

THE ICE CREAM BLONDE

Sample Chapter

The cubbyhole I called an office took up a tiny piece of the ground floor of the studio's main building, tucked in the back corner. You would not mistake it for a broom closet. It wasn't big enough. A small wooden desk, a straight-back wooden chair for the occasional lost visitor and a couple of light gray, steel filing cabinets about shoulder high crammed the room. The filing cabinets were empty except for a few things in the top drawer of the one closest to the desk.

The little desk, a battered refugee from the Leland Stanford administration, faced the door, with just enough space between it and the wall for a thin lad like me to slide through, but you had better watch your shins.

A small casement window behind the desk looked directly at the white, stucco wall of Stage One. The open window and the whirring, four-blade GE fan on my desk stirred up a little air in the close room. A three-hook coat rack filled the area between the window and the wall. The plaster walls, once white, needed a serious paint job. A ritzy room, all right, just like its inhabitant.

A Philco cathedral-style wooden radio perched on the left corner of the desk beside the telephone. A little box containing pens and ink glowed under the desk lamp. Harry's secretary had given me the lamp and the box to help brighten the decor. Inside the desk were the usual odds and ends, but by far the most important item was the bottle of genuine Canadian whiskey in the bottom right drawer. A law prohibited liquor everywhere in the country, and, even worse, a York Brothers rule barred booze on studio property, but Harry's top people laughed at that rule and made toasts to it. I was not top people, but the whiskey was there to stay. I kept paper cups in the drawer, but paper cups were optional most days.

I left the office door open to allow air to circulate, settled into a squeaky reclining desk chair with lopsided padding, propped my feet on the battered desk and sipped straight from the bottle. The whiskey eased my head and the breeze from the fan caressed my face. It was better than aspirin.

I always did my best thinking this way, staring over my feet at the little calendar nailed to the wall while the contents of the whiskey bottle faded away. Herbert Hoover discounted this year's calendar, looking officious behind his Oval Office desk with a big American flag behind him. With the election a little more than a year off the shine on the seat of my blue serge pants gleamed brighter than the beleaguered president's chances of getting elected again. If you looked at the calendar close enough you could see hot water lapping at Hoover's chin. His political future plummeted like a box office turkey, but he'd at least land on a fluffy pillow. If I toppled from my slippery ledge no soft spot would ease the fall.

I stared at the calendar and sipped. Hoover's pained face melted away as I thought about driving up the coast and getting lost somewhere, or doing a little fishing high in the mountains. Maybe drive down to Agua Caliente. Lose money on the ponies by day, crawl into the bottle at night. I really didn't need Harry York and his headaches. There were other ways to die slowly.

I thought of Nels. A couple of minutes older than me, he looked more like our Dad. In 1917, at the ripe age of nineteen we joined the Army, and crossed over to Europe side-by-side in the spring of 1918. Off on a great adventure with the American Expeditionary Force. We both got all the war we wanted about ten minutes after we landed in France. I caught a little mustard gas not worth mentioning during the Meuse-Argonne fight that September. Nels caught a lot of gas. It ate at his skin and blistered his lungs and he fought the rest of the war in a string of hospitals around battle-torn France.

When we got home Nels was eaten up by the stuff, but he hung tough and got well enough to join the police force. I joined and got bounced for being a crooked cop—

Eddie Cantor: "Three guys standing on a street corner in LA. How do you know who's the crooked cop?"

Straight man: "How?"

Cantor: "He's the one with the badge."—

but Nels' fading health soon forced him to retire. After that he kept sinking into himself, wasting to nothing, spending listless days in a reclining wheelchair, mostly sleeping, with nothing to do but wait for the end.

I looked in on him almost every day. Mostly he slept, but some days found him awake. Sometimes being awake meant he was alert. When he was alert he always asked me that same question. The question I could not face. In my more romantic moments I thought he was getting better. Those few moments became fewer. Most of the time I faced up to his bleak prospects. My mother, nearly eight years dead of cancer, would have smiled and been strong. She was stronger in mind than any of us. Especially my old man. A bitter shell replaced him. Each day he drew closer to a dying son. Each day he pushed his other son farther away.

I capped the bottle and set it on my desk. Johnny Cutter popped into my head. I knew I would, it was just a matter of time. Success had pumped up Cutter's ego like a hot-air balloon. The problem child showed up for work late after all-night binges, or didn't show up at all, or caused trouble on the set with rude, erratic behavior. When talkies came in, he'd forget his lines or slur his speech, or curse long and loud for the camera. But Harry tolerated Cutter because Johnny Cutter was good box office and that forgave a lot of sins in Hollywood. A week ago he failed to show up to shoot the final scenes on a big-budget potboiler, and Harry sent me to find him. I figured he was merely strung out again on illegal hooch, or shacked up with another young, willing bit player. A simple job to pry him from her arms, sober him up, get his clothes on and get him back in front of the cameras. From that point he was the director's problem.

But it wasn't that simple. Not this time. The Cutter mess opened a deep pit of quicksand and I teetered on the edge while somebody shoveled mud at me. And laughed wickedly while he was shoveling.

The smell of cigarette smoke brought me back to life.

"How you sleepin' at nights, Bo?"

The laughing in my head stopped. The cannon went silent. Wicked thoughts shoved out the morbid thoughts. The bogeyman in the form of LAPD Detective Sergeant Elmo Jones loomed at my door.

"How'd you get in here?"

"Man at that boat hadn't shown, Bo, you'd still be sleeping. Way down deep."

He leaned his right shoulder against the door frame. His burning gasper dangled from the side of his mouth, which twisted into a weasel grin from under the glare of rat-mean eyes. His left hand peeled back his suit coat, showing his police shield and his worn service revolver.

"This gets me places," he said, tapping his badge.

"You can't hide behind that buzzer forever. Sooner or later you'll get swept out with the garbage."

I set the bottle on the desk. I wasn't heeled. No need for guns inside the studio. Until now.

"I ain't hidin', Bo. I'm right out here in the open. You invited me to come check out your melon. Remember?"

I reached for the bottle and took it by the neck. "You'd have to step a little closer."

Jones took notice and grinned wider. "Where'd you put the body, Bo?"

"Be a little clearer."

"You know what I mean. I left that bruno as a warning to Johnny Cutter. Thanks to you Cutter didn't get the message. Now it's too late to warn him."

"Didn't think a cake-eater like Johnny Cutter would scare you that much. You're slipping, Jonesy."

Jones stood away from the door, balancing himself on the balls of both feet. He dropped the cigarette on the floor and ground it with his heel, his eyes not leaving mine. His right hand dipped into his coat pocket.

"That body shows up, Bo, I'm gonna tag it to you. Should've thought of that in the first place. But I didn't come here to your cage to talk about a dead torpedo who only thought he was tough. I come to see a walkin' corpse that knows he ain't tough. Little Bo Peep. I just wanted to see your pan to tell you that what you got the other night is comin' back to you, Bo, and you ain't walkin' away again."

"You could have phoned that in and not brought your stink."

Jones' right hand came out of his coat pocket holding a snub-nosed .38 special. He squeezed off a shot that shattered the glass in the window behind me, the slug tearing into the Stage One wall. Jones grinned at me and slipped the gat back into his pocket. He pointed his right index finger at me.

"Tick...tick...tick."

Harsh laughter trailed behind him like oil from a broken engine as he walked down the hall clicked shut. I grabbed the bottle and finished it with one long pull. This deep into the bowels of York Brothers Studio, no one had heard the shot. And chasing after Detective Sergeant Elmo Jones just now was a damn fool idea. I dialed the switchboard and told Gertie to send someone to replace a broken window in my office, and keep his yap shut about it. I put my hat on my aching head and went down the hallway and out the door.

Sunlight hit me like a scabby fist. Big Bertha fired another salvo inside my skull. Jones was gone but I could still smell him. A hellish image of rat-mean eyes scorched my baked mind. The sidewalk felt like quicksand, dirty and sluggish at my feet. I didn't know where or how this damned mess would end, only that it wouldn't go on much longer.

A week ago, Harry had sent me to find a missing picture star named Johnny Cutter who turned up dead. But this whole business had started long before that, started with a dirty cop named Elmo Jones, and it didn't take a genius to see that's where it would finish...

About the Author



Ray Dyson first took up eating in Evansville, IN, just long enough ago that, not only is the house he was born in no longer there, neither is the street. He attended The Ohio State University School of Journalism and spent several years as a newspaperman, covering crime and sports. He is a former sports editor and sports columnist, and now lives in Mansfield, OH, with his wife, Pamela, where he works as a freelance journalist. He has a particular interest in American history (especially the Civil War), the American West, and the American cinema.

Dyson is the author of three other books: a baseball story, *Smokey Joe*, a Western novel, *Bannon: The Scavenger Breed*, and the second Neil Brand crime story, set in Hollywood in 1934, *The Naked Nymph in the Dark Flickers*.

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