

# REAR SUPPORT



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**Fer-de-lance**

## CHAPTER 1

There was no reason why I shouldn't have been sent for the beer that day, for the last ends of the Fairmont National Bank case had been gathered in the week before and there was nothing for me to do but errands, and Wolfe never hesitated about running me down to Murray Street for a can of shoe-polish if he happened to need one. But it was Fritz who was sent for the beer. Right after lunch his bell called him up from the kitchen before he could have got the dishes washed, and after getting his orders he went out and took the roadster which we always left parked in front. An hour later he was back, with the rumble seat piled high with baskets filled with bottles. Wolfe was in the office-as he and I called it, Fritz called it the library-and I was in the front room reading a book on gunshot wounds which I couldn't make head or tail of, when I glanced through the window and saw Fritz pull up at the curb. It was a good excuse to stretch my legs, so I went out and helped him unload and carry the baskets into the kitchen, where we were starting to stow the bottles away in a cupboard when the bell rang. I followed Fritz into the office.

Wolfe lifted his head. I mention that, because his head was so big that lifting it struck you as being quite a job. It was probably really bigger than it looked, for the rest of him was so huge that any head on top of it but his own would have escaped your notice entirely.

"Where's the beer?"

"In the kitchen, sir. The lower cupboard on the right, I thought."

"I want it in here. Is it cold? And an opener and two glasses."

"Mostly cold, yes, sir. Very well."

I grinned and sat down on a chair to wonder what Wolfe was doing with some pieces of paper he had cut into little discs and was pushing around into different positions on the desk blotter. Fritz began bringing

in the beer, six at a time on a tray. After the third trip I had another grin when I saw Wolfe glance up at the array on the table and then around at Fritz's back going through the door. Two more trays full; whereupon Wolfe halted the parade.

"Fritz. Would you inform me when this is likely to end?"

"Very soon, sir. There are nineteen more. Forty-nine in all."

"Nonsense. Excuse me, Fritz, but obviously it's nonsense."

"Yes, sir. You said one of every kind procurable. I went to a dozen shops, at least that."

"All right. Bring them in. And some plain salt crackers. None shall lack opportunity, Fritz, it wouldn't be fair."

It turned out that the idea was, as Wolfe explained to me after he had invited me to draw my chair up to the desk and begin opening the bottles, that he had decided to give up the bootleg beer, which for years he had bought in barrels and kept in a cooler in the basement, if he could find a brand of the legal 3.2 that was potable. He had also decided, he said, that six quarts a day was unnecessary and took too much time and thereafter he would limit himself to five. I grinned at that, for I didn't believe it, and I grinned again when I thought how the place would be cluttered up with empty bottles unless Fritz ran his legs off all day long. I said to him something I had said before more than once, that beer slowed up a man's head and with him running like a brook, six quarts a day, I never would understand how he could make his brain work so fast and deep that no other man in the country could touch him. He replied, also as he had before, that it wasn't his brain that worked, it was his lower nerve centers; and as I opened the fifth bottle for him to sample he went on to say-not the first time for that either-that he would not insult me by acknowledging my flattery, since if it was sincere I was a fool and if it was calculated I was a knave.

He smacked his lips, tasting the fifth brand, and holding up the glass looked through the amber at the light. "This is a pleasant surprise, Archie. I would not have believed it. That of course is the advantage of being a pessimist; a pessimist gets nothing but pleasant surprises, an optimist nothing but unpleasant. So far, none of this is sewage. As you see, Fritz has marked the prices on the labels, and I've started with the cheap ones. No, here, take this next."

It was at that moment that I heard the faint buzz from the kitchen that meant the front door, and it was that buzz that started the ball rolling. Though at the time it appeared to be nothing interesting, just Durkin asking a favor.

Durkin was all right up to the neck. When I consider how thick he was in most respects I am surprised how he could tail. I know bull terriers are dumb, but good tailing means a lot more than just hanging on, and Fred Durkin was good. I asked him once how he did it, and he said, "I just go up to the subject and ask him where he's headed for, and then if I lose him I know where to look." I suppose he knew how funny that was; I don't know, I suspect him. When things got so Wolfe had to cut down expenses like everybody else from bankers to bums, Saul Panzer and I got our weekly envelopes sliced, but Durkin's was stopped altogether. Wolfe called him in when he was needed and paid him by the day, so I still saw him off and on and knew he was having hard sledding. Things had been slow and I hadn't run across him for a month or more when the buzzer sounded that day and Fritz brought him to the door of the office.

Wolfe looked up and nodded. "Hello, Fred. Do I owe you something?"

Durkin, approaching the desk with his hat in his hand, shook his head. "How are you, Mr. Wolfe. I wish to God you did. If there was anybody owed me anything I'd be with him like a saddle on a horse."

"Sit down. Will you sample some beer?"

"No, thanks." Fred stayed on his feet. "I've come to ask a favor."

Wolfe looked up again, and his big thick lips pushed out a little, tight together, just a small movement, and back again, and then out and back again. How I loved to watch him doing that! That was about the only time I ever got excited, when Wolfe's lips were moving like that. It didn't matter whether it was some little thing like this with Durkin or when he was on the track of something big and dangerous. I knew what was going on, something was happening so fast inside of him and so much ground was being covered, the whole world a flash, that no one else could ever really understand it even if he had tried his best to explain, which I never did. Sometimes, when he felt patient, he explained to me and it seemed to make sense, but I realized afterward that that was only because the proof had come and so I could accept it. I said to Saul Panzer once that it was like being with him in a dark room which neither of you has ever seen before, as he describes all of its contents to you, and then when the light is turned on his explanation of how he did seems sensible because you see everything before you just as he described it.

Wolfe said to Durkin, "You know my failing on the financial side. But since you haven't come to borrow money, your favor is likely granted. What is it?"

Durkin scowled. Wolfe always upset him. "Nobody needs to borrow money worse than I do. How do you know it's not that?"

"No matter. Archie will explain. You're not embarrassed enough, and you wouldn't have brought a woman with you. What is it?"

I leaned forward and broke in, "Damn it, he alone! My ears are good anyhow!"

A little ripple, imperceptible except to eyes like mine that had caught it before, ran over Wolfe's enormous bulk. "Of course, Archie, splendid ears. But there was nothing to hear; the lady made no sound audible at this distance. And Fritz did not speak to her; but in greeting Fred there was a courtesy in his tone which he saves for softer flesh. If I should

hear Fritz using that tone to a lone man I'd send him to psychoanalyst at once."

Durkin said, "It's a friend of my wife's. Her best friend, you know my wife's Italian. Maybe you don't know, but she is. Anyway, this friend of hers is in trouble, or thinks she is. It sounds to me like a washout. Maria keeps after Fanny and Fanny keeps after me and they both keep after me together, all because I told Fanny once that you've got a devil in you that can find out anything in the world. A boob thing to say, Mr. Wolfe, but you know how a man's tongue will get started."

Wolfe only said, "Bring her in."

Durkin went out to the hall and came right back with a woman in front of him. She was little but not skinny, with black hair and eyes, and Italian all over though not the shawl kind. She was somewhere around middle age and looked neat and clean in a pink cotton dress and a black rayon jacket. I pulled over a chair and she sat down facing Wolfe and the light.

Durkin said, "Maria Maffei, Mr. Wolfe."

She tossed Fred a smile, showing little white teeth, and then said to Wolfe, "Maria Maffei," pronouncing it quite different.

Wolfe said, "Not Mrs. Maffei."

She shook her head. "No, sir. I'm not married."

"But in trouble anyhow."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Durkin thought you might be good enough--"

"Tell us about it."

"Yes, sir. It's my brother Carlo. He has gone."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know, sir. That's why I am afraid. He has been gone two days."

Where did he-no, no. These are not phenomena, merely facts." Wolfe turned to me. "Go on, Archie."

By the time he had finished his "no, no" I had my notebook out. I enjoyed this sort of business in front of Wolfe more than at any other time because I knew damn well I was good at it. But this wasn't much of a job; this woman knew what to get down as well as I did. She told her tale quick and straight. She was housekeeper at a swell apartment on Park Avenue and lived there. Her brother Carlo, two years older than her, lived in a rooming-house on Sullivan Street. He was a metal-worker, first class she said; for years he had made big money working on jewelry for Rathbun & Cross, but because he drank a little and occasionally didn't turn up at the shop he had been one of the first to go when the depression came. For a while after that he had got odd jobs here and there, then he had used up his small savings, and for the past winter and spring he had been kept going by his sister. Around the middle of April, completely discouraged, he had decided to return to Italy and Maria had agreed to furnish the necessary funds; she had, in fact, advanced the money for the steamship ticket. But a week later he had suddenly announced that the trip was postponed; he wouldn't say why, but he had declared that he would need no more money, he would soon be able to return all she had lent him, and he might stay in this country after all. He had never been very communicative, but regarding the change in plans he had been stubbornly mysterious. Now he was gone. He had telephoned her on Saturday that he would meet her Monday evening, her evening off, at the Italian restaurant on Prince Street where they often dined together, and had added gaily that he would have enough money with him to pay back everything and lend her some into the bargain if she needed it. Monday evening she had waited for him until ten o'clock, then had gone to his rooming-house and been told that he had left a little after seven and had not returned.

**"Day before yesterday," I observed.**

**Durkin, I saw, had his notebook open too, and now he nodded.  
"Monday, June fourth."**

**Wolfe shook his head. He had been sitting as still and unobservant as a mountain with his chin lodged on his chest, and now without moving otherwise his head shook faintly as he murmured, "Durkin. Today is Wednesday, June seventh."**

**"Well?" Fred stared. "Okay with me, Mr. Wolfe."**

**Wolfe wiggled a finger at Maria. "Was it Monday?"**

**"Yes, sir. Of course. That's my evening off."**

**"You should know that evening. Durkin, annotate your notebook, or, better perhaps, throw it away. You are a full twelve-month ahead of your times; next year Monday will be June fourth." He turned to the woman. "Maria Maffei, I am sorry to have to give you a counsel of desperation. Consult the police."**

**"I have, sir." A gleam of resentment shot from her eyes. "They say he has gone to Italy with my money."**

**"Perhaps he has."**

**"Oh no, Mr. Wolfe. You know better. You have looked at me. You can see I would not know so little of a brother as that."**

**"Do the police tell you what boat your brother sailed on?"**

**"How could they? There has been no boat. They do not investigate or even consider. They merely say he has gone to Italy."**

**"I see, they do it by inspiration. Well. I'm sorry I can't help you. I can only guess. Robbery. Where is his body then? Again consult the police."**

Sooner or later someone will find it for them and your puzzle will be solved."

Maria Maffei shook her head. "I don't believe it, Mr. Wolfe. I just don't believe it. And there was the phone call."

I broke in, "You mentioned no phone call."

She smiled at me with her teeth. "I would have. There was a phone call for him at the rooming-house a little before seven. The phone there is in the downstairs hall and the girl heard him talking. He was excited and he agreed to meet someone at half-past seven." She turned to Wolfe. "You can help me, sir. You can help me find Carlo. I have learned to look cool like the grass in the morning because I have been so long among these Americans, but I am Italian and I must find my brother and I must see anyone who has hurt him."

Wolfe only shook his head. She paid no attention.

"You must, sir. Mr. Durkin says you are very tight about money. I still have something left and I could pay all expenses and maybe a little more. And you are Mr. Durkin's friend and I am Mrs. Durkin's friend, my friend Fanny."

Wolfe said, "I am nobody's friend. How much can you pay?"

She hesitated.

"How much have you got?"

"I have-well-more than a thousand dollars."

"How much of it would you pay?"

"I would pay-all of it. If you find my brother alive, all of it. If you find him not alive and show him to me and show me the one who hurt him, I would still pay a good deal. I would pay first for the funeral."