

15¢

AMBLETTS
FIFTH AVENUE

Deliver to: Miss Lily Inez
Buckingham Apartments

Merchandise: Crown Sable Coat

Value: \$100,000

Purchaser's Name: MUST NOT BE REVEALED

But the coat had not been delivered to the glamorous Lily Inez. And two of Ambletts' trusted employees were missing.

Don Cadee, Chief of Store Protection, knew that Jim Preston would not have given up a \$100,000 coat without a fight. That's what made every second precious as he began to unravel one of the most daring thefts in department store history.

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MURDER

ON DELIVERY

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By SPENCER DEAN



POCKET BOOKS, INC. • NEW YORK

MURDER ON DELIVERY

BY
JOHN D. COOPER
ILLUSTRATED BY
CHARLES L. HARRIS

• • • • Chapter 1

THE ATTENDANT AT THE TOLLGATE PUNCHED HIS REGISTER, held out a handful of change. "Little colder tonight."

"Yeah." The driver slid the station wagon away.

The man in the middle seat blinked at stinging sweat trickling off his eyebrows. He resisted the impulse to reach for his handkerchief; the watchful teen-ager at his right might misinterpret the movement.

That was your last chance, the man told himself bitterly. You'll never have another. Never in this life.

All he'd have had to do was cry out. *Help! Or Kidnap!* That would have done it. The driver might have made a fast getaway, but the attendant would have notified the state troopers; the chase would have been on.

Yet he'd lacked the nerve—just as he'd not been able to summon up the courage to fling open the door and dive out onto the highway at that stop light a few miles back. That couple in the other car across the street would surely have seen him, would have come to his aid.

But fear of his captors had paralyzed him absolutely; he was the helpless rabbit staring, fascinated, at the beady eyes of the snake. Knowing what the end would be, yet powerless to prevent it.

It was not because they had actually threatened him. What had dropped back there in Buckinghurst—that had been more effective than any spoken threat. What had half hypnotized him had been their matter-of-fact brutality and ruthlessness.

There was also the numbing recognition of the inference to be drawn from the fact that his abductors had made not the slightest effort to keep him from seeing where they were

taking him. Evidently they were not worrying about what he might say, later.

The headlights funneled down a dark, grove-guarded slope, flashed past a white barn and a farmhouse, touched the pale cement of a creek bridge, bored on through the pine-shadowed gloom of the next rise.

He knew these Berkshire foothills well; this was the way he'd driven to the Tanglewood festival only a few months ago. But he could think of no reason for them to be bringing him up into these lonely hills in November.

"If you're going to kill me—" he began, shocked at the harsh queerness of his voice.

The driver laughed tolerantly. "Don't be silly. Kill you? We need you in our business."

The youth beside him, the teen-ager with the eyes that looked like peeled grapes, added: "You want to look at it this way, doc. We're taking you into partnership. You could make a sensational score outa this."

The man felt the muscles of his throat constrict. Partners with this cold-blooded pair? He knew what that meant: it was only a question of time before the partnership would be abruptly ended with bludgeon or bullet. Yet until that time came there was margin for hope, even though slim. He would hold onto that hope as long as he could; he would string it out as long as possible.

"As businessmen"—he tried to keep the terror out of his voice—"you know you can't ever sell it."

The driver chuckled softly. "Try to get your mind out of the conservative channel, pard. We're thinking of a radical approach."

"But how *can* you sell it?" the man asked. "It's the only one of its kind in the world. There'll probably never be another like it. It's not like a diamond necklace; you can't sell the skins separately. You can't dispose of it the way you might an old master; it's only valuable when the public sees it."

"We heard," the youth with the green-grape eyes said affably, "it's worth a king's ransom."

"It is," the man said bleakly. "There's no way to put a

price on it; it's priceless—because it can't be duplicated, now. Possibly never. But——"

"That's all we want out of it," the driver said over his shoulder. "That's what you're going to get us."

The teen-ager sniggered. "Just a good, average king's ransom . . . and if you play ball nice, we'll cut you in for a big, fat slice."

The station wagon slowed at the crest of a hill. The headlights swerved to touch a low building flanked by two rows of blue cottages, holding in bright illumination:

MOUNTAIN VIEW—LODGE & COTTAGES

Country Fare . . . City Conveniences

• • • • Chapter 2

THE TALL MAN WHO CAME THROUGH THE SWINGING DOORS from Lexington Avenue had the lean, keen look of a marine, the prematurely white hair and mustache of some distinguished diplomat. He had been a marine; since then he had found himself exercising what diplomacy he could muster as Chief of Store Protection for Ambletts Fifth Avenue. Sometimes, as on this particular day, he wondered what an ex-leatherneck was doing in a job that called for lecturing precocious pilferers, questioning suspected employees, and sending shoplifters to the House of Correction. But there were compensations; this evening had been one of them.

The night clerk smiled a greeting, reached toward the 1709 pigeonhole. "Lady's been calling, Mister Cadee."

"Business or pleasure, Stan?" Don Cadee quirked an eyebrow shaggy-white as a chicken feather. "Must be pleasure, this

"They're having a birthday party over there, Ruth. That kind of celebration might call for corks a-popping. . . ."

"But you know Jim. He might take a drink or two . . . but he'd have called me if he was staying any length of time, Don."

"Few glasses of champagne will make anyone forgetful." He made it sound more reassuring than he felt. "Don't fret about it. I'll check and have him call you back . . . or I will."

"All right. I . . . I've been so upset." She sniffled. "He's never done this before, all the years we've been married."

"All the more reason you should forgive him for one little lapse. Take it easy, Ruth. You'll be hearing from one or the other of us before long." He hung up, went out of the booth, brooded at the row of telephone directories in the rack.

Quickest way would be to ring up the lady's apartment, ask if Press is still there. He thumbed the Manhattan book to the I's.

Inesco, Inetta, Ineval, Inew, Iney . . . no Inez.

He looked under Lily. Dozens of Lilies . . . but no Lily Inez.

Well, hell, that's her stage name. Nobody'd have Inez for a last name. Chances are, too, she'll have a private number, unlisted, to avoid the autograph pests, the charity cranks. But the apartment building would know.

He found the number, dialed.

A suave voice, with a faintly British accent, said: "The Buckinghurst. Whom do you wish?"

"Connect me with Miss Lily Inez?"

"Very sorry, sir. We have no line to that party."

"This is urgent," Don said. "I have to get hold of her in a hurry. Can you give me her number?"

"Very sorry. We are not authorized to give out any information of that sort." The accent hung up.

Don swore softly. Myron Grolheim had been right. Amblettes' fur buyer had emphasized the *sub rosa* nature of the affair, had insisted that he never had known who the customer was, had never even been notified as to the identity of the recipient until a few days ago. "Whole deal is classi-

Maybe there would be an explanation at the store.

The austere gray monolith of Ambletts was silhouetted like an ancient temple against the cold, star-glittering sky; there were, even at that late hour, a few window-shopping worshippers at the sidewalk shrine of fashion.

Don paid the cab driver, walked the forty steps down the side street to the Employees Entrance, rang the night bell.

The watchman, who answered, saluted smartly:

"Little tour of inspection, Chief?"

"No inspection, Mike. Just looking for Press. Seen him?"

"Not since he left with Mister Grolheim. Around eight-fifteen, that was. I checked 'em out with that fancy-wood case."

"Grolheim been back?"

"No, sir. He didn't say anything about coming back."

"Um." Don went to the night elevator, waited for the car to come down with its usual group of chattering cleaning women and glass-polishing porters. His concern about Press had become suddenly coupled with an uncomfortable feeling about Myron Grolheim.

He wasn't as well acquainted with the fur buyer as with most of the store's top men; Grolheim had only been with The Store Superlative since Sol Davidson's death, a matter of a year and a half. But any man who could make the grade with Ambletts had to be a good sound man to begin with. Yet there was something odd about Myron Grolheim, something Don found it difficult to define. The man was so intense, so high-strung as to seem almost fanatical at times.

As clearly as if it was just happening, Don could recall the feverish glint in the man's dark eyes, the scarcely suppressed excitement in the tense voice:

"You think I'm exaggerating, Don? Well, you really have to see it to understand. It does something to you. Come in my office. You'll see what I mean."

age to bid for one, but it helps if you're in the upper brackets of the American Social Register, Poors Manual, or Moody's."

Don said: "I see. Sables have a social significance beyond that of, say, mink?"

"Why, a Russian crown sable is as far superior to the finest pastel mink—in the social scale of furs, that is—as a mink is superior to a muskrat! Sables are for women who are tired of two minks in every closet. You can't simulate a sable, it's impossible to imitate it. That's why it takes patience as well as a fat purse to get one. It took six months to match out the skins for this beauty." Grolheim whisked away the cloth, disclosing a cabinet of amber-colored wood. "That was comparatively swift work. All the pelts have to be brought halfway round the world from that one small Siberian town of Barzuin. It took more than a year to assemble the Duchess of Windsor; even longer to put Barbara Hutton together."

"If you have to rate in the Blue Book to qualify for one of these items, how did Lily Inez crash the charmed circle, My? I know she's had a billion-dollar build-up as Queen of the Kilocycles, but still . . ."

"You misunderstand, Don. It's the purchaser who has to rate, not the recipient." Grolheim fitted a golden key into a gilded lock. "That's because nobody can tell what a crown sable coat is going to cost until after it's been made. That's why you never see a crown sable advertised; there's no way to quote a price on it. Oh, maybe once a year some house, just for the hell of it, will show a little clutch cape at twenty thousand or so . . . but even then it's Kamchatka fur, not the genuine Yakut. What I mean is, the furrier has to know in advance that his patron is able to come up with a hundred thousand or more, without squawking, when the garment is ready for delivery."

"Who is the patron? . . . or shouldn't I inquire?"

"Doesn't make a bit of difference. I don't know, myself. Fact, I'm not even sure who does know, Don."

"Shouldn't be too difficult for some of the keyhole peepers on the gossip columns to find out which of the lady's admirers is able to pick up a six figure tab," Don said thoughtfully.

ment were gone. "I suppose you'll think it's pure hallucination, but I think I've been followed the last two or three days."

Don said: "Here at the store?"

"No. From the time I leave the store, at noon . . . at night. You know that crawly sensation you get sometimes, when you're being watched . . . ?"

"You've seen this watcher often enough to recognize him?"

Grolheim replaced the covering cloth. "I know what you're thinking: The little man who wasn't there. Hell, it hasn't been one little man . . . there have been two."

"Tell me about 'em. And don't get the idea I'm putting you down for a psychopathic case. I'm not," Don assured him.

"One is older . . . the one who picks me up when I go out to lunch. Dark, maybe Italian, hard to be sure, never get a really good look at him, he's always ducking into doorways or into a crowd. But I've seen him at least half a dozen times—he waited outside the Heidelberg today while I had lunch, he was across the street near our Employees Entrance when I came out."

"And the other one?"

"I'm not so sure about him. But he . . . he bothers me, more than the older one. I've only seen him once. Last night, as I left to go over to Stellenhachts—who make up most of our silver fox. I didn't see him when I reached the street, though perhaps he was around—I was expecting the other fellow, you understand. But between Broadway and Seventh, I stopped and made a bluff to peek in a store window so I could look behind me. And there, twenty feet away, was this zoot-suiter—not even bothering to duck into a doorway or turn his head." Grolheim became agitated. "Now I know I'd never seen that kid before. Yet somehow I felt as if I recognized him. It was almost as if I'd seen him in a dream and waked up to meet him on the street."

Don nodded. "You'd probably seen him before when your mind was preoccupied so you didn't pay any attention to him. Then when you did notice him, the previous impression came back to you. Did he follow you the rest of the evening?"

"Only to Stellenhachts, I guess. He couldn't very well have trailed me away from there; Leo Stellenhacht drove me up-

town in his limousine. Not that I didn't look for this youngster on the street when we came out of the Stellenhacht Building. I did. But neither of them were around." Grolheim rubbed his nose with thumb and forefinger in obvious embarrassment. "But I dreamed about the little son of a bitch last night."

Don grinned. "Go ahead. I'll be your analyst. Pretend you're lying on a couch. Get it off your mind."

"It's been weighing on my mind, I won't deny that. I dreamed this kid was strutting down Fifth Avenue in that crown sable . . . and I was trying to catch him but the crowd kept getting in my way." He smiled apprehensively. "Schizophrenia? Or dementia praecox?"

"Neither," Don said solemnly. "Plain, old-fashioned overstrain. Too much concentration on this big coat deal. We'll make delivery to the lady tonight and then you can go tie one on and forget it."

• • • • Chapter 4

Now, THIRTEEN HOURS AFTER THAT CONVERSATION, DON could see things in a different light. Then it had seemed natural to discount the buyer's anxiety.

Worry over the coat had weighed on Grolheim's mind, left him prey to the delusion of the chronically apprehensive, that of being followed by some sinister figure. A casual glimpse of a teen-ager had been enough to make the youth seem a skulker on an evil errand. The subsequent nightmare had merely confirmed the fact that Grolheim was overwrought.

Now Don was not so sure. The fur buyer might not have been dreaming up trouble. Maybe the menace had really been

there all the time, lurking in a darkened doorway. If so, Don had made a bad mistake.

You didn't exactly give him the laugh-off. But neither did you take much stock in his story about being trailed. No use to claim, now, that you gave him your best man to see that shipment across town; maybe you should have arranged for an armored truck.

At Grolheim's desk, his hand moved toward the phone. Then he realized there wouldn't be a night line connected through the board for a buyer's office. But he checked, anyway; the instrument was dead.

Except for a heavy crystal ash tray and an onyx-base clock that said twenty to one, the only noteworthy item on the desk was a cabinet photograph framed in Florentine leather. A handsome boy, about ten, in the dress uniform of some military school. Stiff-braided collar, bell buttons, full tailcoat, white trousers creased to a knife edge. Beneath the visor of the military cap the boy gazed straight ahead with fierce pride, not unlike the expression in Grolheim's eyes when speaking of the crown sable.

In the top drawer of the desk was a jumbled miscellany of papers. Proofs of Ambletts' Festival of Furs ads; memos from comparison shoppers in Philadelphia and Washington; glossy prints of the new dolman sleeve designs. Also—tucked under a clip holding an item from a trade journal about *Fox up at Edmonton*—there was a long buff envelope, one of the twice-a-month missives from the payroll department.

The envelope was still sealed; the buyer hadn't bothered to open it. Don slit the envelope. The gray-green check said that The Store Superlative was prepared to pay to the order of Myron A. Grolheim the sum of \$741.66 after deductions. It was dated November 19.

Whatever Grolheim's worries were, evidently they couldn't be money worries, if he could leave two weeks' pay lying around since day before yesterday without taking the trouble to deposit it in his bank.

Don replaced the check, tucked it under the clip, tried the

side drawers of the desk. They were locked, as they should have been, according to Standard Operating Procedure.

Don glanced up at the ceiling: the Display crew had removed the spotlights. Had Grolheim taken those color shots? What, exactly, had the buyer meant to do with the photographs? Other questions, too, suggested themselves with stroboscopic speed as he hurried across the fur salon, down to his own office on the Third.

If the Lily Inez deal was so damn top secret, why had Grolheim brought Don into it at all? Had that been the buyer's idea? Or Stolz's suggestion?

Suppose someone had figured on hijacking a sable coat worth better than a hundred thousand . . . where could he dispose of the loot? Who would dare wear it? Could you fly it out of the country to sell it to some South American dictator? Some oil mogul?

In his own office, Don dug out the Confidential folder on Grolheim. There wasn't much in it that helped. Man was a widower with one child. Lived at 2874 West End Avenue. Had been with Neiman Marcus in Dallas and later with I. Magnin in Beverly Hills before joining the staff of The Store Superlative. There was a phone number. Don dialed it on his outside line.

No answer. He kept trying. Nothing but the burr-burring of the automatic ringer.

Well, hell. Fellow may be in the habit of staying out till dog's hours. Or could be he's shacking up with some lady love. He may be home in half an hour. Lots of possibilities. Some not so good!

He rang the Stolz home. A maid answered sleepily: "No, suh, Mister Stolz not home yet, nor neither Missus Stolz. No, suh, no idea when he get home. Who you say speakin'? Mister Cadee? Yes, suh, I tell him to call you . . . At your hotel? Yes, suh."

Leaves it strictly up to you, boy. You can't stall around any longer on account of this hush-hush angle.

He put the Confidential folder back in the file, switched off the lights, went out to the elevator.

The watchman on Employees' Entrance unlocked the street door: "Get hold of Press all right?"

"Not yet, Mike. What kind of car was Mister Grolheim driving?"

"Ponty. Green and brown station wagon. Fifty-six, I'd say. They couldn't have squeezed that fancy-wood box in anything except a station wagon, 'less it was a panel truck."

"No. Sort of clumsy thing to handle." Don touched the watchman's arm. "Don't say anything about Press until I clear it, right?"

"Right, chief. Hope there's nothing wrong with him . . ."

"Hope so too." He knew, now, how Ruth must have felt for the past three hours. She must have been sure there *was* something wrong or she would have heard from her husband. Don was beginning to believe she was right. The important thing was to find out for sure, to find out fast.

A cab dropped him at the Buckinghurst in three minutes. There was no station wagon in front of the avenue's newest co-operative building or on the side street to the north.

The doorman was inside the lobby warming himself by the log fire in the great hearth; he intercepted Don halfway to the night super's desk.

"Good evening. . . . You wish to see . . . ?"

"Miss Lily Inez," Don said. "Which apartment?"

The doorman passed the buck to the night superintendent. The super looked pained. "Are you expected, sir?"

"Think I am. I'm from Ambletts."

"Ah . . . ?" The super recovered his poise. He waved languidly. "The service elevator is closed at ten."

"That's all right. I'll use the same door as the white folks. Call your tenant. Tell her Mister Cadee of Ambletts is on his way up. And get the lead out. I'm in a rush." Don pushed the doorman aside firmly, stepped toward the bank of autotronic cars.

The super huddled with a headphone for a moment. Then: "She says to come right up, Mister Cadee. Apartment Seventeen West."

The doorman leaped into action. "This car, Mister Cadee. Just press Seventeen."

The door of 17W was held open by a diminutive blond maid in a smart, Frenchy uniform. She stared, puzzled:

"You have not brought it yet? Mamselle's birthday present? What is the matter!"

"I don't know," Don said softly, "but I damn well mean to find out."

• • • • Chapter 5

DON HAD SEEN THE STAR ON TELEVISION OFTEN ENOUGH TO BE an admirer of her brash mannerisms, her bouncy vitality. He felt she was better than her publicity men managed to have her pictured, which was usually in such a way as to emphasize her ample bosom. Sexy she undoubtedly was, but she was more than the possessor of the biggest pair in Albuquerque, as the naughty night-club lyrics put it.

For him, Lily Inez always managed to make even the corniest comedy routine seem fresh and funny. But now, as she came across the big living room to meet him, he sensed that something had dampened her customary high spirits. In spite of a dazzling electric-blue gown cut as low as any censor would allow, she seemed much older than when he'd last seen her on the big bulb—older and either tired or depressed.

Perhaps, he thought, it was because the rose and gold splendor of the lush *décor* took away some of the glamour from her. Or possibly it was because she didn't have on all that television make-up. The impudent turned-up nose, the mischievous, overworked dimples, the wide mouth that seemed to be made for hearty laughter, the wild mop of apricot-colored

hair that had started the newest fad in coiffures—they were all strictly as advertised on twenty-five million sets every Sunday night at nine. But the bright blue eyes did not have that sparkle which had been referred to in press releases as like the sun glinting on wave tops; they were dull, red-rimmed. She might, he guessed, have been crying.

There was no indication of it in her voice, however. "You are a bad boy to spoil my birthday party." She dimpled at him. "I wanted to show off before my guests but now they've all gone home—except Elton." She waved at the man standing before the Carrara fireplace. "Elton Hadley, my manager. Mister . . . Cadee."

"Evening." Don bowed.

Hadley was a tall, stout man with a head which was large even for one of his bulk. He had no visible eyebrows and a high forehead from which the dark hair had receded so that his frontal appearance was oddly like one of those elongated images in an amusement park's trick mirror. He flipped a hand in casual greeting; a hand remarkably small in contrast with his huge limbs—small and pudgy like that of an overfat baby. "What's holding up the parade, friend?"

Don said: "Mister Grolheim hasn't been here?"

Lily Inez pouted. "No one from your store has been here, though delivery was promised positively by nine at the latest, so I kept delaying dinner and pouring martinis into people until everyone was practically crocked. You've made me so unhappy. . . ."

You're unhappy, Don said silently. *What about Ruth Preston?* "You haven't heard from Mister Grolheim at all?"

Hadley stroked the lapel of his dinner jacket with a tiny thumb. "We haven't heard from anybody connected with your store until you showed up just now."

"Your coat left the store at quarter-past eight, Miss Inez." Don decided that Hadley didn't look like the sort of individual who could finance a hundred-thousand-dollar gift. "Two of our most trusted men were bringing it over. I appreciate your concern about the sables but I want to know why our employees didn't get here."

Lily Inez frowned daintily: "Perhaps they misunderstood my address . . . ?" She glanced at Hadley doubtfully.

"Don't be silly," the manager said. "How could you misunderstand an address like the Buckinghurst? Mister Cadee thinks these men may have decamped with your birthday present."

"No." Don had the feeling that neither the star nor her manager was really surprised by the non-arrival of the sables, that she was following a prearranged script and that Hadley was improvising as he went along. "I don't think they ran away with the merchandise. But someone may have intercepted them before they reached here."

Hadley said: "You're from Ambletts' investigating bureau, Mister Cadee?"

"I'm Chief of Store Protection. One of the men who started over here was my assistant, Jim Preston. The other was the fur buyer, Myron Grolheim. Nothing can make me believe they would have been mixed up in anything crooked." Don thought Lily Inez was waiting for a cue before saying anything else. "Only alternative is a hijacking . . . a matter for the cops."

Lily Inez cried: "Oh no!"

Hadley held up one of the ridiculously small hands: "Now, just a minute, friend. We can't have any police publicity, coat or no coat, see?" He came toward Don with the false geniality of a politician about to buttonhole a voter.

Watch your temper, boy. You can't handle these people the way you'd deal with some coked-up shoplifter. This is a kid-glove deal. "Ambletts isn't anxious for any publicity, either," he said. "It's our policy to avoid it, to protect our customers from it. But if a crime has been committed, the authorities will have to be notified. No way out of it."

Lily Inez put both hands to her cheeks in a stock gesture of despair. "For God's sake, don't do anything about it *tonight!* There may just have been some stupid mistake . . . I'll probably have the coat by morning. Promise you won't do anything about it until tomorrow, at least!"

Hadley beamed approval. "Now that's good common sense, Lil. You'll admit that, Mister Cadee. Get the newspaper men