

 **booklife.**
REVIEWS
EDITOR'S
PICK

MANHATTAN .45

ROBERT BRACE



MANHATTAN .45

Also by Robert Brace

Floreat Lux

Andromeda Graphika

Ash Wednesday

Journal of the Supernova

Lysander Dalton series

Black Tiger

Iron Butterfly

Speed Graphic

MANHATTAN

.45



Robert Brace

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

MANHATTAN .45. Copyright © 2026 by Robert Brace. All rights reserved.

Front cover photograph: Empire State Building © Erika Wessel

Cover design by the author

First Edition: October 2026

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026911049

ISBN 978-1-968103-02-6

Privately published, Oct 2026, New York.

www.RobertBraceAuthor.com

No part of this book may be reproduced or retransmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, artificial intelligence, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

MANHATTAN .45

1

WHEN LOLA DESHAINES WALKED INTO MY OFFICE THAT FIRST time, striding through the door without knocking, without any of the usual hesitation, I knew before she said a word that my luck had just changed.

She wore a pillbox hat with a veil. Her dress was cut close and belted tight. The top was double-breasted but with the cross flap open, like a cavalry officer cooling after a long ride. Something silken beneath. Shoes new enough to be unscuffed. Latest fashion, expensive materials, expertly tailored.

A pretty little rich girl; someone who'd never heard the word *no* in her life.

She came to a halt in front of me.

"Mr. Kerrigan?"

I took my feet off the desk, put down the boxing pages, and tried to look reliable.

"Yes, ma'am," I admitted. "Jack Kerrigan."

"My name is Lola Deshaines." She looked back at the empty room behind her. "I couldn't find your secretary."

"Out to lunch," I said.

Actually, my secretary had been out to lunch for about a year now.

Deshaines looked around, squinting with disappointment—whatever she'd been expecting, my office wasn't it. Maybe she'd been fooled by the address. The Empire State Building, being the world's tallest, has a certain swank. They began the thing back in '28, before the Crash. By the time it was finished in '31, so was the economy. Now, five years later, they still hadn't filled it, which was the only reason someone like me could get an office here. Not much of an office, but an office just the same.

"Take a seat."

She turned her back to me as she went to the chair. The seams of her stockings were dead straight. I leaned back as she sat down.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Deshaines?"

She lifted the veil, and I saw her eyes clearly for the first time. They were big, brown, and focused on me with all the sentiment of a sniper.

"I was hoping to engage your services," she said, "but now I think I've made a mistake."

"Why's that?"

"You called me *Mrs.* Deshaines." She held up her left hand. "No ring. Surely a good private detective should notice things like that?"

"I prefer the term *investigator*. Detective means police."

I'd made the assumption because most women who walk alone into my office turn out to be married. I end up following the husband down to some west-side flophouse or one of those new "motel" joints on the Jersey shore, break in at the opportune moment, take a quick photo of him and the girl with my trusty Speed Graphic, then get out fast before hubby finds his .38 Special.

Lola Deshaines sat back and crossed her legs. The dress rode up over her knees.

"What can I do for you, Miss Deshaines?"

"I want you to investigate something for me."

"I'm pretty busy right now."

I hadn't had a new case in weeks. My last two had been failures. One client refused to pay, believing the revelation that her sweetheart could have

been with another woman was an outrageous lie, despite the fact she had hired me to discover precisely that, and notwithstanding the glossy eight-by-tens attesting to the fact. If she'd been a man I would have slugged the fee out of her, but what can you do with a woman who refuses to pay?

The second client had terminated my services for reasons involving "decent standards of Christian conduct."

I flipped through a few leaves of my empty desk calendar.

"I might be able to take on something, though. Exactly what is it that you'd like me to investigate?"

Instead of immediately answering, Deshaines pulled out a cigarette case. It was fancy, and so were the cigarettes: they were that new filter-tipped style. She took one out, closed the case, and tapped the cigarette on the cover. It took me a moment to realize that she expected me to come and light it, but before I could she stood and sashayed over to the desk.

Deshaines picked up my desk calendar, examined it briefly, dropped it in the wastebasket, and then sat on the newly cleared space. She put both hands on my side and leaned across. Her face was inches from mine. The cigarette was between her lips. The bright red lipstick made them look wet. Those big baby browns zeroed in on me.

I pulled out my cigarette lighter.

The Zippo had been with me my entire adult life. It had accompanied me throughout the war and the flu epidemic that followed. When I had been in France, lying on the fallow ground of a frozen winter field, a dumb kid full of German lead and turning the snow red with my blood, I had lit what I assumed would be my last cigarette with that Zippo. When I bought a new suit after getting demobilized, it was the first thing that went into the pocket. When I'd been down and out in San Francisco or Havana or Shanghai, that same Zippo had always been with me. Through good times and bad, it was the one thing in life that never failed me.

I flipped the cover and thumbed the flint wheel. Lola Deshaines lit her cigarette, blew a little smoke in my face, and then pulled out a sheet of paper from her pocket. She placed it on the desk between us.

"I'd like you to investigate this."

Deshaines resumed her chair. I unfolded the paper.

It was a consignment note, a carbon copy. The shipper was the Hamburg Amerika Line. The note was printed in German with English translations typed in underneath. The consignor was “Daimler-Benz.” I’d heard of the name, a German automobile company. The consignment was described as “Parts of Assemblies of Clutching and Gearing of Mercedes Model 540K Motor Car.” Clumsy translation, but the meaning was clear. The weight was listed at 435 pounds. The cargo had been carried aboard the SS *Danzig* and landed at the Bush Terminal in Brooklyn three weeks ago.

The consignment note made sense: no foreign manufacturer exports automobiles to America—especially luxury cars; who could compete with Packard or Duesenberg? So there are no dealers, and if someone owned a foreign-made vehicle that needed spares they would have to import the parts themselves.

I got to the space marked “Consignee.” It had been covered with ink. I looked up.

Deshaines had put the veil back down, and her eyes were again in shadow. The cigarette hung from her lips. Blue smoke curled toward the ceiling.

“Who was the consignee, Miss Deshaines?”

She removed the cigarette.

“I don’t know. Someone appears to have spilled ink over that part.”

“It was done deliberately,” I said. No reaction. “A spill would have been a blob, and if accidental then whoever made the spill would have blotted the ink. You would still have been able to read it.” I held up the note so she could see for herself. “This was splattered, as you can tell from the spray pattern at the edges. Probably by someone holding a fountain pen above it, then screwing down on the cylinder, forcing the ink to shoot out through the nib. And he—or she—let the ink dry instead of blotting it, to be sure that no one could see what was underneath.”

A long silence.

“So you are a good detective after all, Mr. Kerrigan,” she said at last. “How fortunate for me.”

“Investigator, Miss Deshaines.”

I had a pretty good idea who'd covered up the consignee's name, but there was no point in pushing it now.

"Exactly what is it that you want me to investigate?"

"I want you to find out what the cargo was."

"Says right here: auto transmission parts."

"I want you to verify it."

"Only way to do that would be to see it for myself. And the only way to do that would be to check out the consignee."

"What a pity we'll never know who that was, Mr. Kerrigan."

If I'd been in a position to do so, I would have refused the case, but even private investigators have to eat.

"What does this have to do with you, Miss Deshaines?"

"I don't know, Mr. Kerrigan. That's why I want you to investigate it."

"How did you come by the consignment note?"

"It arrived in the mail."

"From who?"

"It was sent anonymously."

"Do you have the envelope?"

"I threw it away."

"Was there anything else with it?"

"A letter."

"What did it say?"

"That I should have it checked out."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"Do you have the letter?"

"I threw that away, too."

This was just about the least convincing story I'd ever heard, and I've heard some doozies. I stared at her in silence for a long moment, but she wasn't budging.

"Okay, Miss Deshaines. I charge twenty dollars a day, plus expenses."

"Fine," she said.

I couldn't believe my luck. I would have happily done it for ten.

ROBERT BRACE

"I'll need a retainer," I said. "A hundred dollars," I added, trying to keep the question mark out of my voice.

Deshaines again stood and came to the desk. This time she stubbed out the cigarette in my ashtray, taking her time, before opening her handbag. I glimpsed a spectacle case inside: she wore glasses, but vanity had gotten the better of her, or maybe she just thought her chances of suckering me were better if she didn't wear them.

She took out an envelope and placed it on the desk.

"I've already arranged your retainer. This should be adequate."

I opened the envelope and unfolded the sheet of paper inside. It was typed on First Continental Republic Bank letterhead and addressed to me. There was just one paragraph, stating that I now had a thousand-dollar line of credit with the bank and could draw down on it by presenting this letter and some form of personal identification at a teller window. It was signed by the manager of the branch on East Forty-Second Street. I wasn't exactly sure what a line of credit was, but as I read through the letter a second time, it seemed that I now had a thousand bucks. I've never even seen a thousand bucks, much less been paid it.

"Yes," I admitted. "This is adequate."

"I rather thought it would be."

I pulled a pad from the desk. "I'll need your address and phone number."

"There's a Western Union office in the Daily News Building," she said. "A message left there will reach me."

"What if I need to contact you urgently, Miss Deshaines?"

"It's a Western Union office, Mr. Kerrigan. They'll telegraph me."

No address, no telephone number. I was pretty sure that I would have found both beneath the ink blot.

I returned the letter to the envelope, put it in the drawer, and stood to show her out.

One of the benefits of a modern building like the Empire State is that the elevators are automatic, so there's no operator to witness when you come

and go. This was important to me: I'd been kicked out of my apartment a while back, and the office was where I slept now. This was strictly against the terms of the lease.

I've had worse times; in this Depression, who hasn't? I kept telling myself that it was only temporary, and good times would come again. With that line of credit in my pocket, it seemed they just had.

I escorted Deshaines to the elevators. I stood in front of the call buttons so that she couldn't see them and hit the one marked *Up*. A car arrived with people inside. I held the doors open, pressed the button for the lobby, and stepped back out. I knew from experience that pressing the lobby button meant nothing. That elevator car was still going up, and it would finish taking the other passengers to their floors before returning to the lobby.

As soon as the doors closed, I pressed the button marked *Down*. Another elevator car arrived. I hit the button for the lobby, and down we went. If it worked out like I hoped, I would get downstairs well before the woman who called herself Lola Deshaines.

2

THE LOBBY OF THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING WAS AN EXPANSE of polished marble, a deep, rich brown, the color of Lola Deshaines' eyes. The fittings and furnishings were in the flowing Art Deco style that makes you believe in progress after all. Here, everything was streamlines; outside in the real world, it was more often bread lines.

I stepped outside into the real world.

There was the usual rush of people along the Fifth Avenue sidewalk. I went to a shoeshine stand set up outside the tobacco store. The seat was empty. An elderly black man was sitting on a box by the side. He stood as I approached but kept his eyes down, assessing my shoes.

"Yes, suh," he said enthusiastically. He slapped the seat with his hand. "C'mon right up, suh."

"Shady, it's only me."

He looked up and couldn't keep the disappointment from his eyes.

"Kerrigan." He shook his head sadly. "You're a mean nickel-tipping S-O-B. I don't want to shine your stinking shoes."

At least the cotton-boy accent was gone.

"You don't have to shine them, Shady. I just need to use your chair for a minute." I got up on the customer seat.

Shady sighed. "Since you're up there..." He fetched his brushes from the box.

I would have preferred he do nothing, for Shady didn't see too well and tended to polish your socks. But he took pride in his work, so I kept quiet and picked up the newspaper he left by the chair to occupy customers. Shady never paid for these; he retrieved them from the trash. I tried to avoid the stains.

According to the headline, last night they'd finally executed Bruno Hauptmann, the Lindbergh Baby kidnapper. Actually, they'd executed Hauptmann back in April, but Shady never learned to read and so couldn't check the papers he found. I went through the story anyway.

The New Jersey governor offered to commute the sentence to life if Hauptmann confessed, but he maintained his innocence till the end. The execution had gone ahead. They claim the electric chair is more humane than hanging, but it took them six and a half minutes to kill Hauptmann.

Deshaines emerged from the lobby. If I hadn't seen her out of the corner of my eye, I still would have known she was there from the reaction of the men on the sidewalk. Her presence went through them like a ripple across a pond.

She turned in my direction. I hid behind the paper as she walked past, although there was probably little chance of her recognizing me without her glasses. I was intending to follow, but when I lowered the paper I saw that it wouldn't be possible. She was heading to a car parked at the curb.

There were three things I'd refused to sell or pawn because no private investigator can work without them: my car, my camera, and my Colt .45. But the car, an aging Ford Model A that was as reliable as a promise, was parked three blocks away. And unless I could find a cab whose driver gave change on letters of credit, a taxi wasn't an option either.

Even had the Ford been handy, it would have been unable to keep up with Deshaines, for hers was no ordinary automobile. It was an Auburn, a Boattail Speedster model. The top was down. Like all speedsters, it was slung low. Four big exhaust pipes swooped out from either side of the hood.

This one was made all the more spectacular by the paint job: bright pumpkin on the coachwork; glossy black on the fenders and running boards.

The vehicle verified what her clothes had suggested, and the line of credit had confirmed: Lola Deshaines was rich.

She walked to the car, a beautiful woman and her beautiful automobile. The only thing marring the picture was a big, ugly cop standing in the way. He was writing a parking ticket. I recognized him: Grogan—a thick-necked Irish thug from the Thirteenth Precinct.

Deshaines talked to him for a moment before opening her handbag and passing the cop a greenback whose denomination I could not make out. The only words I overheard were Grogan's as he accepted it, loudly declaring in a liar's brogue, "I'll see this donation gets to the Benevolent Association, ma'am." He managed to keep a straight face while saying this. Deshaines merely smiled.

Grogan tipped his cap as she got into the car. There was no further ticket writing.

Deshaines slammed the door and soon had the powerful engine started. She screeched away from the curb without signaling, without even looking in the mirror as far as I could tell. She hadn't put on her glasses, so it probably would have been pointless anyway.

My socks were done. I paid Shady for the shine and tipped him a dime. He asked me if I wanted change.

I went over to Grogan, who was still standing at the curb, hands on hips, watching the speeding Auburn disappear down Fifth Avenue. He was shaking his head.

"Mistake letting women drive," he said to no one in particular. "Just like giving them the vote."

"Do you know who she was?" I asked.

Grogan turned and suddenly realized who was beside him. "Kerrigan," he said. He spat on the sidewalk between us. "Like I'd ever tell you."

It seemed that he was still sore.

Grogan used to moonlight as a bouncer down at McLarty's. He tried to bounce me once. Trouble is, I don't bounce. That incident marked the end

of his off-duty employment at the bar. Since then, we've not been on the best of terms. Grogan was part of an ever-expanding list of Gothamites I didn't feel safe turning my back to.

"So, Grogan," I said conversationally, "How's the knee?" The incident at McLarty's had been months ago. He still had a limp.

Grogan's face turned even redder than usual, and his hand went unconsciously to the wooden nightstick in his belt. I knew that he'd had the core drilled out and filled with lead shot. If the sidewalk wasn't full of witnesses, he'd have been swinging it by now.

"You'll keep," he said in a low growl. He turned and walked away.

It wasn't until he disappeared around the corner that I realized I hadn't gotten Deshaines' plate number. I raced to the curb and stared after her, but it was too late—the Auburn was gone. So much for the one lead as to the true identity of my new employer.

Shady came over beside me. "Here," he said. He offered me a piece of stiff cardboard, which I hesitated to take. "It's clean," he urged.

I took the cardboard. "What's this for?"

"You know what it's for." Shady turned and shuffled back to his box.

It took me a few moments, standing there staring at the thing, before I figured it out. I sat on the running board of a nearby car, tore the cardboard in two, and used it to line the soles of my shoes, right above where the holes were.

3

I WALKED DOWN TO THE TURKISH BATHS ON TWENTY-THIRD Street. I had a locker there where I kept my camera and gun, out of reach of the collection agency people. I checked the pistol—a Government 1911 Model .45 automatic that I’d had more use for than is healthy in this life. The action was functioning nice and smooth, and there was still a good coat of gun oil to protect it from the moisture in a Turkish bath. I grabbed a towel and stripped down.

The steam room was a long barrel-vaulted cistern, tiled like a subway station. There were tiers of benches built into the walls, also tiled. Brass registers released steam from a basement boiler. Visibility was usually around five feet or so, and the steam deadened all sound. There could be a dozen people in there, and you’d never know you weren’t alone.

It takes twenty minutes in the steam room to work a half-pint of bourbon out of your system. By the time I finished the first bottle, the consignment note I’d brought in with me was steamed through. I went out to the bathroom, got a wad of paper from one of the stalls, and used it to sponge away the moistened ink blot. Most came off easily. I used a dab of hair tonic on fresh tissue paper for the more stubborn parts, careful not to let it blur what lay

beneath. When it was done, the paper was still ink-stained, but not so ink-stained that I couldn't make out the consignee's name and address:

Mr. Thomas Acton, Esq.
1515 Van Ruyter Drive
Cloudchester Bay, New York

I'd never heard of Thomas Acton, but I'd heard of Cloudchester Bay. The town is out on Long Island's north shore, Gatsby territory, a place where the rich retreat from the bustle of the city to drink cocktails on the lawn while watching their yachts bob, or whatever it is the rich do to occupy their time. At least I now had some idea of who I was working for. I wondered if the woman who called herself Lola Deshaines was a daughter, or perhaps a wife who removes her wedding ring to enhance her charms when hiring private investigators.

I left the consignment note in the locker and went back into the steam room to work on the second bottle. The hangover was almost gone by the time Red Willie walked by. He spied me through the steam, came over, and sat down. Besides the towel, he wore fingerless woolen gloves—unusual attire in a steam room, but I'd never seen him without them. He smoked for a while in silence, a skinny little roll-your-own held between nicotine-stained fingers.

"I suppose you want a piece of the Bomber?" he asked after a while.

I nodded. "What are you making?"

"Ten-to-one."

Those are heavy odds for just a two-horse race, but Louis had earned them. Joe Louis was undefeated in his professional career, and twenty-four of those twenty-seven wins had been by knockout. His next opponent, Max Schmeling, was a former heavyweight champ—but Primo Carnera had been a former heavyweight champ, too.

The Primo Carnera-Joe Louis fight had been held a year ago. As with the upcoming bout, the venue was Yankee Stadium. Carnera weighed in at

one and a half times Louis's weight, and it had seemed impossible that Louis could overcome Carnera's size advantage. I'll never forget what I saw that night. Hemingway described it as the most disgusting spectacle outside of a public hanging he'd ever seen. Louis had been relentless and unstoppable. He'd beaten "Da Preem" to a bloody pulp.

I figured nothing could withstand that, including Max Schmeling.

"Put me down for twenty," I said.

"Don't do it, J.K.," Willie warned. He stared at me through his little round granny glasses, which seemed never to steam up. "You'll lose, and I know you can't afford it."

"Louis'll kill him."

"Not this time," he insisted miserably. "You don't understand material dialectics."

Red Willie was constantly miserable, a condition caused by the American public's continuing failure to embrace his political beliefs, despite the never-ending Depression. He was possibly the world's only Bolshevik bookmaker.

"What are you talking about, Willie?"

"Max Schmeling is a German. He's the darling of the Nazis."

"So?"

People are always trying to make sports political. They'd done it last time too, turning Carnera versus Louis into Mussolini versus Abyssinia. But Abyssinia was Italian now, despite Louis's win.

"So," Willie said, in that labored tone people use when explaining something very simple to someone very stupid, "the internal contradictions of the system are not yet sufficiently developed for Louis to win."

"Huh?"

"What I'm saying is, they'll fix this one."

"I don't think Louis is fixable."

"You're not politically mature, J.K. Believe me, there's no way they'll ever let a Negro win a fight this big. To do so would invite the development of a class consciousness." He shook his head in disgust. "That's the last thing the Fascists want."

“Aren’t the Fascists over there? And the fight’s over here?”

Red Willie smiled, a rare event. “Take a good look at a photograph of Rockefeller sometime,” he said, “and tell me that’s not the face of a Fascist.”

We sat in silence for a while. I suddenly realized that Willie might be able to help me figure out who my client was. As a dedicated Marxist, he felt it was his duty to know the enemy. He used to maintain a carefully researched list of people to be put up against a wall and shot when the revolution came. Then he discovered that *Forbes* magazine did it for him, annually listing the wealthiest men in America. He’s been an avid subscriber ever since.

“Do you know who Thomas Acton is?” I asked.

“Sure. He’ll be one of the first to go.”

“How did he make his money?”

“Through the exploitation of labor.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Mining. He owns Atlantic Gas & Rare Earth.”

“Gas and Rare Earth?”

“Gases you find in the ground. You know, like coal gas.”

“He survived the Crash?”

“Got even richer. Most of them did.”

“Was he born wealthy?”

“No,” Willie said cautiously, “but he was clever.” Only a true socialist could make being clever sound like a crime. “Atlantic Gas & Rare Earth was a small-time concern until the war. You know that when it ended, the League of Nations took over German colonial territory? Most of it’s been administered under League mandates ever since, like Tanganyika and so on.” I nodded, although I’d never heard of Tanganyika. “One of those territories was the former German South West Africa. Thomas Acton went in there after the war, carpetbag in hand. He bought up every concession he could. Today, Atlantic Gas & Rare Earth is one of the world’s wealthiest mining companies.”

“What does he mine there that’s so valuable?”

“Beats me. I’m a political economist, not an industrial analyst.”

“A political economist?”

“Sure.”

“Willie, you’re a bookie.”

“Only until the revolution,” he said. “After that, I’ll be a *commissar*.”

He savored the last word longingly.

“Well, until then, don’t forget to put me down for twenty on Louis.”

You can only do business with Red Willie in person, as he refuses to take phone bets. He believes that all telephone operators work for the FBI. I don’t know if this is bookie paranoia or Bolshie paranoia.

Willie wrote down the bet in the tiny spiral notebook he always carries.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He stood, shaking his head at the poor state of my political development, and disappeared through the mist to the next customer. The steam room at the Turkish baths is Willie’s primary place of business. He has very clean pores for a bookmaker.

By the time the second bottle was worked off, it was noon. I showered and shaved, then walked back uptown. There’s an automat on Lexington where I like to eat when I can afford it. I went inside and selected the roast beef with succotash—at \$1.75, the most expensive dish they have. I was feeling like a celebration, so I went to the dessert section and, after considering the options, opened a door marked “cream pie.”

A slice of cream pie came hurtling through the shelf. I think it had been aimed at my head, but gravity took over and deposited it on the floor. I only caught a glimpse through the other side before the door slammed shut, but I saw enough to know that it was Agnes Kolowski who’d thrown the pie.

Agnes and I had dated a while back. Apparently, she’d heard wedding bells. Me, I’m tone deaf.

The cream pie landed crust-side up but was more or less intact. I picked it off the floor and put it on my tray. I’ve never been a fussy eater.

The teller at the window of the First Continental Republic Bank looked at me doubtfully. She told me to fill out a form, then took it and my driver's license to the manager's office. I could see them consulting through the office window. He compared signatures, looked up at me, then went back to comparing signatures. The manager couldn't find an excuse not to pay and nodded reluctantly to the woman. There's nothing sadder than a banker handing over cash. The teller returned and counted out the hundred dollars I'd asked for. I accepted the money and headed back toward the office, but I had another stop to make on the way.

Diagonally across Fifth and Thirty-Fourth from the Empire State Building stands B. Altman's, a glitzy department store. On the rare occasions I do any shopping, it's at a five-and-dime. Not this time. I went through the revolving doors into a large hall dotted with counters selling just about every fancy thing you could imagine. Well-fed women jostled with each other in their rush to spend money. It was hard to believe that right now, a few blocks south, down on the Bowery, malnourished men were spending hours lined up for a slice of stale bread and a bowl of thin soup.

The goon who'd been following me since the Turkish baths came in, too.

I had no idea why I was being tailed, but at least this guy wasn't demanding money or serving papers, so I didn't mind for now. I found the section I needed. He pretended to look at suits while I tried on shoes. The clerk couldn't help staring at my old ones with the ventilated soles. Soon, I had a brand new pair of sturdy wingtips, paid for with cash. All I really needed was the shoes, but I was feeling pretty spry with a full stomach and a pocketful of green, so I stopped by the men's hats and selected the sharpest-looking snap-brim fedora they had.

4

WHEN I RETURNED TO THE OFFICE, I CALLED THE TELEPHONE operator and asked her to put me through to the Bush Terminal in Brooklyn. Like any foreign cargo, the transmission parts needed to clear customs. I asked for W. Behrman, the man whose name appeared on the consignment note as the inspecting officer.

“Billy’s not on duty today,” I was told. “You can catch him here Wednesday.”

I didn’t want to wait until Wednesday. I searched through the telephone directory for a home address. There were two W. Behrmans listed in the Brooklyn phone book. One was out in Canarsie. The second was in Sunset Park, not far from the Bush Terminal. I decided to try the second address.

The same guy who’d followed me earlier was outside, leaning on a lamppost and reading the *Daily Mirror*—good sports section but it’s a Hearst paper, and I don’t read Hearst papers. He was a big lug, over two hundred, and looked as casual as a Baptist in a speakeasy. I suppressed the urge to walk up and ask how he liked my new hat. The time would come for letting on that I’d made him, but that time hadn’t yet arrived. Instead, I walked over to

the Lexington Avenue line and took the IRT downtown. He got in two cars behind me.

At Bleeker, I switched to the BMT for the trip to Brooklyn. He switched too. This time, he got in the same car with me. His suit jacket didn't fit too well, and all too late I realized that he was carrying. I'd left my piece at the Turkish baths.

We rumbled across the Manhattan Bridge. I looked down at the East River. The waterway was jammed with freighters and ferries. Tugs were pushing a battleship into the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Her decks were crowded with sailors, and her sides had rust streaks from a long period at sea. It would be a high old time on the Williamsburg waterfront tonight.

The train got to the Brooklyn side and went back underground. I could have taken this line all the way to Sunset Park, but that would have meant including the uninvited company, so I got out at Atlantic Avenue. I went up the stairs slowly, making it easy for the lug behind me to keep up.

I was born in Brooklyn back when the locals still thought of it as a city separate from New York. I hadn't been to the old neighborhood for a while, but once I got to the surface I felt right at home, as if time had stood still in the twenty years since I'd run off and joined the army, lying about my age like half the other guys in my induction, all of us using the war as an excuse to leave the dreariness of home and go see something of the world. There was the same crush of people going down Atlantic Avenue—Poles and Italians and Germans and Irish—the same haberdashers and milliners where my mother used to shop, the same delicatessens and tobacco stores, even the same smell in the air: that combination of road tar, grilled sausage, and five-cent cigar that is unique to Brooklyn. More importantly, there were the same trolley cars whose reckless passage through the streets had given the inhabitants a characteristic and the baseball team a name.

I caught a trolley car headed for Fort Greene. The Lug got on behind me. He was uncertain with the fare and, unlike me, took an inside seat rather than hanging onto an outside pole. He was not a Brooklyn native, and that suited me just fine.

The car began moving. When I was a kid, there was no direct trolley to Ebbets Field from Bay Ridge. To get to the ballpark, you had to change at Flatbush Avenue, and that meant two fares instead of one to see the Dodgers lose, which they always do. My pals and I had been the inheritors of a long tradition for avoiding this dual fare. We would pay for the first ride, then leap between passing trolley cars to avoid the second. The drivers were usually too focused on running down pedestrians to notice, and even if they did, they pretended not to.

The first trolley that came past was one of those new bus-like enclosed models—a PCC car—no good to me. Soon, another came rattling along, an old-fashioned one with open platforms at either end.

I waited until the last moment, then, when there was no chance of The Lug duplicating the maneuver, I jumped. I caught the rear pole of the passing trolley car, got a foot onto the platform, and hauled myself on board.

It had been easier when I was younger.

I looked back at the disappearing trolley car. The Lug was on his feet now, no longer pretending to read the paper, and looking back at me with a mixture of surprise and annoyance. I gave him a wave and snapped down the brim of my new hat.

I got off the trolley a little past Greenwood Cemetery and walked the last few blocks to the address in the phone book. Sunset Park is not the most fashionable part of town, but Billy Behrman's frame house had been freshly painted, and a brand-new Studebaker sat in the drive. I wondered how much customs inspectors were paid.

I went up to the porch and knocked on the front door. The latch hadn't been closed properly, and the door swung open under my fist. I called out for anyone at home, but no one answered. I opened the door further and leaned in—one hand on the door handle, the other on the frame—intending to call out louder. But then I saw something that made me stop.

There was an automatic pistol on the floor, a few feet into the entrance hall. Underneath was an envelope. The envelope had my name on it.

I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. I called out again, but didn't really expect an answer this time.

I picked up the gun. It was a Luger, a German pistol chambered for ammunition that Europeans call, with those strange measurements they use, "nine-millimeter." There was a silencer fitted onto the business end of the barrel. Guns usually smell of gun oil, unless they've been fired recently. Then they smell like this one did. I hit the magazine release. It was an eight-round clip, but only half full. I reinserted the magazine and pulled the toggle a fraction of an inch back, enough to see that there was a round in the breech. The hammer was to the rear, in the cocked position.

I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise. A wise man would have gotten out of that house right away, but Mrs. Kerrigan had raised a dumb kid. I ripped open the envelope. There was a single sheet of paper inside, written in the same tight hand as the inspector's signature on the consignment note.

Mr. Kerrigan,

I expect that you're wondering why you haven't received your usual payment today. The answer is simple: there will be no more payments, usual or otherwise. I've told my wife everything, and so now you can take your dirty little camera and your dirty little photographs and stick them where they fit best—you won't be getting another red cent out of me. I've decided to forego the pleasure of seeing you rot in jail, Mr. Kerrigan, comforted as I am by the certainty that you are destined to rot in Hell. But if I ever see or hear or even smell you again, be assured that I'll go straight to the police and tell them everything I know.

William T. Behrman

Pretty harsh for a guy I'd never met. William Behrman was obviously being blackmailed. I wondered what the odds were of the blackmailer having the same last name as me.

I thumbed off the Luger's safety and began searching the house. The first thing I checked was the hall closet. There were two overcoats inside. The woman's was fur; the man's was cashmere with an astrakhan collar.

These weren't necessarily out of place: many folks who were prosperous before the Crash had been forced to sell their valuables for whatever they could get, and these days it was not unusual to see regular wage earners wearing expensive second-hand coats.

But then I inspected the lining and labels. These coats were new.

No customs inspector can afford a new fur coat, let alone a new fur coat plus a new Studebaker plus a new paint job for the house.

The living room revealed something even more startling. In the corner opposite the couch was what at first I took to be a large console radio phonograph, but when I looked closer, there was a small oval glass panel where the speaker normally was. It took me a moment to figure out what I was looking at. It was the first television set I had ever seen.

I like radio. With radio, you can do things while it plays in the background, like read the paper during a ball game, or dance with a dame to Tommy Dorsey broadcast live from the Roseland. But with a television set, you presumably have to sit still and watch the screen, which more or less precludes any activity other than vegetating. It'll never catch on.

But its presence here confirmed what the new car and coats had already suggested: Billy Behrman had come into a lot of money lately.

I went down the hall and into the kitchen. It was unoccupied, but the oven was on. Whatever was cooking inside smelled good. I opened it—meat loaf, already dark brown, too near done to be left unattended.

I found Mr. and Mrs. Behrman upstairs. Billy was in the main bedroom, curled on the floor in a pool of blood, shot with a single round through the back of the head. He'd gone quietly, but not his wife. I followed a trail of blood to the bathroom, where I found Mrs. Behrman's body slumped in the tub, legs dangling out. The bathroom door had been locked from the inside, but they'd smashed it right off the hinges. Her right forearm lay at an awkward angle: her elbow had been snapped, perhaps by a bullet, perhaps by brute force. I looked closer at the body and found the entry wound through her cheek from the round that had killed her, something confirmed by the spray of bloody material across the tiled wall behind the tub, where the fragments had exited. She was bruised and cut, having put up a struggle.

The blood would have been mostly Mrs. Behrman's, but there was flesh under the fingernails of her right hand, so not all of it was her own. The mirror was smashed, the shower curtain was torn from the railing, and blood was smeared everywhere. Mrs. Behrman had died holding a shard of mirror in her left hand. There were desperate handprints over the lower window sash.

It wasn't hard to figure how it went down. They'd both been taken to the bedroom. Billy was a wimp and took the executioner's round quietly. Mrs. Behrman had more spunk. She ran. One of them caught her, but she took out a piece of his face with her fingernails and got free. They fired a shot after her, clipping her in the right elbow. She got as far as the bathroom and locked the door behind her, intending to escape out the window. But her right arm was useless now and, although she frantically tried, she'd been unable to get the window open with only her left. So she smashed the bathroom mirror with her fist and took a shard in her bare hand, determined not to go down without a fight. She never got the chance. They'd smashed down the door and put a round straight through her face.

Tough break, I was thinking, when I saw a rivulet of blood trickle down the wall. I looked closer. Sure enough, the blood was still wet. I knelt and checked Mrs. Behrman's body.

From the presence of the meat loaf, I already knew they must have been killed in the last few hours, but when I touched Mrs. Behrman's hand, it was as warm as mine. Then I heard a distant siren.

I suddenly figured it out. I raced to the front window. There was a phone booth on the corner from which a man was now walking toward a big Packard limousine parked nearby. It started as he got in beside the driver, then pulled away. There was a third man in the rear, looking directly up at me as they raced past the house.

He was holding a handkerchief over his left cheek.

So I was being framed for a double murder. They'd waited until I'd been inside long enough to ensure that my prints were everywhere before calling in the anonymous tip. No doubt the murder weapon was the gun I was holding, which now had my prints all over it. And I presumed the note, which

ROBERT BRACE

would be found when the cops searched, was intended to provide a plausible motive. I wondered if Billy had known what was coming when they'd made him write it.

I had to admit that it was a nice frame; just a pity that my mug was in the middle of it.

I ran downstairs and escaped by jumping the rear fence, but not before stopping in the kitchen, quickly wrapping the meat loaf in a dish towel, and taking it with me. These were hard times, and it would have been a shame to let a good meal like that go to waste.