



DEAD LANDS

NOIR



TENEMENT MEN

BY SHANE LACY HENSLEY





THE TENEMENT MEN

A Harvey Jenkins Dime Novel for Deadlands Noir

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DEDICATION

To the first victims of the Tenement Men, who wandered into
their den at GenCon 2012.



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**THIS TALE TAKES PLACE
IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE
EVENTS DETAILED IN THE
KICKSTARTER VIDEO
"HARDBOILED IN THE
BIG EASY."
IF YOU HAVEN'T WATCHED
THAT VIDEO, GO TO YOUTUBE
AND SEARCH FOR ALL FOUR
EPISODES OF
DEADLANDS NOIR.**

It always starts with a dame.

This one was slim, dark, and beautiful, at least.

Mama Bonte had helped me out of a spot a few days back. The kind of spot you have nightmares about. The kind that starts with drowning in the Mississippi and ends with a demon inside you.

"How are the ribs, Mr. Jenkins?" she said in her sultry Creole voice.

"Cracked and bleeding. They do that when someone shoots you in 'em." I couldn't help but let slip the smallest smile when I saw Bonte in the doorway. She had pouty lips and deep green eyes that looked right past an ugly mug like mine and into what I hoped was something better.

Bonte walked over and sat on the edge of my desk. She pulled aside my jacket and

looked at the bullet holes beneath. They'd been patched up by Doc Reedy two days ago, but they sure hurt like hell.

I winced, but honestly I didn't mind the touch. "How come I'm not dead? Or...am I? Again? Or is that...thing...still inside me?"

"I don't sense nothin', Mr. Jenkins. That ol' thing all gone. As to why you're alive..."

She fixed me with a wry grin that would have made me crack a safe, hand over whatever was inside, and take the rap for her. "Yeah?"

"You're just one tough son of a bitch."

I leaned back. I'd laugh if it didn't hurt so much. The crooked cop who'd plugged me had used a snub-nosed .38. Anything bigger and I'd be taking a nap over at Metaire. "Seems to run in my family."

"You lose your grandfather's badge?"

My grandfather had left an old Tombstone, Arizona, Sheriff's badge with Mama Bonte. Somehow it had helped me keep the demon inside me suppressed. "Yeah. It went for a swim in the Big Muddy."

Bonte cocked her head, thinking. "And what happened to the loa?"

"The demon? That thing that kept me tickin' after I came back?"

Bonte nodded slowly.

"Member that creep Mortis? Guy with the weird hoodoo?"

She nodded again.

"He was doing some kinda black magic. Something that felt like it was pulling my soul right out of me. I ditched the badge and let him have the thing instead."

Bonte cocked her head back and gave me that "I just gained slightly more respect for you, you poor, ignorant soul," look. That was fine by me.

"And the bullet holes came after." It wasn't a question. She knew I shook off

that kind of thing when I'd had the demon riding my insides.

"Let's just say I have poor taste in women."

"It's always a woman, isn't it?" she smiled.

I smirked. That was my line. "That's what I hear. Now what can I do for you, beautiful?"

Bonte stood and walked around my cluttered office, looking over a few of the souvenirs I'd picked up over the last couple of years. "You keep dese t'ings? From your cases?"

"Some. Not really keepin' a museum... just don't know where else to put 'em."

"I keep t'ings too, as you know. Dat's how I got dat badge of yours. But last night someone broke into my shop and stole some of 'em."

"Anything valuable?"

Bonte turned and gave me a serious look. "More like...dangerous."

I stood and crossed to my makeshift liquor cabinet. I'd missed the ice delivery so I poured two bourbons, hot and smooth as sandpaper. I offered one to Bonte. She took it, sniffed, and threw it back like a sailor.

I sipped mine. "You lookin' for someone to get your knick-knacks back?"

She nodded slowly. I sensed there was more she wasn't telling me yet, probably sensing my innate skepticism despite all the strange things I'd seen in Chicago or now down here in the Big Easy. I couldn't shake that—didn't want to. I knew there were monsters—I'd been one for a few days—but if you start thinking magic is responsible for everything you make a lousy private dick.

"What am I looking for?"

"Silver candle holders, an amethyst necklace, a skull with quartz eyes, and a gris-gris bag."

"Something's outta whack."

Bonte raised an eyebrow, listening.

"The first three things are all shiny. Sound



like the kind of things any thief might take to hawk. That gris-gris bag covered in diamonds or something?"

"No. But it was powerful. It's how I kept your loa in check before you took de badge."

"Any idea who did it?"

"Some 'oodlum, I reckon. Smashed my glass and went through my t'ings."

Something smelled like rotten crawfish. "You had a lot of stuff in there. That's all the thief took? Was it all together in one place or something?"

"No. All 'dose t'ings were in my boudoir in the back—not the shop."

The front of Bonte's shop was nothing but frog legs, chicken's feet, gator skulls, and other junk. Maybe a mambo or houngan would have use for it, but most of the penny-ante thieves of the Crescent City wouldn't pay a plugged nickel for that kind of stuff. So the thief knew Bonte had valuables behind the store front where she lived.

My glass was empty. I fixed that. "You have any visitors in the last week? Especially back in your uh...quarters?"

Bonte shook her head. "You were the last person in, chil'."

This shot of bourbon went down a little faster and burned a little hotter. "I'm older than you. Quit callin' me 'child.'"

Bonte sat her glass down and gave me that pitying look again. I read something like "you have no idea how old I am" in her big green eyes. These hoodoo types are always cheating Father Time, so I didn't press the issue.

"Okay. So I come in all fulla monster. You babysit me for...how long?"

"Tree days."

"Three days. I come to, you give me the badge, I head out and get shot. No one in or out since then."

The ebon goddess nodded.

"You go out anywhere?"

"I did a readin' for some ladies. That's where I was when the t'ief broke in."

"A reading? Like fortune telling? What was the last name of the lady who hired you?"

"Carolla. Edna Carolla."

Sam "Silver" Dollar Carolla was the boss of the mob—or "Black Hand"—in New Orleans. Mama would know that. One of his chief enforcers, Vince Gigante, was the palooka who deep-sixed me in the Mississippi.

"Setup."

"Pardon a moi, Mr. Jenkins?"

I pulled up close to Bonte. Close enough to smell the bourbon on her breath and some kind of herbs in her kinky hair. "Mr. Jenkins was my dad. Now he was a tough son of a bitch. Call me Harvey."

"I'll stick with Mr. Jenkins. For now."

Her words said no but her body language was selling her out. But I'm a gentleman so I backed off. "It was a setup. They asked you to come to them so the shop would be open. That's no random crime, then, so they were after one of those four items. I'd bet the gris-gris bag since the other stuff was shiny enough to look like something a regular thief would take."

Mama Bonte set her glass down on my desk and walked like an angel stepping in honey to the door. "You're a smart man, Mr. Jenkins."

It was a nice compliment, but I could tell from her look she already knew everything I'd just told her.

I fixed her with a hard stare. "You're a fortune teller. Can't you just read some tea leaves and tell me who took your stuff?"

"It don' work like that, Mr. Jenkins. The loas help d'ose who help demselves,

y'know."

"Yeah. I guess my dear old dad's saints are the same way. Never around when you need 'em."

"Says the man who cheated death. Twice."

"Point." I knocked back the last of my bourbon. "So...gris-gris bag? Any way I can tell it apart from all the others in this nutso city?"

Bonte stopped just outside my door. "It's old and tattered, but you can just make out an 'M' embroidered on one side. I don't know what it stands for or where it comes from. I inherited it when my...aunt...died."

We didn't discuss payment, but I owed her one for saving my soul I reckoned.



There were dozens of pawn shops in town. Mama Bonte's visit was after hours so I had to wait till morning. It was August in the Big Easy. No one—not the locals, the gators, or even the god damned mosquitos—liked New Orleans in August. It's humid like Mayor McKendrew is corrupt—no one denies it.

A few of the shops were close by in the French Quarter. I dropped down to my white button-up shirt—a new one without the bullet holes—and threw my coat over my shoulder. It still had bullet holes—this was the Depression and clothes weren't cheap. I stopped at the window of a furniture store and looked myself over. God and my granddad on my mother's side had blessed me with thick black hair. The pomade was holding it in place well enough despite the humidity.

My jaw was square and my nose was crooked—it'd been broken a few times. Most of the cuts and scrapes Vince Gigante had given me before he...killed me...were all healed up now, but the scars seemed determined to take hold.

My blue eyes were tired but better than usual. I'd slept better last night than I had in weeks. When that thing had been rattling around my skull it was like sleeping next to a hornet's nest—the constant buzzing drove you nuts and you were always afraid of getting stung.

My shirt was fresh enough so far, but I knew I'd sweat through it before I reached the first shop. My black suspenders were frazzled and my gray slacks hadn't handled the river very well despite a couple attempts at washing them out.

All-in-all, I was presentable enough for a pawn shop. Given the Depression, I was somewhere south of "upper crust" and well north of "poor."

The first two pawn shops in the quarter were a bust but the third paid off. Thieves were lazy and I figured he hadn't gone far. I saw a brand new set of silver candle holders and an amethyst necklace sitting on the "new" rack.

"Heya, boss. Nice stuff. Where'd you get 'em?"

The clerk sighed. He realized right away the things he'd bought must be stolen.

"Stolen, huh?"

"'Fraid so. From a voodoo shop about three streets over. Mama Bonte's."

He looked resigned but had to at least try. "Got any proof?"

"I'm guessing they came in with a little skull with quartz eyes?"

The shopkeeper shrugged in defeat. He reached down behind the counter to a jeweler's workbench and offered up the skull. "I was making sure they weren't some kinda gemstone."

"Nope. Just quartz."

"So...what are we gonna do about this? I paid honest money..."

"For something taken dishonestly." I

gave him the bully look. I can be a real goon when I want.

I picked up the skull and looked it over. Pure garbage. "But look here, old-timer. I got no beef with you. And you can keep all this junk if you tell me who brought 'em in."

The pawnbroker was an older fella with a green visor, white shirt, and balding with a thin ring of white hair around his pate. He had piercing blue eyes but they were trained solidly on the floor—he knew he'd done wrong, but he also didn't want to see someone get killed over such a petty theft.

"If it helps, I ain't gonna kill him. He took somethin' else and I just want it back. Swear on ol' Dixie."

The shopkeeper looked to the east wall where an old Confederate battle flag hung. With some of these old rebs I think it's country and God instead of God and country.

"All right. I want to do the right thing. And if he was a thief like you say..."

I raised my right hand and gave him my best sympathetic look.

"Well...I don't know his name, but he was wearin' red plaid pants. Like they wear down at Corino's."

Corino's was a private—and by private I mean illegal but paying off its bribes to Mayor McKendrew—gambling hall by the wharfs. I'd been in a few times when money was better.

"You sure?" I gave the codger one last tough-guy look. He nodded and shook some sweat off his jowls so I took him at his word. "Better be."



The rain started long before I got to Broadway. It was pouring, but I was a fish these days and "wet and miserable" were

old friends.

Corino's was in a basement. A lone bouncer stood at the top of the steps. A blonde with desperation running off her face faster than her mascara was pleading with him. I moved in to listen.

"...know he's in there somewhere! He didn't come home last night so he has to be inside. Maybe working an extra shift?"

The bouncer, a big black fellow named Tom, just shook his head. "Sorry, miss. Can't let you in without the stake."

"But I don't have fifty dollars! Who has that kinda money these days, Tom?"

Corino's required a \$50 deposit to get in. That got you \$45 in chips, which you could cash out if you happened to leave with any. That was a couple weeks' wages to most mooks these days. I didn't have it either. I was sitting on eleven and change. But I could run a bluff when I needed to.

"Thomas, right?"

Tom nodded, looking me over for trouble. I was all smiles.

I opened up my wallet and flashed the first ten-spot like more was coming...then "noticed" the distraught young woman. "What's the problem, ma'am?"

"My boyfriend Johnny is a dealer inside. But he didn't come home—we share an apartment—and this man won't let me go in and look for him!"

"Well that's not very nice, Thomas. Surely we can just take her down for a quick look, can't we? Then we can let her get on home out of this rain and make sure she doesn't worry any of the rest of the paying customers." I looked around like I was worried someone would see this mess and consider going elsewhere.

But Thomas wasn't just big. He was smart.

"I can let you go down there and look for her," he grunted.

I smiled.

“For the standard deposit of \$50.”

I dropped my smile and gave Thomas the “you really hurt me, pal” frown. I don’t think he was gonna lose any sleep over it.

I turned to the girl. “What’s your name, miss?”

“Sal. Sal Besson.” She was a mess. Her tight blonde flapper hairdo was coming all undone in the rain and makeup streaked down her face in black rivers.

“What’s Johnny’s last name?”

She looked up at me with just a hint of hope in her eyes. Clearly it had been a long time before anyone had done her any favors. “Hayes. Johnny Hayes. You know him, mister...?”

I let her question go unanswered. “Let’s take a walk.” I put my coat over her head and walked her to the nearest awning out

of the rain—just out of earshot of our buddy Thomas. “You say Johnny’s a dealer. He into anything else? Any run-ins with the law?”

Sal screwed up her face in anger. “He deals for the Black Hand so whatta you think, mister?”

I pointed at Thomas, sitting happily under his awning. “That big fellow isn’t exactly hiding. Corino’s pays their dues so they don’t have to worry about the cops. Was your boy into anything else? Like robbing voodoo shops?”

“Wha-?” If she’d known Johnny had robbed Mama Bonte I would have known it then. She didn’t know squat. About that anyway. “What are you talking about?”

“Never mind, doll. Let’s get you home. Turns out I’m looking for your boyfriend too. I find him, I’ll deliver him right to your door.”



Sal nodded, dazed and confused.

"How do we get there?"

She started walking, my coat over her head. We walked about half a block before she paused at an alley, then continued on past it.

"What's down there?"

"A shortcut, but we don't wanna go that way. Too dangerous. Come on, mister."

"Hold on. That the way Johnny walks home?"

Sal nodded slowly, understanding my meaning but not wanting to think about it.

I headed in. It was pitch dark. The rain didn't allow any kind of matches and I couldn't afford a flashlight. The alley was full of old vegetable crates and trash cans full of rotted food. It smelled worse than I did when I'd come crawling up out of the Mississippi.

Mostly, we felt our way, but occasionally somebody had left a light on by their back door. Two blocks down and I was starting to feel like this was a big mistake. It was a maze, but Sal swore she knew the way and had walked it many times. She was wrong though, and we walked right into a dead-end. I turned to take us back out when I heard someone knock over a trash can behind us.

"Who's that?" I asked. I'd be lying if I said I didn't lower my pitch a little.

No answer.

I shushed Sal and crept forward as quietly as I could. The rain was beating the trash cans and cobblestones all around and gave me a little help. I heard breathing. Light, calm, and heavy.

I crouched and clicked the hammer back on my .45 as loudly as I could for the intimidation factor. Sure enough, two shots cracked from the darkness, lighting up the shooter just enough for me to make out a

white face with a thin mustache.

I lunged forward and shoved my roscoe right into his gut. "Drop it."

Clack.

"Why are you following us?" I barked.

"I dunno what you're talkin' 'bout," said the mystery man. He had an affected New Orleans accent. Like he was from up north originally but had been here at least a decade.

I whacked him on the side of his head hard enough to draw blood.

"YOU INSANE!? I was just makin' sure you two weren't gonna cause no trouble for Corino's!"

It was a good story, but I was near broke and wasn't buying easy.

"That's garbage. Try again." I put the pistol down low and stuck the barrel in his groin. "You're lookin' for Hayes too, aren't you? Figured you'd tail his girl and see if she lead you to him?"

"Yeah. Somethin' like that. He went missin'. That's all I know."

"If he went missing that means he was sent on an errand during work hours. I know what that errand was. What I don't know is what happened after he came back with the gris-gris bag."

The goon looked up at me in amazement. I knew much more than he'd thought. Maybe even more than he did.

"But if you're looking for him, he never came back, did he?"

"Look mister, I don't know nothin' about no...bag. All I knows is he got sent on a job, like you said, an' never came back. But someone saw him runnin' aroun' last night over in Tremé, so we sent some guys to look for him. Me, I'm just supposed to follow Sal and see if he shows up. I ain't supposed to hurt him or nothin'...just bring 'im back to Corino's. Honest Injun!"



I let him go. I wasn't comfortable with my pistol in another man's groin anyway. "Good. You keep an eye on her then. Make sure nothin' happens to her. 'Cause it does, I'm coming for you." It was a vaguely hollow threat. I didn't know Sal and I didn't even know this mook's name. But it was a closer and he backed off.

Tremé was a poor part of town in a poor town. Half was just lousy, but a few of the rowhouses and tenements were abandoned after some kind of disease broke out there a few years back. Only the lost and the damned still squatted in those apartments.

I walked ahead with Sal, solving the maze and getting back to her apartment. The goon disappeared into the night but we knew he was watching. That was okay...for now. "Look Sal. I'm gonna get some help and try an' find your boyfriend."

We were standing in the doorway of the

building. She handed me back my coat and tried to shake some of the rain off of it. It was a nice gesture, at least. "Mister, I ain't got no money. An' I don't mess aroun' on Johnny."

"I ask for anything?"

"No, but..."

"Then don't offer. I'm looking for Johnny for my own reasons. I ain't lookin' to hurt him, but he took somethin' that didn't belong to him and I gotta get it back. Now you sure he did make it back home and hide it in your apartment?"

Sal nodded. I believed her.

Tremé was a soggy, misbegotten hell on a night like tonight. Crime was bad, too. Even our local murderers, thieves, and politicians were afraid to go there. If I was going in, I

wasn't going in alone.

The sign on the shop said "Crescent City Radio and Repair." I opened the door and saw the usual assortment of over-priced gadgets. There were no customers and no one at the counter, but Doc Carver was usually in the back anyway. I opened the door to the back room and instantly regretted it.

A single swaying light bulb illuminated the electronics lab. Smoke filled the room and I felt my hair stand on end even through the pomade. I heard something crackle, then something pop, then suddenly a blackened face wearing a huge pair of goggles appeared through the smoke in front of me.

"Geezus, Doc. You 'bout gave me a heart attack."

One bushy eyebrow rose...then fell. Doc Carver was black, but right now he was blacker than usual. Something had obviously blown up moments before I arrived and covered him in ash or soot. He was about my height and shaved bald with no facial hair. He normally dressed well, but his white jacket was scorched and smoldering.

Doc Carver removed his goggles to reveal his big green eyes. "Harvey? Harvey Jenkins?"

I coughed out some of the thick smoke and nodded.

"Good to see you, Harv. You just missed a miraculous experiment."

"Yeah...I can smell it. You okay?"

"That? Just a little...feedback. Nothin' to worry 'bout. Sometimes you gots to go to eleven to figure out where 10 is."

I let that sink in a bit.

"Hey doc. You still got that...thing?"

"I have lots of things, Harvey. Which one we talking 'bout?"

"The thing you carried in the Big One. Bessy."

"Why of course. In fact I made some changes to it not too long ago and applied for a patent. I expect to be hearing from the War Department any day."

"I'm sure you will. Look, this is gonna sound crazy, but I gotta go down to Tremé. Missing persons case. You an' ol' Bessy would sure make it easier."

Doc Carver frowned. "What's in it for me?"

"Field testing of your patent, of course."

"Field testing is expensive. In case you hadn't noticed there's a depression, though I'd quibble with the 'great' part."

"Sorry, Doc. This one is kinda pro-bono. Friend of a friend and all. Y'know, in fact, this was a mistake. Might be the Black Hand is mixed up in this as well. I wouldn't wanna drag you into it. Forget I said anything." I shook his hand—rubber glove and all—and turned to leave.

"Black Hand, you say?"

"Yeah." I stopped, my back to him.

"No friends of mine..." he started mumbling to himself. It wasn't like I didn't already know it. Doc hated the Black Hand for reasons he'd never cared to share. "Let me just get my coat. And a few other things."



Dragging Doc Carver along was a risk. His "patents," as he called them, were dangerous. Once he'd created a pair of goggles that could see in the infrared spectrum. By the time he'd finished explaining to me what that was exactly the goggles had caught fire and almost burned his eyes out. I called him "Eyebrows" for a time after that because he didn't have any. He didn't seem to appreciate the irony.

But Tremé was dangerous and that's where Johnny Hayes was likely hiding. There were a couple of blocks that had been abandoned after a cholera outbreak a few years back. Now only the faceless and forgotten intransigents squatted in these rundown tenements, and that was a good place for a guy like Johnny to get lost.

Doc had a car so we rode down to Tremé and scouted around. It didn't take long. There were a series of abandoned or rundown apartment buildings. In front of one of them was a black Packard.

Carver turned off his Ford and we sat quietly for a few minutes. Eventually we heard some noises from inside one of the buildings—and then a series of gunshots.

"Sounds like somebody's making popcorn in there, doc. You ready?"

Carver nodded, the look on his face deadly as the grave.

We stepped out of the Ford and walked up to the building. It was unnamed but had obviously been built on the cheap to cram in as many desperate souls as possible. Half the windows were gone or busted and the paint on the façade peeled away like bad memories. The steps leading up had once been grand but were now covered with broken bottles and bits of plaster from the crumbling walls.

The doors were open and hung loosely in their frame. It looked like the doorway to some kind of half-ass hell that couldn't be bothered to be a full-on purgatory.

"You sure your man's in here?" Carver looked up the face of the building to the six or so floors looming above us.

"Nope."

The doc flipped on Bessy's pilot light. It hissed low and blue in the night.

"You be careful with that. I took a couple of bullets recently and managed to come out the other side, but that...whatever it

is...is a whole 'nother thing."

"Plasma, Harvey. It's called plasma. Ionized particles of superheated..."

A Thompson opened up somewhere above us, cutting Carver short. "Science lesson later, doc. Let's go. Could be our boy's in trouble."

We went inside and found a dirty lobby with stairs going up to our right, and dark, open doors to our left. Something made a snarling sound from the nearest opening and Carver turned to face it.

"Dog," I said, as not one but four mutts came charging from the darkness. They were a bloody mess—probably from fighting with each other. Carver lit 'em up in a flash. A brilliant blue stream of gas rushed from Bessy and flooded the air around the hounds. In an instant, they were charbroiled.

I almost puked from the smell.

Carver merely tuned a dial on Bessy and looked her over like he was adjusting the tuner on a radio. "Hmmp. Need to adjust the flow," he mumbled.

I leaned over and looked at the mutts. There wasn't much left. But there was blood trailing from the room they'd come from and I played a hunch. "Wait here, Doc."

I stepped inside and instantly regretted it. A man sat in the corner. His face had been eaten off. Lunch played my mouth a return trip.

"What's in there, Harv?" Carver called.

"Nothing, doc. Nothing."

We stepped upstairs and stopped on the second floor. The steps were rotting away and we had to go slow to keep from putting our feet through them. The stairway was open to the rest of the floor. It was dark but I could make out a long hallway with doors

staggered down its length. Apartments, I reckoned.

A low moan came from one of them. I'm no hero, but if someone was hurt I had a hard time just walking away from it. I stepped out of the open stairwell toward the apartments.

"The shots came from higher up," Carver whispered.

"I know. Just take a second." I left the doc behind and walked as quietly as I could over the rotten floorboards. The building had really suffered since the cholera outbreak. Rot, mold, and rain had worked it over from the inside like cancer.

The first door on my left was closed. I passed it by. The first on my right was open but the apartment was empty. There was some old furniture that looked like someone had been sitting on it recently, and the remains of a fire that had been built in a bathtub someone had dragged out into what was once a living room. Squatters.

The next door on my left was cracked a bit and that's where the moan was coming from. It was hard to see through the crack and the room was dark inside, but there were definitely figures. I tried to nudge it open a little wider with the barrel of my pistol but the wet, swollen carpeting kept the door from swinging easy.

There were at least five individuals in there. All adults. All just sitting in the dark with one of them moaning like she—I think—was sick. Best I could tell there was a woman in the middle of the floor on her back. Four other figures sat around her—maybe holding her down.

Could be they were helping her. She might be raging with fever or suffering from convulsions. But I didn't think so. My gut wasn't just telling me something was wrong—it was telling me to get the hell out of there.

I cleared my throat. I wished I hadn't.

The one on the floor turned her head and looked up at me. I tried hard not to gasp. She had some kind of birth defect or disease. Even with almost no light I could see her eyes and mouth were tiny narrow slits. She mouthed something at me and the others started to turn their heads toward the door. Toward me.

Whatever was going on I couldn't help and it didn't look they were hurting her. I pulled back and heard at least a couple of the others move toward the door. I was down the hall and up the stairs faster than I could. Carver saw the look on my face and didn't ask questions.

"Let's find Johnny." I still had some friends on the force. I'd send them down later to see if these folks needed help. That's how I rationalized running away like a scared rabbit anyway.



Two shots rang out as I climbed the third floor, Doc Carver in tow. I charged, adrenaline pumping, .45 out and ready. Doc and I hit the fourth floor and stopped. We heard a number of scuffling footsteps and someone yelled "COME ON!!! COME AN' GET IT, YOU BASTARDS!!!"

I heard a burst from Thompson from our floor and down the hallway. I'd made a lot of noise coming up the stairs so there was no use trying to be quiet now. "Who's there?" I called out.

"What!? Hey! Someone there? Someone... normal?"

"Yeah. Who are you?"

"*Gras a dye!* I thought we was goners. I'm Gault. Dan Gault. Who dat?"

"Just a couple of nobodys. Heard the shootin'." I looked back at Carver. He rolled his eyes. It was a bad lie. There weren't many folks in the Big Easy who'd rush to help a stranger, and fewer still who would

go into an abandoned building with a firefight going on.

"You see dem...dem t'ings?"

Whoever Dan Gault was, he had a city-Cajun accent and he was scared. Scared enough that he didn't care who I was. He just wanted to hear a friendly voice.

"What things?"

Silence. Then, "You packin' heat, *mon ami*?"

"A little."

"Then come on up here. We need a little help. I'll make it worth your whil', *frere*."

I was at the top of a landing looking down a corridor full of doors—leading to old apartments just like the second floor. Gault was at the far end in some kind of open area. "Why don't you come on down this way? We'll walk you out."

"My friend and I are a little...stuck."

Friend. Well that was some information, at least. He wasn't alone. I nodded to Doc Carver and walked carefully down the hallway. The only light came from Bessy.

I inched forward. "What 's a fellow like you doing in this dump, Gault?" The floor creaked under me. There was a weak spot dead center of the hall.

Gault didn't answer. He didn't like the question, I guessed.

I jumped the weak spot...and landed on a pile of corpses riddled with bullet holes. They were lying on their bellies, as if they'd rushed the room Gault was in and got plugged for their trouble. There were at least four here...and one of 'em wasn't dead...

"What's goin' on..." was all I got out before the floor gave way. I saw Carver's horrified face as I spun down through the darkness tangled up with four bloody corpses. We hit the floor below...and burst it wide open too. Water had leaked straight

down from the roof and ruined the boards all the way down. We crashed through again—three stories now. I felt a rib snap. I heard one of the corpses groan—one of them was still alive!

Carver vanished from view. Nothing but darkness. I hit floor again. This time it held. I felt movement. Then I felt hands. More than one pair of hands. Half a dozen maybe. I heard...strange sounds. As if the people around me were trying to say something but they were gagged.

I heard Carver jump over the hole up top...and scream. I heard Bessy open up and through the three holes above me I saw blue fire. Gault's Thompson opened up again and I heard a smaller pistol too—maybe a .38. Gault's friend, I guessed.

The hands around me stopped grabbing and started pinching. Then clawing. The muffled groans grew louder, more excited. "Back off!" I barked, figuring I'd landed in a bunch of startled hobos or squatters.

I managed to get my .45 out and blast a couple of holes straight up—not trying to hit anyone. I wished I hadn't. The muzzle flash showed me a half-dozen faces in the brief light. They had no mouths...and no eyes. Just flesh over the holes where they ought to be. More extreme versions of that girl I saw on the second floor. Some kinda disease?

I ain't ashamed to admit I screamed.

"JENKINS!!!" I heard Carver yell from above. Bessy gasped again and pale blue light shot down through the hole...illuminating my attackers once more. I didn't know if they were monsters or men...but they were drawing blood. I popped one in the shoulder and slammed my foot into the knee of another. It made a big enough hole in the crowd for me to slip out and make a run for it.

The tenement's denizens pursued, arms outstretched, feeling their way but

somehow able to at least sense the basics of their surroundings. I scrambled to my feet as I ran...trying to find a staircase. I heard Carver yell my name again...more distant this time.

From a doorway to my right another of the "tenement men" emerged. He grabbed my coat and pulled me in to his non-existent mouth as if he were trying to bite. My nerves snapped. I shot him point blank in the face. Thick, ropy blood arced in the muzzle flash between my pistol barrel and the man-thing's snout as he flew back into the room.

I turned a corner and hit another hall. Three of the faceless lost groped their way through the darkness toward me. I capped one in the knee and drilled the other two through the guts. Four shots left.

I leapt over the things even as they reached for me and ran headlong up the corridor. Stairs. Up. Two flights. I heard footsteps just around the corner. Pistol forward—ready to shoot. Huge. It was the biggest one I'd seen. It was seven feet tall and made of corded muscle and misery. I couldn't see its face...didn't know if it was one of the tenement men or not. I stopped short...I'd made enough noise for it to hear me.

The big one spun. There was pale moonlight here...just enough for me to see. No mouth. No eyes. I fired once...it barely flinched.

The thing had a weapon—a thick four-by-four covered in nails. It gave a muffled roar and swung the club at my head. I ducked just in time and watched it shatter the hallway into a pile of rubble.

I stuck my .45 up into its guts and yanked the trigger three times. It didn't kill it, but it hurt it. The monster fell over onto the stairs and I leapt over as fast as I could. I heard the other tenement men clambering behind me...but they stopped when they hit the big guy. The ogre.

"CARVER!" I yelled. There was a faint reply from the next floor and I bounded as fast as I could go—motivated as much by fear and adrenaline as concern for the doc.

I topped the landing, turned the corner, ran down the hall, and jumped the hole I'd made in the floor the first time. There was plenty of light now. Doc's plasma gun had torched a number of tenement men and their corpses—as well as some of the surrounding walls, floor, and ceiling—were lit up in incandescent blue.

Doc himself was beyond the corridor in the large room where Dan Gault was. The gangster—you couldn't miss the pinstripe suit and weasely mustache—was in the far corner to my left. The floor had fallen away around him and he was stuck on what little ledge remained. Doc Carver was just inside to the right. Bessy's pilot light was out.

There was another man beside Gault...a lackey of some sort. He was bleeding from his neck and looked like he was about to pass out. He had a small pistol in his hand but didn't look like he was going to be much help. On the floor behind them was another man. This one had a bag over his head and his hands tied behind his back. He had red plaid pants. It was Johnny Hayes. Gault had found his man after all.

I looked down at Carver's gun and the doc shook his head. He threw it over his back with a grimace and pulled out a small pistol.

"What does that gizmo do?" I asked.

"Uh, fires bullets?" I almost laughed.

Something thumped heavy in the hallway behind me. It was the ogre, followed by however many other faceless souls were behind him. It half-roared through that skin-covered mouth and smashed its club into the walls in anger and hate as it came.

"What the hell's dat?" said Gault.

"Same as these other things. Just...bigger. Who's the guy in the hood?"

Gault was fairly cool for a man in his predicament. "Never you mind that, *mon ami*. But you help me get 'im outta here and I'll make sure there's a cool C-note in it for you."

A hundred clams was a lotta money. But there was no way he was going to pay it. This was a Black Hand hit. No witnesses.

"Sure, pal. Ain't none o' my business."

Carver fired his pistol down the hallway...eyes wide with terror. The ogre smashed and thudded its way toward us...a horseshoe toss away. Doc's peashooter did nothing but tell it where we were.

"Got anything left in that Thompson, Mr. Gault?"

"Bone dry."

"Well this is gonna go down like Castor oil, ain't it?" I turned and blocked what was left of the flaming hallway. "We need a plan, doc. Fast."

The ogre drew up next to me and raised its club above its head. The ceiling was burned away giving it plenty of clearance. Lucky me.

I dodged the first blow and felt the floor slipping away behind me—into the open space between the hall and Gault.

"One minute," Carver said and knelt down beside me. "Buy me one minute. I got this."

"I ain't gonna last 10 seconds, doc."

The giant gave another of his strange muffled roars and swung his club backhanded. It hit the flaming wall and a section of ceiling crashed down to the floor. I jumped on it—there was a bridge of fallen debris now between us and Gault.

I backed up to the gangster...hoping for a little help. He replied like the black-hearted son of a bitch I knew he was—and kicked his dying flunky out in front of us. The little man staggered forward holding the wound in his throat and fired his last round into the ogre. It reached out with its other hand, grabbed him by the coat, and threw him to the scuttling horde behind. The flunky screamed and cursed as the tenement men ripped him to pieces.

I shot Gault a dirty look...then laid my



best haymaker into the ogre's massive jaw. He'd been a black man in life—if that was how this all worked—and he was built like Hercules. I rattled some teeth—they were in that flesh-covered maw after all—but it barely noticed.

"Nice hook, pal," said Gault. He smashed the butt of the Thompson into the giant's nose and blood spurted like soda fountains. The thing yanked the Thompson out of the gangster's hands and hurled it into the blackness below.

"How's that plan of yours coming, doc?" I barked as I dropped low and threw a punch into the monster's crotch. No dice.

"Another 30 seconds."

"You gotta be sh..." The ogre had me by the throat and lifted me up off the crumbling floor with one muscular arm. The other shoved the club forward at Gault, but the wiry hit man dodged and came up with a switchblade.

"I was always more of a knife man anyway." He lunged past the ogre's arm and stabbed his thin blade into its neck and right shoulder over and over.

I gasped for air and tried to look at Carver but all I could see was the throng of tenement men moving up behind the ogre—the fresh kill of the lackey still covering their ratty clothes, groping hands, and faceless skulls.

"Over here, you cretins!" I heard...but I was about to pass out.

Gault was playing mumbly peg on the ogre's face now and managed to stab away enough of its flesh to see a bloody eye and some teeth. "Take that, you sumbitch!" I heard him yell as he stabbed the monster over and over again.

Suddenly the ogre dropped me and I landed back on Johnny...struggling under the mask and trying to get free of the ropes Gault had bound him with. I looked over at Carver and saw him hunkered down in the corner opposite me, facing the wall with his

fingers in his ears. It registered what was about to happen just a fraction of a second too late.

Bessy didn't explode like a hand grenade or a bomb. It was more like a massive sucking sound...then silence...then an equally large exhalation of gas. If there were such things as fire-breathing dragons, I imagine this is what they would sound like.

Carver had rigged Bessy up to blow somehow and then tossed her into the middle of the raging tenement men. She blew in a blue fireball that consumed most of the horrors and the floor beneath them as well. The ogre was on the edge of the new hole and began falling back into it...flailing for purchase as Gault stabbed away like Ahab on Moby Dick.

"Jump!" I yelled at him...but didn't know why. I had no reason to save a Black Hand assassin—especially one that was likely trying to waste the guy I was sent here to save. But that ogre was going to haunt my dreams, and I'd rather plug Gault myself then watch him tumble down into the blackness with that thing.

I caught him by the coattails a second before it was too late. The ogre crashed backward through whatever floor was left and managed a real, honest-to-God scream through the cave Gault had hacked into his mouth hole. I saw that one big, wild eye look over at me one last time in hate...or fear...or panic...and then he just slipped away into the black.

When Gault turned to thank me, I had my pistol leveled at him.

"Passerby, huh?" he half-smiled.

"Not exactly."

"Look *mon frere*. You saved my life. You want this guy? Take him. We both walk out of here and call it even."

Carver lowered a plank of wood for us to walk over to him. "Fire escape out this window. We can avoid any more of those

things.”

I looked Gault over long and hard. He was a hit man. A killer. Most of his victims would be other members of the Black Hand, or rival gangs. But he'd kill his own sister for a nickel most likely. Still, we'd just fought something even darker. Together. Something that would haunt us forever once we got past the adrenaline rush of our fight.

“Go on. Get outta here. I'll get the kid outta town. You say he died here. Got it? Someone comes lookin' for him, I come lookin' for you.”

Gault hurried to the window. He looked over the captive, folded his switchblade, and tucked it into his jacket pocket. “I saw the corpse myself,” he grinned. Gault slipped out the window, clambered down the fire escape, and left Tremé.

“All right, kid. Let's get you outta here. There's a gal a few miles away who's missing you something fierce.”

“What are those things?” Carver asked as I cut Johnny's hands free.

“The lost and forgotten. The faceless men of Tremé,” I grunted. “Things like that take on a life of their own sometimes. Clichés become real.”

Johnny struggled to pull the hood off his head but it was cinched around his neck. He was panicking. I heard his muffled cries underneath the burlap sack.

“Just a second kid...I gotcha.”

“Wait, Harvey,” Carver whispered behind me. “Something's not ri...”

I pulled off the hood. Johnny Hayes grabbed at me, screaming a horrible muffled cry from a mouth sealed over by his own flesh...



“And did he have my gris-gris bag?”

“No. Maybe Gault had it already. I forgot to ask. Things were a little...hairy.”

Mama Bonte sat on the edge of my desk later that night. She wore a green, silk gown that hugged her figure like a lover sending her boyfriend to war.

“And what did you tell da girl?”

“The truth,” I grunted in a tone that said I didn't want to talk about it. “Johnny was dead when I got there.”

Bonte looked down and nodded. She knew there was no other way. “That gris-gris bag. It's trouble. The Black Hand needs it for somet'ing. Somet'ing bad. The future is a dark and cloudy t'ing, Harvey Jenkins, but I can see that much.”

“Well, unless somebody pays me to care, I'm afraid this private dick is sticking to cheating husbands.” I threw back a shot of bourbon and felt it go warm and hateful down my throat. “It's been a long night, Bonte.”

She reached over and turned off my desk lamp. The rain pattered outside but a quarter moon still managed to shine through my windows. The mambo's ebony skin glistened in the pale light. “It's not quite over yet, Mr. Jenkins. Payment will be rendered. In full.”

I started to protest but truth is she was a dark Aphrodite and I wanted to worship. I knocked back one more bourbon and loosened my tie.