

R A P P I N ' D O G

RAPPIN' DOG

DICK LOCHTE

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*“Go to school,
“And play the fool,
“You get no help in the cruel world.
“Play it smart, get a fast start,
“There’s an art
“To livin’ large in the cool world.”*

The words of rapper B.A. “Big Apple” Dawg reverberated through the unmarked police van. I turned to Mr. Leo Bloodworth, the renowned private investigator, who was sitting next to me and said, “You’re playing the fool when you go to school? That’s the dumbest advice I’ve ever heard. The man’s a cretin.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Sara,” Mr. B. replied, using his own diminution of my given name, Serendipity. Full name, FYI, Serendipity Dahlquist.

The three LAPD detectives in the van, members of an elite team known as The Star Squad, were busy with their surveillance. The leader, a Detective Gundersen, asked, “You getting a good level, Mumms?”

“CD quality,” Officer Mumms replied. She was a very cool black woman, seated at a table that had been bolted to the floor of the van, studying the various indicators on a recording device secured to the table.

“Bug’s workin’ fine,” Detective Gundersen informed our driver. “Give the Dawgman a heads-up honk.”

The driver, Detective Lucas, tapped the van’s horn twice. He was a rather handsome man with more than a passing resemblance

to the actor, Mr. Bruce Willis, except that he didn't wear a constant smirk and he had quite a bit of curly hair. Detective Gundersen's hair was straight, but gray and lay flat on his head like the late legendary singer, Mr. Frank Sinatra's. My grandmother, who is an actress and should know, once told me that Mr. Sinatra's hair was not totally his own. Maybe Detective Gundersen's wasn't either, but I'd like to think that the Los Angeles Police Department insisted that their officers eschew such nonessential cosmetic touches.

The horn was a code Detective Gundersen had set up with Mr. B.A. Dawg, who was driving a peach-colored Rolls Royce maybe two car-lengths ahead of us on Sunset Boulevard. It informed him that the transmission was working well and he could stop testing it with his dreadful singsong.

But he didn't stop.

"Show some sense,

"Keep Mr. Pig on the de-fense.

"He comes aroun', puts you down,

"Expects to find you shiverin' and shakin'.

"Take the pledge, use an edge, cut that mutha oinker up into bacon."

"What the heck's he saying, Mumms?" Gundersen asked.

"You don't wanna know, Herm," Officer Mumms called to him. She smiled at me. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen-and-a-half," I replied truthfully.

"And you don't like rap?"

"Vachel Lindsay is about as far as I go," I said.

"Never heard of her," Officer Mumms said. "But I dig the Dawgman. I hope we can catch the guy messing with him."

Mr. Dawg moved on to another of his ditties, one exploring his total lack of respect for womankind. "He's giving a concert at the Shrine tomorrow night," Officer Mumms said.

"I know," I told her.

She leaned toward me and, in a voice loud enough for Mr. Bloodworth to hear, asked, "Your boss like rap?"

Mr. Bloodworth wasn't my boss, exactly. Though officially categorized as a "high school student," I am sort of his apprentice, spending my afternoons, and some school holidays at his detective agency, mainly observing the art of criminology. I also do a little filing and billing, which I was in the middle of, alone in the office, when the call came from Ms. Lulu Diamond, Mr. Dawg's manager, the day before. If Mr. Bloodworth had been there, he probably would have turned down the job. But he wasn't and so he and I were in the van, sharing an adventure with the members of the Star Squad.

"Does Mr. B. like rap? No," I told Officer Mumms, "rap really isn't his thing. His idea of popular music is *Moon River*."

He glared at me with those odd yellow-brown hawk's eyes. "Careful, sis," he said. "You're talking about the late, great Johnny Mercer."

"Cops, they got the wrong approach,

"Like the cockroach,

"Crawl around in the dirt,

"Gonna meet up with a hero, burn 'em up like Nero, and make 'em face the big hurt."

"Jeeze," Detective Gundersen said. "If he don't change the tune, I may wind up killing him, myself."

Mr. Bloodworth gave me one of those "this is all your fault" looks. True, of course, but if he expected me to feel guilty about it, he was quite mistaken.

As I've mentioned, the big, rawboned sleuth hadn't wanted to get involved with Mr. Dawg. But I'd explained to him that because of his recent illness – he'd been felled by a flu virus – the month had been a gloomy one, financially speaking. And there was no sign on the horizon of any other ship coming in.

On arriving at Mr. Dawg's suite at the Beverly-Rodeo Hotel, I must admit to a certain trepidation on my part, too. The place was filled with an assortment of unpleasant people – loud and

arrogant men in expensive baggy gym clothes and silver jewelry, caught up in some football epic on TV and totally ignoring their ladyfriends who, I am sorry to report, were no less anti-social. Nor better dressed.

“Rock and roll trash,” Mr. B. muttered to me, and though he was several generations off, his point was well made.

A little pink-cheeked, bespectacled matron in her fifties, her round body covered by a loud Hawaiian muumuu, navigated the crowd gracefully to greet us. “Hi. I’m Lulu Diamond,” she told us, using a chubby finger with a bright red nail to point to the glittering stones embedded in her eyeglass frames.

We exchanged introductions and she asked, “What can I getcha, kid? These bums B.A. calls his friends have cleaned out the portable bar, but I can order up room service.”

“I’m fine,” I told her.

“You, big boy?” she asked Mr. B.

“I’m okay, too,” he said scanning the scene. “I don’t see your client.”

“He’s, uh,” she pointed to me and winked, “spending quality time with the missus in the bedroom.”

The big detective winced. “Yeah, well, Ms. Diamond – ”

“Make it Lulu, big guy.”

“Lulu, you think you could pry him loose? We ought to get moving on this, assuming that we’re dealing with a real situation.”

Lulu frowned and suddenly didn’t look so matronly. “B.A. Dawg, with three platinum CDs and the new one going gold after just one week, does not have to resort to fake death threats to make headlines.”

“I hope not,” Mr. Bloodworth said. “Because then we’d be wasting our time.”

“I’ll go get him,” she said.

“There seems to be a lot of violence in the record business,” I said, mainly to distract him from the ball game on TV.

"Yeah," he said absently, eyes glazing at the sight of video pigskin. "Gangs. Drugs. Good old-fashioned business rivalry. I don't think we're dealing with that here. In fact, I don't know what we're dealing with here."

According to Lulu, Mr. Dawg had received one of those scary notes made up of pasted letters. It announced that an organization called The Rap Tribunal had found him guilty of plagiarism. In his ultimate wisdom, he assumed the sender to be a crank, though he should have realized that anyone who went to the effort of clipping and pasting that sort of note surely would not go away quietly.

He'd no sooner disposed of the note when the Tribunal gentleman was on the phone, his voice electronically altered, offering Mr. Dawg a choice. He could donate a portion of the profits from his most popular CD, *Smack Attack*, to the poor street people from whom he stole most of his lyrics. Or he could die. The amount requested was \$150,000 in \$50 bills, to be placed in one of those aluminum suitcases.

He had twenty-four hours to get the money and stand by for further instructions. If he went to the police, he was told, he might as well put a gun to his own head.

That's when Lulu dialed the Bloodworth Agency.

Mr. Bloodworth was falling under the spell of the ball game when I spied Lulu waving to us from an open doorway. "We're being summoned," I said.

Mr. Dawg was sitting on a rumpled bed, a man of thirty or so. He was wearing leather pants the color of brown mustard. No shoes. No shirt. He was long and thin and very black. His hair was dyed a bright orange. And there were enough pieces of metal embedded in his ears and nose to keep him off of airplanes for the rest of his life.

"You the private pork?" he asked Mr. Bloodworth.

Mr. B. frowned. "I'm an investigator," he said.

"Blood-worth. I like that. This your ladyfriend?" Mr. Dawg asked, looking at me.

"Thirty-five years too late for that," Mr. B. said.

"She don't look so young," Mr. Dawg said. "Nasty's only twenty. An' she been Miz Dawg for two years."

His reference was to the woman seated at the dresser combing her hair. She was nearly as tall as he, and as thin. But there was a languid quality to her, as if she weren't fully awake. I imagine it must have had quite an effect on simple-minded men.

"My name is *Nastasia*," she corrected her husband. "And those two years seem like an eternity, Dawgman."

Mr. Dawg shrugged off her comment. "So, you gonna keep me breathin', Bloodworth?"

"I'll be honest with you, B.A. No one person can guarantee to do that."

"See," Nastasia said. "Told you, Dawgman. Get those cops back."

Mr. Bloodworth raised his eyebrows. "What cops would that be?"

"During the tour last year," Lulu said, "we had another little problem when we hit L.A.. One of the former members of the Dawg Posse, that's B.A.'s backup, went a little whacko and made some threats against him. So we called the cops and they sent us these detectives who specialize in dealing with celebrities."

"The Star Squad," Mr. B. said.

"Yeah. That's them," Nastasia said.

"Didn't like 'em," B.A. said.

"You just a crazy man," Nastasia said. "We oughta get those guys back. They didn't take more than a day to pick Walter up and toss his butt into jail."

"It's the way to go," Mr. Bloodworth said. "If you want me to duplicate the level of protection the cops can give you, I'll have to put on a bunch of other operatives. Could cost you as much as three grand a day."

"F'get that jive," B.A. Dawg said.

"The man on the phone said no cops," Lulu Diamond said.

"They always say that," Natasia replied. "Cops know how to handle it."

Mr. Dawg snapped his fingers at Lulu and the two of them walked out onto the balcony to discuss the situation.

Nastasia looked me up and down. "What you playin' at, girl?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Why you here?"

"I work with Mr. Bloodworth," I said.

"Yeah? Well, Mr. Blood, here, fits the private eye image, but you, I'd take you for some kinda Miley wannabe."

"Then you'd be making a mistake," I said.

Mr. Dawg and his manager re-entered the room. He snapped his fingers at Mr. Bloodworth. "Cops are in. But I want you to handle it."

"How's that?" Mr. B. asked.

"The cops. I don't like 'em. So I'm payin' you to deal with 'em. Work everything out with them and then you tell me."

"Mr. Dawg," I asked, "could it be your former employee, Walter, trying to get your attention again?"

He shrugged. "Walter's crazy enough, I guess."

"Maybe the cops still have a line on him," Mr. Bloodworth said.

"C'mon, tall, blond and rugged," Lulu said to Mr. Bloodworth. "Let's go talk money."

Later, when he and I were driving downtown to the new Parker Center where the Star Squad offices are located, Mr. Bloodworth said, "Herm Gundersen and I go back a ways. This should be a snap; we'll just let him do all the work."

In point of fact, he and Detective Gundersen had gone through the police academy together. So there was none of the antagonism a private detective sometimes encounters when dealing with lawmen.

"The Dawgman again, huh?" Detective Gundersen said. "Hear that, Lucas?"

Detective Lucas looked up from his desk four feet away. "Who's he pissed off this time?"

"Maybe the same guy you arrested last year?" Mr. B. suggested.

The younger detective picked up the phone and quickly ascertained that Walter Lipton, the recalcitrant ex-employee, had been released from prison only three weeks before.

"Talk about your likely suspects," Detective Gundersen said. "Well, we'll take over from here, Leo."

"That'd be fine with me, Herm, but Dawg said he'd like us to stick around."

Detective Gundersen hesitated, then smiled, "Sure, buddy. You and the kid are welcome to observe a crack team in action. Lucas, slap on that charming smile of yours and let's show 'em how we handle international celebrities in this man's town."

So we'd "observed" them shooing away the freeloaders at the hotel, setting up the phone taps, arranging for counterfeit bills to be placed in an aluminum suitcase along with a tracking device, and being generally obsequious in the presence of Mr. Dawg, his sullen wife and Lulu Diamond.

To give The Star Squad their due, when the representative of the Rap Tribunal finally called, they leapt into action. Unfortunately, the call had been made on a drug store cellular phone and was therefore untraceable. But at least we had a disk of the conversation and didn't have to rely on Mr. Dawg's rather short attention span.

The representative of the Rap Tribunal, voice distorted electronically, informed Mr. Dawg that he had thirty minutes to get into his Rolls Royce with the suitcase and drive to a public telephone at an address on Sunset Boulevard. Further instructions would be forthcoming.

So there we were, tagging along, being regaled by the so-called rapmaster's poetic but addled view of life.

Suddenly, he stopped mid-rhyme to declare, "Mus' be da place."

He pulled to the curb at a bus stop in front of a sidewalk shop called Café Coffee and got out of the Rolls. The pay phone was just at the edge of the café's patio which was filled with folks satisfying their caffeine fix while risking melanomas.

There were no other spaces, legal or illegal, for the van to park, so Detective Lucas drove about a quarter of a block past the Rolls and double-parked. Up ahead was an unmarked sedan, stopped in a similar position. Its occupants were four other members of the Star Squad. They were a bit too far away to keep Mr. Dawg in view, but we had a clear view of him, resplendent in his powder blue leather jumpsuit, standing at the phone.

"Would you look at the hot babes at that coffee place?" Detective Lucas said. "Damn, I love L.A."

"Keep your roving eye on the Dawgman, huh?" his boss said.

Thanks to the transmitter taped to Mr. Dawg's chest, we could hear sidewalk noises, the whistle of the wind and, eventually, a ringing phone. "Yeah, it's me," we heard him say. We could not hear the caller at all.

"Hold on," Mr. Dawg said. He reached under the ledge of the booth and removed a small object that had been taped there. "Got it." It was a cellular phone.

Detective Lucas said, "Check out the babe and the guy sitting at the second table over from B.A."

A young African-American couple seemed very interested in Mr. Dawg. In any other city in the free world, it would not seem unusual for people to be gawking at a blonde African-American recording star wearing powder blue leather, tearing something from beneath a pay telephone ledge. But this was Hollywood. And none of the other patrons of Café Coffee was giving him a second's notice.

As he hopped back into his Rolls, the couple stood up from their table. The man tossed a few bills down and they both ran for their car.

"What now, Herm?" Detective Lucas asked.

“Wait and watch, lover boy.”

Mr. Dawg pulled out into traffic. From our speakers, his voice blared, “Man say he’s gonna call me, tell me where to go.”

The departing couple got into a little red BMW. When they passed us, heading after Mr. Dawg, Detective Gundersen yelled, “Let’s roll.”

“I take it neither of those people are the guy who gave Dawg trouble last year,” Mr. Bloodworth said.

“Walter Lipton? Naw,” Detective Gundersen said. “He’s probably manning the phone.”

“That’s a heck of a bright red car they’re using to collect loot,” Mr. Bloodworth observed.

“Amateurs,” Detective Gundersen sneered. “Mumms, run a check on that license, if you please.”

It was blissfully quiet in the Rolls, Mr. Dawg evidently too caught up in the moment to be thinking about rapping. But Detective Lucas took up the musical slack, humming nervously.

Mr. Bloodworth picked up on the detective’s melody. We listened to their duet for a few minutes until Detective Gundersen growled, “Could we can the concert?”

Mr. Bloodworth looked at me and shook his head sadly. “You don’t like that, you don’t like good music,” he muttered.

“Another of your Johnny Mercer songs?” I asked.

“Close. Written by the late great Bobby Troup. *Route 66*. Troup was a pal of Mercer’s, I think.”

He started to recite the lyrics, which sounded to my ears almost like rap, except they were much more whimsical (rhyming “Arizona” with “Winona,” for example). The ringing of Mr. Dawg’s cellular phone interrupted him.

We heard the rapper say, “Okay. Make the next turn an’ head back to the ocean.”

The unmarked sedan in the lead must’ve gotten the message because we saw it head into the left lane just in front of the Rolls.

The red Beamer was directly behind Mr. Dawg. We were several cars behind it.

"How you doin' on that license check, Mumms?"

"We'll get it when we get it, Herm," she said.

Our little caravan made the turn and continued west on Sunset for about a mile when the cellular rang again. "Okay," Mr. Dawg said, "I turn down Doheny to Santa Monica Boulevard an' keep goin' to the ocean." He was silent for a beat, then added, "Sure, I got the loot. I'm co-operatin'. Nope, no cops nohow."

Officer Mumms emitted a little chuckle. "Isn't he some-thin'?" she said.

We moved along Santa Monica Boulevard, past the Century City shopping center and on under the San Diego Freeway. Past old movie houses, rows and rows of small businesses, restaurants.

The temperature dropped several degrees when we moved through the seacoast town of Santa Monica. I could smell ocean salt in the air when the phone rang again.

"Right," Mr. Dawg said. "I turn right on Ocean, take the incline to the Coast Highway an' keep goin' 'til I see the sign for Topanga Canyon. Then head up the Canyon. Why we goin' to all this trouble? Lemme jus' give you the damn money. I got me a concert tonight. I...*Damn!* Dude hung up on me."

Detective Gundersen scowled. "It would've been simpler to have us just stay on Sunset. Why the circle route?"

"Must be making sure the rapman is all by his lonesome," Detective Lucas said.

"Mumms, tell Maclin to press the pedal and go on up Topanga and wait." Detective Maclin was in the lead car. "Lucas, you'd better pull back as far as you can. We don't want to spook those folks in the red car. And, Mumms, can't we find out who the hell they are?"

"Searches take time," Officer Mumms said.

The couple in the red car didn't seem to care if we spooked them or not. They remained on Mr. Dawg's tail up into the Canyon.

My grandmother loves to tell horror stories about gruesome crimes that took place in Topanga back in the 1960s way, way before I was born, during that odd historic time of social unrest. As we drove through, it didn't look dangerous at all. Just another moderately populated rustic canyon.

Mr. Dawg's phone rang again. This time the instruction was to turn off into Calico Canyon.

Unfortunately, that news came too late for the lead car. The Rolls made the turn, followed by the red Beamer and, after a considerable distance, us. Detective Maclin and his men were now last in line as we climbed along a small road through the relatively uninhabited, tree shaded canyon.

Higher and higher we went along the twisting macadam, barely keeping the little red car in sight and not seeing the Rolls at all.

The cellular rang and Mr. Dawg said, rather waspishly. "Okay. I'm stoppin'. And I'm tossin' the suitcase...Now what?... You sure I can get out of here goin' up?...Okay, you the man."

We rounded a curve and saw the Rolls pulling away.

But the red Beamer had stopped. The male, who'd been driving, got out and was at the side of the road, bending down to pick up the suitcase.

"It's a go-go-go," Detective Gundersen yelled.

"Book'em, Dano," Officer Mumms said, as Detective Maclin leapt from the other vehicle.

Mumms, Mr. Bloodworth and I remained in our car, observing the six plainclothes policemen running to the man holding the suitcase. The woman threw open her car door and got out, rushing to her companion.

"LAPD," Detective Gundersen growled, "Drop the money, boy."

"Boy?" the young man shouted back. "Who the hell...?"

Then he made a big mistake. He threw the suitcase at the detective.

Suddenly the other three were on him, pummeling him with their fists.

"Jee-zus," Officer Mumms said.

"This is bad news," Mr. Bloodworth said, getting out of the van. "Stay here, Sara."

As he ran toward the melee, Officer's Mumms' radio began to squawk and a static-y voice informed us that, according to its plates, the red BMW was licensed to a Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Laurence of Mill Valley.

"Where you goin', girl?" Officer Mumms asked me. "Your boss said stay."

"I took no vow of obedience to him," I told her.

Mr. Bloodworth had pulled one of the detectives off of the young man. And was getting a fist to the side of his head for his trouble.

Screaming at them, the young woman kicked another detective in the shin and received an elbow in the chest that sent her to the ground.

I ran to their car, looked in. Then I quickly opened the driver's door and kept pressing the horn until I had everybody's attention.

"They're tourists," I shouted.

"Huh?" Detective Gundersen said.

"Tourists. From Mill Valley. They've got luggage in the back of their car and highway maps in the front. Look," I held up a pair of Mickey Mouse ears. "They've been to Disneyland."

Officer Mumms had left the van, too. She moved to Mrs. Laurence and was helping her from the ground.

The young man pulled away from Detective Lucas' grip, wiped his bloody nose on his shirt and staggered to his wife.

"You all right, baby?"

"Jus' got the wind knocked out of her," Officer Mumms said.

Mrs. Laurence nodded in agreement.

"You bastards are crazy," Joseph Laurence of Mill Valley said to all of them. "I'm gonna sue your ass off."

"Yeah?" Detective Gundersen said. "First you're gonna have to explain to us crazy bastards what the hell you tourists are doing out here with that metal suitcase?"

The young man lost just an inch of attitude. "My wife and I are having a cup of coffee wondering how to spend our last afternoon in L.A. when there's B.A. Dawg, himself, right there on the street. The rappin' rap master. So I figure, let's check out what the Dawgman's up to."

"That brings us to the suitcase."

"We're behind the man, see him toss something from his Rolls. I tell my wife, hell, B.A. Dawg may not want whatever that is, but for the rest of us, it's a solid gold souvenir."

Detective Gundersen looked dubious, but he said, "We'll check out your story."

"Check out my story? You sure as hell will. Right after I sue you and everybody else for beating on me and my wife."

Detective Gundersen shifted his gaze from the battered Laurences and scanned the area. I supposed he was searching for someone with a camera. Seeing none, he gained a bit more confidence and said to Mr. Laurence, "We're pretty sensitive to stalking in this part of the state, pal. Got all kind of laws against it. So I'm giving you two choices – you can let us fix up your scrapes and bruises while we're checking out your story. Or you can keep mouthin' off about lawsuits and we'll throw you and the little lady into the tank for stalking and harassing Mr. Dawg."

I hit the horn again.

Everyone looked my way. Detective Gundersen seemed particularly peeved. "What now?" he shouted.

"Speaking of Mr. Dawg, where is he?"

In an absolutely horrific piece of bad timing, from the upper road came the unmistakable sound of a gunshot.

Shouting orders for the others to stay with the Laurences, Detective Gundersen ran back to the van, followed by Detective Lucas. And me and Mr. Bloodworth.

Detective Lucas eased around the red BMW, slightly scraping the side of the van on the canyon wall before zooming up the road.

Half a mile or so later, we came upon the Rolls sitting still, its engine purring. I started to open the van door, but Mr. Bloodworth grabbed my arm. The two policemen had their weapons drawn and were searching the area through the van's windows.

Eventually, Detective Gundersen said, "The rest of you stay here."

He slipped from the van and, head moving from side to side like a radarscope, he approached the Rolls. He stopped, turned and stared up the canyon wall, then put his pistol back into its holster. He opened the Rolls' passenger door and bent into the vehicle. A few seconds later, the pale exhaust clouds ceased. Detective Gundersen backed out of the car and, looking at Detective Lucas, made a gun with his thumb and forefinger and pantomimed shooting himself in the temple.

Mr. Bloodworth felt it was his duty to notify the widow Dawg.

But by the time we got to the suite at the Beverly-Rodeo Hotel, the news had already broken. The widow was in black – a lacy, sort of see-through outfit, but definitely black – holding a hankie to her red-rimmed eyes.

She thanked Mr. Bloodworth for doing his best to save her husband's life. Lulu Diamond wasn't quite as forgiving. "I hope you don't expect to get paid for letting poor B.A. take one in the head," she said. "You're lucky I don't sue. Maybe I will."

"You do what you want," he told her. He was feeling very low about the way things turned out.

As we started for the door, Mrs. Dawg called out, "Hey, Mr. Blood, don't listen to her. I'm grateful you did what you could

for my husband. You'll get your money. It wasn't your fault the police panicked Walter into shooting B.A."

"It was his fault the bungling cops came into it," Lulu grumbled.

"No. That was my suggestion, Lulu," Mrs. Dawg said. "My fault."

"But when somebody doesn't deliver –"

"Pay the man, Lulu."

"Look, it's my opinion –"

"And it's my money."

Grumbling, Lulu Diamond went to the desk, opened a check-book and began scribbling on it.

The phone rang and Mrs. Dawg said, "Could you get that, Mr. Blood? I'm not up to phone talk."

Mr. Bloodworth, looking even more uncomfortable than usual, lifted the receiver. "This is, ah, the Dawg suite...oh, hi, Herm."

The big detective listened a bit, then his face registered surprise. "Damn. That was fast...No kidding. Yeah, I'll tell her. Thanks."

He placed the phone back on its cradle and turned to Mrs. Dawg. "That was the cops, ma'am," he said. "They found the guy who murdered your husband. Walter Lipton."

"Oh?" She said it as though it didn't matter much.

"He put up a fight and they had to shoot him."

"He dead?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Too damn bad, huh?" she said and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Lulu ripped the check from her book, waved it in the air and handed it to Mr. Bloodworth. "You oughta be ashamed to take this."

"Right," Mr. B. said, jerking the paper from her fingers and slipping it into his wallet.

"So they caught and killed the schlemiel who put an end to my meal ticket," Lulu said. "Big friggin' deal."

"Whew," Mr. Bloodworth said, when we were back in his car. "Tough racket."

As we drove toward the apartment I share with Grams, I opened his glove compartment and began digging through his music tapes. Finally, I found one titled "Kicks on 66, the songs of Bobby Troup."

I slipped it into his cassette player and heard a man with a very pleasant voice sing the title number. "You're right," I told Mr. B, "it's a neat song."

"Troup's a real talent. Used to be married to Julie London."

The name meant nothing to me. "According to the song, Route 66 runs from Chicago to L.A.," I said. "Where is it out here, exactly?"

The big detective scratched his head. "Darned if I know. I think they renamed it or something."

"I'll have to look it up," I said.

"The only thing I have to do is deposit this check," he said. "And hope it clears."

I imagine he must have spent some of the check in his dim bar-rooms because he seemed a little slurry when he arrived at his apartment at ten that night. I'd been phoning him since four in the afternoon.

"Wha's so 'portant?" he wanted to know.

When I told him, he was silent for a few seconds. Then he said. "Could be a coince'nce."

"A coincidence? Not likely."

"Hmmm. How can we be sure?"

I gave him a suggestion. I'd been thinking the problem through for five hours.

By the time the detectives, Gundersen and Lucas, arrived at the Beverly-Rodeo Hotel at shortly before eleven, Mr. Bloodworth seemed to have sobered up a bit. The lawmen were totally sober.

And angry. "Leo, what the hell is this all about? Lipton was in possession of the rifle that killed Dawg. He's been IDed as the purchaser of the cell phone. All that was hanging fire was a checkup on the Laurences. That came in and we are now confident that Lipton was acting alone."

"He's dead," Detective Lucas added. "Case closed."

"But Mr. Lipton wasn't acting alone," I said. "Someone was working with him, someone who could provide him with Mr. Dawg's suite telephone number, someone who knew that Mr. Dawg was familiar enough with Southern California streets and byways to follow rather cryptic directions."

Detective Gundersen shook his head and turned to Mr. Bloodworth. "Leo, I hope we're not here just because of this kid's fantasies."

"Serendipity's pretty good at this sort of thing," Mr. Bloodworth said. "Let's go on up to the suite. The ladies are waiting for us."

"You bothered that poor woman?" Detective Lucas said. "Interrupted her mourning?"

"She'll rest better when we clean this up," Mr. Bloodworth said, entering the hotel.

On the way up in the elevator, Detective Lucas asked me, "So, who do you think was helping Lipton?"

"Lulu Diamond, of course," I said.

The young policeman raised an eyebrow. "Why 'of course'?"

"She had a strong motive," Mr. Bloodworth said. "I checked in with this guy in New York who's on top of the music business. Says Dawg had feelers out for a new manager. Not only was Lulu going to lose her main client, the insurance policy she's been carrying on his life would be canceled."

"How big's the policy, Leo?"

"A mil," Mr. Bloodworth said.

Detective Gundersen let out a low whistle. Detective Lucas looked amazed.

The two women were waiting for us. Not cheerily. Nastasia Dawg sat on the sofa, a wine colored robe wrapped over what appeared to be a satin nightgown. Lulu was dressed in yet another muumuu, this one with large blood-red flowers against a yellow background.

"Let's get this over with," she said waspishly, "I need my beauty sleep."

"Okay, Lulu," Mr. Bloodworth said, as planned, "these officers are here to arrest you in connection with the murder of B.A. Dawg."

Lulu's mouth dropped. And Nastasia Dawg seemed to shake off her languor for the first time, her eyes saucer-wide.

"You son of a buck," Lulu shouted at Detective Lucas. "You sold me out."

The handsome detective couldn't have been more surprised if Lulu's skin had peeled away exposing a Martian underneath. "Are you nuts?" he wailed.

"Yeah," Lulu said, advancing on him. "Nuts for thinking I could count on you."

"Hold on," Detective Gundersen shouted. "Mrs. Diamond, you're saying Lucas is involved in Dawg's murder?"

"Involved? He planned it."

"She's demented," Detective Lucas whined. "I don't even know her."

"You say that now, you bum," Lulu snarled. "But on the phone it was 'Lulu, honey, it's a perfect plan. I got this nut case Lipton all primed to pull the trigger. He's spent the last year getting crazier and crazier. All we've gotta do is get the rapmeister within fifty yards of him.'"

"This is insane," Detective Lucas protested.

"You located Lipton pretty quick today, Lucas," Detective Gundersen said. "And it was you shot him dead."

The young detective looked from his boss to Lulu to Nastasia.

"Stand up guy, huh?" Lulu said with contempt. She turned to us. "That's how he described himself last year when you cops took care of Walter Lipton the first time."

"You two have been planning this for a year?" Mr. Bloodworth asked.

"His plan," she said. "But I went along. I guess we can forget all about that insurance money now, huh, lover?"

Detective Lucas' hand went for his gun, but Mr. Bloodworth was too fast for him. One punch and the younger man was on the floor and Mr. B. was holding the weapon.

Detective Gundersen looked down at his partner and said, "You have the right to remain silent..."

As he worked his way through the Miranda litany, his young detective looked past him, staring at Nastasia Dawg. "Tell 'em," Detective Lucas shouted over the recitation of his rights. "Tell 'em, damnit."

"I don't know what you're talking about, mister," the sultry woman replied.

"I'm talking about us."

"You and Lulu?" Nastasia looked genuinely confused. But Mr. Bloodworth and I knew that to be a pose.

"Me and you," the no longer very handsome policeman screamed.

"Man's pathetic," Nastasia said, turning to leave the room.

"Yeah, I guess I am," Detective Lucas said bitterly. "I was dumb enough to fall for that, 'my husband beats me' routine. We had to kill him before he killed her. That's what she got me to believe. Then we'd be in velvet. All that loot from his music. We'd live happily ever after. Just another goddamned pipe dream."

He grabbed Detective Gundersen's arm. "You know I'm not lying to you, Herm," he pleaded. "I wouldn't have done what I did for some ugly fat broad."

Lulu Diamond's eyes narrowed.

"I guess I do know that much about you, Lucas," the older detective said sadly. "Leo, you want to keep him and Mrs. Dawg covered while I phone for somebody to come take 'em away?"

Nastasia sneered at Detective Lucas. "It was a setup. Lulu's working with them, you vain jackass. Why is it I always wind up with fools?"

"Lulu, you were terrific," I said. "You should have been an actress."

"I tried that," she said. "But I never was much good. Guess I was waiting for that perfect role. Thanks for giving it to me, Bloodworth."

"Don't thank me," he said. "It was Sara who wrote the script."

Nastasia turned to me. "Of course, it was you. So what messed us up?"

"Well, when we were driving around today. Detective Lucas did something that indicated he knew where we were headed even before Mr. Lipton conveyed that information to Mr. Dawg over the cellular phone."

"I didn't do a thing," Detective Lucas said. "She's lying."

"I don't lie," I told him. "When we were traveling on Sunset Boulevard, you knew we would eventually drive out of our way to take Santa Monica Boulevard to the ocean."

"I knew that?" Detective Lucas said. "You're nuts, kid."

"One of us is. According to the Route 66 page on the Internet, the highway runs along Santa Monica Boulevard and ends at the ocean."

"That's no big news," Detective Lucas said. "I once drove 66 all the way from Santa Monica to Albuquerque. So what?"

"So while we were still on Sunset, headed away from the ocean, you started humming Mr. Bobby Troup's famous song. You had Route 66 on your mind at a time when only those who planned Mr. Dawg's murder knew that's where we were headed."

"Another fool, just like B.A.," Nastasia said.

"But with better taste in music," I said. "Unfortunately for you both."

THE END