

The Crate

By Teddy Hayes

(a Prequel to)

The Devil Barnett detective novel

Blood Red Blues

The three men looked down at the dead body lying in an old wooden crate originally used to transport large amounts of vegetables back in the sixties.

The corpse looked to be a thin middle-aged man, he was Asian, with thinning black hair and a pencil thin moustache. He was dressed in a stylish looking copper-colored suit with a gold color tee-shirt underneath. He was just lying there, all bloody and lifeless. He still wore his watch and ring. His limbs were placed at crooked angles, like whoever put him there did it in a haphazard hurry. He wasn't covered up or anything. Just lying there.

The trio had been talking and drinking in the office after work and had lost track of the time. Dap panicked thinking he might miss picking up his wife Sheila from the bar where she worked as the night manager. So they decided use Tom's keys to take a shortcut through the warehouse to get to the street on the other side. Halfway through the warehouse, there he was. Hook was the first one who'd spotted him. Tom knew right away that the man was dead, but not Hook and Dap. They were born in different times, and hadn't seen much death, not close up anyway.

"Damn, damn, damn" was all Dap said after the men had finished soaking in the scene. They walked past the corpse continuing through the warehouse and out onto the street on the other side of the building. Tom lit a joint and stood for a moment, then turned around looking at the door that he hadn't closed. He looked like he might say something, but didn't.

It was almost 12:30 am as the three men stood around the warehouse door that faced the Harlem River on the Upper Westside of Manhattan. The moonlight highlighted Tom's craggy features. He looked his age. He was nearly eighty years old. He was bent and half crippled and wearing not enough clothes for so cold a night as he smoked the joint that hung from the corner of his mouth and squinted into the darkness towards the half open sliding door of the warehouse. He stood looking at the door with his hands thrust deep into his thin jacket. His name was Tom Prichard and he had been a stevedore for more than fifty years, ever since he had come from Vietnam with his mind half scrambled from the effects of war. He

had been thinking about retiring for the last twenty years, but somehow just hadn't gotten around to it.

The other two men with him looked to be in their mid-forties. All had dark brown skin that blended in with the shadows of the night. Although Tom was old and bent, he seemed to be the boss because when he spoke the other two seemed to listen.

"We should do something," Tom said to no one in particular.

"Tom, the man is dead. Ain't nothing we can do except leave him and let's get the hell out of here" Dap said, pushing his hands down in his jeans pockets against the chilling night wind that came off the river.

"That man probably got a family. Somebody should at least report it" Tom said, thinking about his long-lost daughter whom he had lost track of years ago.

"How you know that?" Hook said. "Dap's right, we need to think about getting the hell out of here before somebody comes around, sees him and tries to blame his killing on us."

"Who said anything about killing?" said Dap, as his face became more concerned.

"You saw him, blood all over," Hook replied.

"That don't mean he was killed, he coulda been,,,uh been in an accident," Dap said.

"In one that cut his throat and stabbed him through the heart" Tom added, almost nonchalantly and sucked deeper on the joint. "No, that man was killed and it wasn't by accident either. He made somebody mad...real mad."

"You talking like you the police," Hook said.

"No. Not now I ain't."

"What you mean, not now?" Hook asked, with his eyebrows moving up his forehead in distrust. He didn't like cops or anything or anyone connected with law enforcement. Spending two years in jail for beating up and almost killing a man who had raped his sister, accounted for his dislike of law enforcement.

"When I was in 'Nam I was an MP. Saw my share of killings," Tom said laconically, which was enough to shut Hook's mouth.

"Lissen" said Dap who wore thick rimmed glasses and a scraggly beard. "Tom, Hook is right, we should act like we never saw nothin, I mean aint no reward in saying we found him. And we can only bring trouble on ourselves. Anyway he looked Chinese. Wonder what the hell he doin up in Harlem anyway?"

"Times ain't like they was," Tom explained. "Chinese all up in Harlem now, like everybody else, especially since the gentrification. Money been flowing more and more."

“Even though black folks don’t seem to be getting much of it” Hook said, not expecting an answer to a statement he was sure everyone agreed with.

“Maybe he was waiting on a dope deal that went wrong. I got word that some of these people owning the vegetable shops been doing a little sideling, selling blow. Say it comes in straight from Asia” Hook said, keeping his eye on the door of the warehouse as if he was expecting the dead man to walk out any second.

“How you know where they get it from Hook. You involved or something?” Dap wanted to know. Just the thought of being connected with a criminal was enough to ruffle Dap’s feathers. He was a law abiding man who tried to live strictly by the good book. In addition he was a regular church-goer who was about to make deacon, if his cousin Laura who was his pastor’s wife had anything to do with it.

“I ‘ont know, I’m just sayin” Hook said backing off his last statement.

Dap started moving away from the proximity of the other two men and changing the subject. “I got to catch up with Sheila. If I miss picking her up, I’ll have to hear about it from now on. Plus she got the car, and I’ll have to take a taxi home. Good luck.” he said as he was backing away from the warehouse door as if to put psychological space between him and the men with whom he had just made a soul soiling discovery. While doing so, Dap made a mental effort to mentally wash his hands and mind of the matter. But it wasn’t so easy, the magnet of curiosity still pulled at him. “So what y’all gone do?” Dap asked.

“Me? Nothin” Hook said. “I got some greens and rump roast at home, that needs tenden to. See ya’ll tomorrow.”

Without another word, Hook turned and started walking in the direction of the station without looking back. A few minutes later he had turned the corner and was out of sight.

Tom closed the warehouse door thinking that maybe Dap and Hook had a point. The dead man didn’t have anything to do with him and many times in his 79 and a half years he had discovered that trying to do the right thing could sometimes open up a can of worms that proved more trouble than it was worth.

He climbed into his eight year old Ford and made his way East with the thought of the dead man still in head. For some reason he turned at a hundred and thirty fifth street and a few minutes later found himself looking at the bar called The Be- Bop Tavern where its former owner and his old buddy Ernest Barnett used to play checkers. Even though it had been over a year he still missed his old pal. Ernest getting killed during a holdup was among the many senseless things that went on in Harlem that kept him thinking from time to time that he would get out permanently before he died.

“Hey Tom, your boys pulled it off tonight, a minor miracle” Duke the bartender called to him as he walked into the Be-Bop and took his usual seat at the end of the bar. Tom was a dyed in the wool basketball fan and supporter of the New York Knicks. He ordered the usual gin

and tonic and had started looking at the sports page, trying to figure out who else the Knicks had to beat before they got a chance at the playoffs when something clicked inside his head.

“Hey Duke, the boss still around?”

“Yeah he’s back there in the office,” Duke said

A few minutes later, Tom sat in a chair looking across the desk at Ernest’s son; someone he had known from a kid. His given name was Marcus, but everyone for as long as he could remember had always called him by his nickname which was Devil.

Though it was never spoken in words Tom had a feeling that Devil has been involved with the government doing undercover work before he’d returned to Harlem after his father’s death.

After a few pleasantries Tom got around to telling Devil about the dead Asian he had found not even an hour ago.

“And you don’t want to call the police?” asked Devil.

“No, uh no.”

“And no doubt you got your reasons.”

“Yeah, I do” Tom said and looked around over his shoulder as if he was checking see if the wall had ears.

Picking up on Tom’s vibe, Devil stood up and closed the door to his office and sat back down.

“This dead man, I think I knew him.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, not sure, well not really sure I know him, but I am sure that he was part of a group that caused some...well let’s say was involved with some goings-on around here about a month ago.”

Devil was quiet. Experience had taught him he’d get a lot more if he let a person tell their story in their own way.

“I’m pretty sure he was Japanese. You know a lot of Asians have moved their businesses up here in the past fifteen years.”

“Yeah.”

“Well I remember seeing this fella talking to some people at Red’s restaurant a few weeks ago, and I remembered him cause Mamie had mentioned that she’d heard that the Japanese were trying to buy a lot of commercial property in Harlem and they was being blocked by...well, certain big shots in the know, uh who wasn’t too happy about it.”

“Big shots?”

“Yeah big shots. Big, big shots.”

Devil had an inkling of what Tom was saying, but wasn't saying. The big shot he was referring to, especially if it came from his sister more than likely had to do with his Uncle Beans who was the biggest politician in Harlem. A lot of people called him “the Sultan because of his far reaching power base. Tom's sister was Mamie Pritchard, who had been his uncle's secretary for the past thirty years and in addition to that had been his late father's lady friend since his mother had died some years before.

“Ok, so you think these big shots might have had something to do with this dead man?”

“No, I ain't saying that. But what I am saying is that Mr. Beans should know about this and that it shouldn't come from me.”

“I understand,” Devil said.

He was sensitive to Tom's awkward position with respect to Mamie. He didn't want her getting in any trouble for telling tales out of school, while at the same time he wanted Uncle Beans to know what was going on.

Devil picked up the phone and dialled his uncle's number.

“It's me. Code Red. We got to meet. ASAP.”

“Code Red?” His uncle's voice was drunk with sleep.

“Yeah.” He gave his uncle the address of the warehouse and looked across his desk at Tom who nodded and lit up another joint.

It was now 3:10am, and inside the warehouse was almost pitch black.

Devil shone his flashlight on the dead man lying in the wooden crate.

“That's Yuki Sato, a property developer. He was leading a group to buy interests in commercial property” Uncle Beans said.

“And from what I hear, you weren't too happy about it?”

“I wasn't happy or unhappy, my position was simple. If he wanted to do business in Harlem he had to come through me.”

“And how did he feel about that?”

“Good, until a certain someone pissed in the soup and tried to do an end run.”

“I can guess who it was. Deke Robinson, right?”

“Um” was the sound he made to affirm Devil’s intel.

“The dead man still had his expensive watch and gold ring, so they weren’t even trying to make it look like a robbery” Uncle Beans said.

“That’s cause it wasn’t, this was a hit,” Devil confirmed.

Uncle Beans looked up at his nephew without speaking.

“Takes one to know one” Devil said.

Devil and his uncle thanked Tom and put him into a taxi that headed downtown and made their way back to where Devil had parked his classic Jaguar.

“So you think Deke might be behind it?”

“At the moment that’s what it looks like, but who knows. I know he will do anything he can to unseat me and steal my power.”

“Even go so far as to putting a hit on a foreign property developer?”

“The Koreans might have done the same thing, they had beef with Sato because they felt they had been in Harlem first and should have first dibs.”

“And how would Deke play in that?” Devil wanted to know.

“Depend on him to go with whoever seems to be winning and playing both ends against the middle all the time. With Deke there are no limits,” Uncle Beans said.

“If it’s him moving the pieces against them, we can put an end to this quick fast.”

Devil didn’t have to spell it out. His uncle was one of the few people who knew that for the past fifteen years before he had returned to Harlem, Devil had worked internationally as a hit man for the CIA. So without saying it straight out, Devil was offering his uncle the gift of making Deke Robinson disappear for good.

“I thought you was through with that” Uncle Beans said, looking directly at his nephew.

“I was and I am. But sometimes extreme circumstances call for extreme solutions.”

“Naw, that would only make his comrades come after me.”

“Comrades?”

“Yeah, he’s got lots of people in the police, as well as the legislature who he’s been grooming. He’s been promising them things he’ll never be able to deliver politically if I were out of the picture, but they don’t know that.”

“So, what do we do?”

“We wait... and see which way the cat jumps.”

That was his uncle's countryfied way of saying let things play out for themselves and see what comes next without their interference.

"Okay."

Nothing more was said about the dead Asian or Deke Robinsons as they returned to the Be-Bop Tavern where they drank beer and talked about the upcoming roster of jazz artists that Devil had planned for the future.

As he drank his beer, Devil looked up towards the wall at a blown-up cover of John Coltrane's 1960 album called "Giant Steps," and thought about the giant step he had taken getting away from the CIA, and also about the giant step he hoped he wouldn't have to take if Deke made it necessary for him to put his lights out for good.

Devil had seen these things with people like Deke before, and almost never had it ended with a friendly truce. Deke was out for blood and his uncle was not one to back down. He knew that his Uncle Beans would fight to his last breath to protect the political machine he had helped to build during the past thirty years. Devil felt that there was only one way this was going to end.

Maybe his uncle was being magnanimous or maybe just trying to access his better self by telling Devil to hold on, or maybe even back down.

But Devil was under no illusion, a war had started and Deke Robinson had fired the first shot.

The End