.S.)
Hands where I can see them!

Bennett steps back from his car, arms out.

BENNETT
(over his shoulder)
Officer, this is my automobile. I've got the registration in my wallet to prove it. Provided I remembered to bring my wallet.

CLERK
Oh, I don't care about that. I just wanted to see your hands.

Bennett turns to face the cheerful property clerk.

BENNETT
You.

CLERK
Good afternoon.

BENNETT
Are you first coming in or first going home?

CLERK
My shift just ended. I'm headed for the hay.
(beat)
So you've finally come for your car.

BENNETT
Finally. I almost forgot what it looks like. Now that I see it in the harsh light of day, I'm starting to think I should have donated it to science. Give you a lift somewhere?

CLERK
I was going to hoof it.

BENNETT
Nice enough day for a stroll. You want to get something to eat before you hit the sack? I'm sure my car will wait for me a little longer.

CLERK
Sure thing, Harrison Danger Bennett.

BENNETT
I never did get <u>your</u> name.

CLERK
Mary. Mary Trubble Murray.

BENNETT
"Trouble" is your middle name?

CLERK
It's "Trubble," with two b's. It's a family name. You know how it is.

Bennett smiles.

BENNETT
I do. I really do.

FADE OUT.