

FIRST SCENE

Amongst a certain set Harry D'Amour liked to believe he had some small reputation—a coterie which did not, alas, include his ex-wife, his creditors or those anonymous critics who regularly posted dog's excrement through his office letterbox. But the woman who was on the phone now, her voice so full of grief she might have been crying for half a year, and was about to begin again, *she* knew him for the paragon he was.

"—I need your help, Mr. D'Amour; very badly."

"I'm busy on several cases at the moment," he told her. "Maybe you could come to the office?"

"I can't leave the house," the woman informed him. "I'll explain everything. Please come."

He was sorely tempted. But there *were* several outstanding cases, one of which, if not solved soon, might end in fratricide. He suggested she try elsewhere.

"I can't go to just anybody," the woman insisted.

"Why me?" "I read about you. About what happened in Brooklyn."

Making mention of his most conspicuous failure was not the surest method of securing his services, Harry thought, but it certainly got his attention. What had happened in Wyckoff Street had begun innocently enough, with a husband who'd employed him to spy on his adulterous wife, and had ended on the top story of the Lomax house with the world he thought he'd known turning inside out. When the body-count was done, and the surviving priests dispatched, he was left with fear of stairs, and more questions than he'd ever answer this side of the family plot. He took no pleasure in being reminded of those terrors.

"I don't like to talk about Brooklyn," he said.

"Forgive me," the woman replied, "but I need somebody who has experience with . . . with the occult." She stopped speaking for a moment. He could still hear her breath down the line: soft, but erratic.

"I need you," she said. He had already decided, in that pause when only her fear had been audible, what reply he would make.

"I'll come."

"I'm grateful to you," she said. "The house is on East 61st Street —" He scribbled down the details. Her last words were, "Please hurry." Then she put down the phone.

He made some calls, in the vain hope of placating two of his more excitable clients, then pulled on his jacket, locked the office, and started downstairs. The landing and the lobby smelt pungent.

As he reached the front door he caught Chaplin, the janitor, emerging from the basement.

"This place stinks," he told the man.

"It's disinfectant."

"It's cat's piss," Harry said. "Get something done about it, will you? I've got a reputation to protect."

He left the man laughing.

SECOND SCENE

He got out of the cab on 3rd around 83rd Street, and walked through to a bar on Lexington where he knew he could put half a bottle of bourbon between himself and the dreams he'd had.

It was well after one. The street was deserted, except for him, and for the echo his footsteps had recently acquired. He turned the corner into Lexington, and waited. A few beats later, Valentin rounded the same corner. Harry took hold of him by his tie.

"Not a bad noose," he said, hauling the man off his heels.

Valentin made no attempt to free himself. "Thank God you're alive," he said.

"No thanks to you," Harry said. "What did you put in the drink?"

"Nothing," Valentin insisted. "Why should I?"

"So how come I found myself on the floor? How come the bad dreams?"

"Butterfield," Valentin said. "Whatever you dreamt, he brought with him, believe me. I panicked as soon as I heard him in the house, I admit it. I know I should have warned you, but I knew if I didn't get out quickly I wouldn't get out at all."

"Are you telling me he would have killed you?"

"Not personally; but yes." Harry looked incredulous. "We go way back, him and me."

"He's welcome to you," Harry said, letting go of the tie. "I'm too damn tired to take any more of this shit." He turned from Valentin and began to walk away.

"Wait—" said the other man, "—I know I wasn't too sweet with you back at the house, but you've got to understand, things are going to get bad. For both of us."

"I thought you said it was all over but the shouting?"

"I thought it was. I thought we had it all sewn up. Then Butterfield arrived and I realized how naïve I was being. They're not going to let Swann rest in peace. Not now, not ever. We have to save him, D'Amour."

Harry stopped walking and studied the man's face. To pass him in the street, he mused, you wouldn't have taken him for a lunatic.

"Did Butterfield go upstairs?" Valentin enquired.

"Yes he did. Why?"

"Do you remember if he approached the casket?"

Harry shook his head.

"Good," said Valentin. "Then the defenses are holding, which gives us a little time. Swann was a fine tactician, you know. But he could be careless. That was how they caught him. Sheer carelessness. He knew they were coming for him. I told him outright, I said we should cancel the remaining performances and go home. At least he had some sanctuary there."

"You think he was murdered?"

"Jesus Christ," said Valentin, almost despairing of Harry, "of course he was murdered."

"So he's past saving, right? The man's dead."

"Dead; yes. Past saving? No."

"Do you talk gibberish to everyone?"

Valentin put his hand on Harry's shoulder, "Oh no," he said, with unfeigned sincerity. "I don't trust anyone the way I trust you."

"This is very sudden," said Harry. "May I ask why?"

"Because you're in this up to your neck, the way I am," Valentin replied.

"No I'm not," said Harry, but Valentin ignored the denial, and went on with his talk. "At the moment we don't know how many of them there are, of course. They might simply have sent Butterfield, but I think that's unlikely."

"Who's Butterfield with? The Mafia?"

"We should be so lucky," said Valentin. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. "This is the woman Swann was with," he said, "the night at the theatre. It's possible she knows something of their strength."

"There was a witness?"

"She didn't come forward, but yes, there was. I was his procurer you see. I helped arrange his several adulteries, so that none ever embarrassed him. See if you can get to her—" He stopped abruptly. Somewhere close by, music was being played. It sounded like a drunken jazz band extemporizing on bagpipes; a wheezing, rambling cacophony. Valentin's face instantly became a portrait of distress. "God help us . . ." he said, and began to back away from Harry.

"What's the problem?"

"Do you know how to pray?" Valentin asked him as he retreated down 83rd Street. The volume of the music was rising with every interval.

"I haven't prayed in twenty years," Harry replied.

"Then *learn*," came the response, and Valentin turned to run. As he did so a ripple of darkness moved down the street from the north, dimming the luster of bar-signs and street-lamps as it came. Neon announcements suddenly guttered and died; there were protests out of upstairs windows as the lights failed and, as if encouraged by the curses, the music took on a fresh and yet more hectic rhythm. Above his head Harry heard a wailing sound, and looked up to see a ragged silhouette against the clouds which trailed tendrils like a man o' war as it descended upon the street, leaving the stench of rotting fish in its wake. Its target was clearly Valentin. He shouted over the wail and the music and the panic from the black-out, but no sooner had he yelled than he heard Valentin shout out from the darkness; a pleading cry that was rudely cut short.

He stood in the murk, his feet unwilling to carry him a step nearer the place from which the plea had come. The smell still stung his nostrils; nosing it, his nausea returned. And then, so did the lights; a wave of power igniting the lamps and the bar-signs as it washed back down the street. It reached Harry, and moved on to the spot where he had last seen Valentin. It was deserted; indeed the sidewalk was empty all the way down to the next intersection.

The driveling jazz had stopped.

Eyes peeled for man, beast, or the remnants of either, Harry wandered down the sidewalk. Twenty yards from where he had been standing the concrete was wet. Not with blood, he was pleased to see; the fluid was the color of bile, and stank to high Heaven. Amongst the splashes were several slivers of what might have been human tissue. Evidently Valentin had fought, and succeeded in opening a wound in

his attacker. There were more traces of the blood further down the sidewalk, as if the injured thing had crawled some way before taking flight again. With Valentin, presumably. In the face of such strength Harry knew his meager powers would have availed him not at all, but he felt guilty nevertheless. He'd heard the cry—seen the assailant swoop—and yet fear had sealed his soles to the ground.

He'd last felt fear the equal of this in Wyckoff Street, when Mimi Lomax's demon-lover had finally thrown off any pretense to humanity. The room had filled with the stink of ether and human dirt, and the demon had stood there in its appalling nakedness and shown him scenes that had turned his bowels to water. They were with him now, those scenes. They would be with him forever.

He looked down at the scrap of paper Valentin had given him: the name and address had been rapidly scrawled, but they were just decipherable.

A wise man, Harry reminded himself, would screw this note up and throw it down into the gutter. But if the events in Wyckoff Street had taught him anything, it was that once touched by such malignancy as he had seen and dreamt in the last few hours, there could be no casual disposal of it. He had to follow it to its source, however repugnant that thought was, and make with it whatever bargains the strength of his hand allowed.