

**NOIR SAGA**

**by inky**

**BOOK ZERO: THE ORPHAN GASP OF THE**

**SLUTPUPPY**

**AND HER SLIDING PIMPCAT**

**AS THE TENDERLOIN TAKES ITS FIRST BITE**

**San Francisco, 1933 – the year the**

**Tenderloin fog first tasted orphan**

**blood, chewing jazz bones under quake-**

**raw skyline...**

-6

The first sound Kathleen Valiente ever made was a gasp so thin it slid between the Mission-flats floorboards and died there. Born 1919, bruise-plum eyes already knowing rhythm. Ma Brigid hacked matching wheeze-tuberculosis Christmas-ribbon-while midwife rinsed knuckles in cracked pot. "Dance, niña," Ma would gasp later, "or streets eat you."

1933: Ma finally coughed inside-out, fourteen-year-old Kathleen pressing cold

spoon to fever-lips, Galway pearl  
buttons rattling drawer. Tenement saints  
wept plaster. Potter's-field dawn, gulls  
dirge-laugh.

Kathleen hitched Powell cable to  
Tenderloin neon fangs—"Girls!  
Burlesque!"—skirt scandal-high, shoes  
newspaper-stuffed, tap-dancing  
Embarcadero soapbox for nickels. Men  
tossed for eyes promising memory.

Silky-Salvador Valiente, seventeen  
Spanish-Irish alley-cat (Tenderloin  
boarding ma rented hourly, pa silk-

scarves bi-annual)-watched from pier  
piling, shoe-shine kit switchblade-hid,  
cigarette tiny lighthouse. Flicked hot  
nickel. "Puppy," first name-scar purred.  
"Bleed beats for me. In tune."

She caught mid-air. City inhaled cheap-smoke. First catch. First slide.

-5

Garter Snake Saloon basement, O'Farrell  
shadows. Piano "St. Louis Blues" off-key  
prophecy. Silky dressed her velvet-dried-violet slit-shy, rent-party lift:

**Black Cat Cellar dock-boss wallets.**

**Fingers flashbulb-light snagged three  
billfolds, saxophone reed ear-feather.**

**"Music's money mute," he riffled,  
pocketed souvenir. Ledger born: five-  
and-dime notebook. "Kathleen Valiente-  
orphan nickel, potential." Under: "Alive  
till profit."**

**Alley-grit couple: back-to-bricks, paws  
teaching 5/4 inevitable, salt-panic  
taste. Slip sighed floor. Fog crawled,  
shadows hinge-count.**

First job: Nob Hill alderman Kee love-nest tick. Derringer (Ma's .25 petticoat-oiled orphan-tears) temple-cold. "Pay, or Puppy bites." Wallet forty, watch doomsday-tick. Grab-twist-pop champagne-soft, brain treble-red. Gasp orphan-thin.

Silky torched gardenia-cordite, ledger: "Kee-eternal silence." '32 Ford black-rumble fog-slid. Gulls bad-actors. Boarding flop cat-piss valves: rye burn flared cut-gasp.

"Love or loot?"

"Both."

Rhythm off-balance. Slept open-mouthed animal.

-3

Dawn nicotine. Luz/Lola proto-cathouse (Fillmore sisters, Cherokee whispers): eyes marble-crack at cuff-blood. Silky split loot. Chronicle "Mystery!" Laugh gargle: "Ledger fangs."

**Snake stage feral-swirl, tips bad-nickels. 3 a.m. clown-porcelain cracked, sawn-shotgun: "Debt!" Mirror guilty-shards. Silky .32 leak-black-no-blood. Cards rain: jack spades, queen hearts, joker tongueless.**

**First phantom. Derringer clutched.**

**Ghosts dirt-cheap.**

**-2**

**'34 Luz vanish Chinatown silent-throat.  
"Overdose yawn." Burn page. Lola stepped**

**camera-razor.** Ledger bared: judges,  
**proto-Crusaders.** Ford headlights proto-  
**predator.**

'36 winter-spring: Milk-teeth fog  
streetlight-sparks. Columbus flophouse  
poems-reefer: lessons hips-owed, glance-  
sell, razor-thigh tease. "Threat  
sexier." Pocketed jingling.

Bay-rail baptism: dual Chesterfields.

"Handle choke-smile."

"Slutpuppy."

"Pimpcat patent-paws."

Piling-slap swallow. Bridge half-steel  
optimistic fog-lesson.

-1

Black Cat blazed blue-snaps goat-beards  
switchblade-poetry. Puppy reed-humming  
stage. Silky booth-lick: "Harlan-garter  
two-bits." 3:17 clown fedora-grave weep.  
Cards no-prints.

6½ The Song that Paid for the Cough that  
Killed her Mother

(Black Cat Cellar, three nights after  
Brigid's dirt)

Silky drags her downstairs 2 a.m.:

"Tonight you don't dance, you open."

Jammed: stevedores, councilman wrong-ring. Trio slits "Body and Soul."

"Sing, champagne buys, I collect. Fail, coffin due."

Rye-shot shove. Spotlight nicotine-eyelids. First whisper sorry Ma-room leans hungry. Nickel-metallic bridge

**steals lungs. Crack-note fixable.**

**Applause belt-hot.**

**Silky counts spit-fives, no grin: "Again  
four. Mouth cash, not confessional."**

**Throat gasp soldered priced. Cadence  
currency.**

**0**

**Pier proto-Doll tuberoses: Craddock  
crisp-boys. Chase scuttle-ghosts (Luz  
drip). Ledger bob-fished, Luz-boat  
Pacific. Broker fat-envelope rat-ledger.**

**East-tickets tangle: "Slide longer?"**

**Ghosts rail-stow. Fog patent-hungry.**

**Bite eternal. Portrait curtain.**

**-end of inky noir Book Zero-**

**BOOK ONE: THE PORTRAIT OF A SLUTPUPPY**

**AND HER SLIDING PIMPCAT**

**AS THE SATIN DOLL GOES DOWN**

**San Francisco, 1937 – the year the bay**

fog learned to wear lipstick and a  
stiletto...

1

The night smelled of diesel, jasmine,  
and fresh blood. I was drinking the  
first two and wearing the third when the  
dame found me in the Black Cat Cellar, a  
basement jazz joint on Grant Avenue  
where the beards were billy-goat thin  
and the poetry came switch-blade sharp.  
She drifted across the smoke like a  
wrong note you couldn't stop humming.

"Mr. Quill," she purred, "I need a man who can kill a story before the story kills me."

Her voice was bourbon poured over crushed ice and bruised hearts. She wore a black sweater tight as a confession and a skirt that had forgotten how to be decent. The pre-beatniks at the table stopped snapping their fingers; even the saxophone blushed.

I touched the bandage under my collarbone where a .32 had kissed me last week, courtesy of a dock boss who

**didn't appreciate follow-up questions  
about the '34 strike.**

**"Murder's my native tongue, dollface.  
What's yours?"**

**"Lust," she said, and slid into the  
booth.**

**"Call me Slutpuppy. Everybody does."**

**I believed her. Names are just scars we  
haven't heard of yet.**

**2**

**She laid it out between choruses of  
"Sweet Georgia Brown" played sloppy by a  
pianist who swore he could see tomorrow  
in the black keys.**

**Her old man-Silky "Pimpcat" Valiente-was  
a Spanish-Irish pimp who ran cathouses  
from the Mission to the docks, a tomcat  
in a zoot suit who slid through alleys  
on patent-leather paws. Born Salvador in  
a Tenderloin boarding house where his  
Irish ma rented rooms by the hour and  
his Spanish pa showed up every six  
months with silk scarves and empty**

promises. He'd learned early:  
everything's for sale, everyone's got a  
price, and the difference between love  
and business is just bad bookkeeping.

Somebody, somewhere paid the ransom and  
the song dwindled into a reversing  
silence that echoed for some seconds  
like Salem witches after the hunt.

Three nights ago one of his girls, a  
Cherokee canary named Lola Lazar, turned  
up in a Chinatown doorway with her  
throat cut in the shape of a treble  
clef. The cops yawned. The papers

screamed. Pimpcat kept sliding, but his eyes had started to look like cracked marble.

"Silky's got a ledger," Slutpuppy whispered. "Names, dates, how high the judge was when he bit Lola's shoulder. Somebody wants that book. Somebody wants him dead. I want him alive long enough to disappear with me."

"Love or loot?" I asked.

"Both," she said, "and maybe a little revenge on the side, like olives in a

**martini."**

I should have walked. Instead I lit her cigarette and watched the tip glow like the last traffic light before hell.

Pondering the corridor of murder I was about to paw with my hound pulse, I reckoned maybe too quickly; in for a penny, in for a pound. At least I could bandage my expenses.

My rate: twenty a day plus expenses and any body bags under size twelve. She paid in advance, slipping a roll of tens

into my hand with fingers that trembled like a virgin on her third honeymoon.

"Real name's Kathleen Valiente," she said, "but that girl died in a Mission tenement when her mother coughed herself to death. Fourteen years old, dancing for nickels on the Embarcadero. Silky found me. Taught me."

She didn't finish. She didn't need to.

3

We found Pimpcat at the Elbow Room, a

dockside bar where the whiskey was cut  
with turpentine and the women knew how  
to disappear when the fleet came in. He  
wore a chalk-stripe suit the color of  
cemetery fog, two-tone shoes, and a grin  
that had sold its soul to the devil for  
sharp teeth. His 1936 Cord 810 sat  
outside like a sleek metal cat, garnet  
red with those coffin-nose hidden  
headlights that popped up like predator  
eyes, chrome exhaust pipes running down  
the sides like silver veins.

"Quill, you look like yesterday's  
obituary," he greeted me.

"Still breathing," I said.

"That can be fixed."

Slutpuppy slid under his arm like she belonged there. His eyes flicked to her, then to me, then to the black satchel I carried. Inside was a Luger and the ledger she'd promised.

We took a corner booth. A ceiling fan chopped the air into nervous pieces.

Pimpcat laid it out: Lola had been blackmailing City Supervisor Craddock, a

family-values crusader who kept a love nest on Russian Hill and a wife in Peoria. The ledger page for Craddock read: "Two hours, French silk, hummingbird tongue, \$500, photo of him in ladies' lace."

Five hundred dollars—enough to keep a longshoreman's family fed for four months. Lola wanted ten grand to keep the negative. Craddock sent a cutter instead.

"Now the book's hot," Pimpcat said. "Half the board of supervisors, two

judges, a monsignor, and a lady cartoonist who draws naughty mice are in it. They'll burn Chinatown to cinders to get it."

He tapped my chest with a manicured nail. "You're gonna hide me till I sail to Manila at dawn. In return I give you the book. You sell it back to the marks for fifty grand, split with Puppy here. Everybody wins except the choirboys who sang off-key."

I didn't believe him. Guys like Pimpcat don't sail; they sink and take the ocean

with them. But the dame's thigh was warm  
against mine and the Luger was cold  
against my ribs, so I nodded.

Outside, foghorns moaned like widows.

Inside, the bartender polished a glass  
that never got clean. I felt the night  
shift its weight, getting ready to  
pounce.

4

We holed up in a flophouse above a  
proto-beatnik bookstore on Columbus. The  
walls were papered with poems that

smelled of reefer and regret. At 2 a.m.  
the lights went out and the city turned  
into one big dark mouth.

Slutpuppy changed into a silk slip the  
color of candle smoke. She poured rye  
into tooth glasses and sat on the  
windowsill, legs swinging like a couple  
of moonlit bridges.

"Ever kill a man, Quill?"

"Only the ones who bored me."

She laughed, a sound like dice on felt.

"Silky says you're the last honest guy  
in town. That means you're the most  
crooked, you just haven't cashed in."

I watched the fog crawl up the brick  
opposite. Somewhere a siren started,  
thought better of it, died.

She came over, put her palms on my  
chest. Her pulse drummed against my  
scars.

"Make me forget I'm property," she said.

So I did. The slip sighed to the floor.

Her skin tasted of salt and panic. We moved like jazz in 5/4 time, off-balance and inevitable. Afterward she slept with her mouth open, a small animal exhausted from running.

I stayed awake counting shadows. At 3:17 the door handle turned, slow as cancer in a lumberjack. I rolled off the mattress, Luger first.

A silhouette in the hallway—tall, thin, wearing a fedora like a grave lid. He raised a shotgun cut down to whorehouse length. I fired once. The muzzle flash

showed me his face—no face, just a white porcelain clown mask cracked down the middle. He staggered back, leaking blackness, and fled. No footprints, only playing cards scattered in the corridor: the jack of spades, the queen of hearts, the joker with its tongue cut out.

Slutpuppy didn't wake. I tucked the cards into my coat and listened to the city breathe through broken teeth.

5

Dawn came the color of a nicotine stain.

We moved to Pier 39 where Pimpcat kept a cruiser named The Satin Doll. The plan: get holed up till night, then slip under the Golden Gate—still a bright orange-red of optimism, the past decade seemed not to have danced upon that new traverse standing as if time didn't exist—and sell the ledger in Manila where dollars bought more skin.

The boat stank of tuberoses and engine oil. Below deck was a stateroom with mirrors on the ceiling and a record player that spun it all but glowed like outer space suns when it played Billie

**Holiday.**

**Pimpcat poured champagne and wore  
sunglasses even in the fog.**

**"Cheers, suckers," he toasted. "To the  
death of innocence—may it rest in  
pieces."**

**We raised our glasses. The boat rocked  
like a rickety candle in a slow  
earthquake.**

**Satan Takes a Holiday whispered below  
deck "Stop, look, and listen to me..."**

**That's when the second phantom showed.**

**She climbed out of the forward hatch  
barefoot, wearing a blood-red cheongsam  
slit to the thigh, hair down to her  
waist like spilled ink. Lola Lazar. Dead  
Lola. Her throat was still smiling wide,  
but no sound came out except the wet  
drip of memory.**

**Pimpcat dropped his glass. "You're in  
the morgue, baby."**

**She smiled, showed teeth like piano**

keys.

"Not anymore, cat. Some songs don't know  
when to quit."

She had a straight razor in one hand, a  
camera in the other. The camera flashed.

White fire. Pimpcat screamed. I fired.  
The bullet went through her and  
shattered the mirror behind, multiplying  
us into a thousand guilty fragments.

Then she was gone. Only the smell of  
gardenias and formaldehyde lingered.

**Slutpuppy clutched my arm hard enough to bruise. "She was buried yesterday. I saw the ceremony."**

**"Coffins are cheap," I said. "The spirit worlds are cheaper, dirt cheap."**

**Pimpcat's cool cracked like cheap varnish. "We sail now."**

**He gunned the engine. It seem to rattle out names like a stool pigeon in deep for a fix. The names nodded out like Chinese junkies under opium den smoke.**

Then hummed as names are so prone to do outside. Never rolled out moaning like when they are inside by sweet fireplace flashing the chirp of burning wood.

The dock lines snapped like promises. We slid out into the bay while the city behind us burned daylight savings into counterfeit coins.

6

Mid-channel the fog closed in, thick as courtroom lies. We dropped anchor off Alcatraz. The Rock loomed, empty now but

**still hungry.**

**Pimpcat went below to radio his buyer.**

**Slutpuppy and I stayed topside. She shivered though the air was warm.**

**"He killed her," she said suddenly.**

**"Who?"**

**"Silky. Lola was leaving him, taking the book. He slit her, then paid the coroner to dig in the wrong Jane Doe. Craddock's just the goat."**

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I needed you to keep him alive long enough for me to kill him."

I stared at her. The wind whipped her hair into Medusa snakes.

"Love or loot?" I asked again.

"Justice," she said, and pulled a derringer from her garter. It looked like a toy until it pointed at my heart.

Below, the engine coughed and died.

**Silence bigger than the grave.**

**Pimpcat reappeared, face fish-belly white.**

**"Radio's smashed. Somebody's on board."**

**Footsteps overhead, soft as cat paws.**

**Then the music started—"Gloomy Sunday"**  
**from the record player, though the power**  
**was cut.**

**We were three spectres in a steel**  
**coffin, drifting.**

Lola stepped out of the companionway again, razor singing. This time she wasn't alone. Behind her came the clown-masked shotgunner, leaking a whorehouse's length of blood from the chest wound I'd given him, and a third figure-Craddock in his monsignor collar, face powdered like a corpse at a wake.

"Welcome to the jury," Lola whispered.

Pimpcat backed against the rail. "I can pay."

"Too late," said Craddock, voice dry as

**old communion wafers. "The city needs a scapegoat wearing your spots."**

**Slutpuppy raised the derringer. "He's mine."**

**Lola laughed, a sound like a record spinning backward. "Share."**

**The clown lifted the shotgun.**

**I swung the Luger. Four weapons, one heartbeat.**

**Then the boat exploded.**

**Not fire-water. A Coast Guard torpedo?**

**No, simpler: somebody had scuttled us.**

**The hull cracked like a bad alibi. Sea  
poured in.**

**The spirits didn't care. They kept  
coming.**

**I grabbed Slutpuppy, dragged her over  
the side as the Satin Doll rolled and  
kissed the black deep. The water was ice  
and ink. She fought me, trying to swim**

back to the boat where Pimpcat wrestled with phantoms.

"Let me go!" she screamed, swallowing bay.

"Dead is dead," I growled, "but dying takes forever."

A flashbulb popped underwater-Lola's camera, still working. In the phosphor glare I saw Pimpcat dive clear of the sinking stern, his patent-leather crawl stroking hard for the Alcatraz shore. Lola's razor slashed empty water.

Craddock held the ledger high like a priest with the host, but the book slipped from his powdered fingers, sinking into kelp. The clown's mask floated, cracked grin bobbing. Then the boat slid under, taking Craddock and the clown-phantom with it, bubbles rising like unheard last words.

Through the murk I glimpsed Pimpcat pulling himself onto the prison dock, zoot suit streaming, still alive, always sliding. No bodies surfaced from the wreck. Just him, escaping again.

I hauled Slutpuppy toward the island,  
kicking through guilt and cold.

8

We crawled onto the prison boat landing  
at dawn, coughing blood and seawater.  
The island was empty except for gulls  
that laughed like bad actors.

She sat on the concrete, dress plastered  
to her skin, eyes holes punched in the  
sky.

"It's over," I said.

"Nothing's over," she answered. "The book floats."

And it did. A black oilskin bundle bobbed in the rip current, drifting toward us like a message in a bottle from a corrupt god. I fished it out.

Pages sodden but readable—names, sins, daguerrotypes of powerful men wearing nothing but shame.

She took it, kissed the salt off my cheek. "We can own this town."

"Or it can own us."

"Same difference."

I looked at her—half witch, half waif, all hunger. The sun broke through the fog, painted her gold and ruthless.

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "We sell the book to the highest bidder, take the money, catch the next steamer to Shanghai. But first we bury Lola."

"She's already underground."

"Then we bury a prayer for what we did to her."

She thought about it, teeth worrying her lower lip. Finally she nodded.

We tore out the page with Craddock's name, folded it into a paper boat, and set it adrift. The current carried it toward the Golden Gate and the far Pacific where all dirty stories eventually drown.

The rest of the ledger we wrapped in oilskin again. She tucked it inside her

slip, between heart and breast, a black  
heart beating against her own.

We flagged down a fishing skiff. The French captain took one look at our hollow eyes and asked no questions. As we passed where the Satin Doll went down, gulls wheeled over a patch of slick water. No bodies, no ghosts—just the reflection of the city shimmering like a lie that hadn't been invented yet.

Back on shore we holed up in my office above a tattoo parlor on Kearny.

**She frowned at my Kodak Junior six  
sixteen series Bellows rusting on the  
desk.**

**I phoned a broker who brokered sins for  
senators. He offered thirty grand, meet  
at midnight, Pier 43.**

**The vagrants (near invisible, scattered  
like justice) who had cremated their  
dollars for joyrides only to be crushed  
by the gloom of need could hardly been  
seen.**

We arrived early. Fog again, cat-quiet.

She wore a trench coat two sizes too  
big, hair pinned like a promise she  
intended to break.

The buyer showed in a Packard Twelve the  
color of dried blood, those vertical  
chrome grille bars catching the dock  
lights like prison cell doors, whitewall  
tires gleaming. He was flanked by two  
boys who looked like they'd been born  
wearing brass knuckles.

Money changed hands: fat envelope for  
the ledger, thin smile for the future.

Then the boys drew. Too late. I had the Luger, she had the derringer. Four shots, two bodies, one driver sprinting into the fog like a spilled confession. We left the ledger on the pier, pages fluttering like dying moths. Let the rats fight over it.

We had the cash. We had each other—whatever was left.

At the train depot she bought two tickets east under the names Mr. and Mrs. Holiday. As the locomotive coughed steam, she leaned into me.

"Think we'll make it, Quill?"

"Nobody makes it," I said. "Some just take longer to miss."

She laughed, that dice-on-felt sound, and pulled me into the sleeper. Behind us, San Francisco shrank, a jeweled whore waving goodbye with broken nails. Ahead: every cheap motel between here and eternity.

I closed my eyes and saw Lola's razor, Pimpcat's patent-leather crawl to

freedom, the clown's cracked mask. They rode the rails with us, stowaways in the dark.

But her hand found me under the thin blanket, warm and alive and wicked. For now, that was enough.

The train howled into the night, a saxophone solo nobody would ever remember except the ones who bled for it.

The lips that pressed rough kisses upon the reeds...

**Outside, the fog kept sliding, slick as  
a pimpcat in patent leather, hungry as a  
slutpuppy learning new tricks.**

**The city was gone. The story wasn't.**

**It never is.**

**It has a throat like jazz that cradled  
and cuddled but always swallowed.**

**-end of inky noir Book One-**

BOOK TWO: THE GHOST TRAIN OF THE  
SLUTPUPPY  
AND QUILL'S BLOODY REED  
AS THE MIDNIGHT LIMITED HOWLS LOW

Chicago, 1937 – the year the Windy City  
learned to bite back, all brass knuckles  
and saxophone wails under a sky bruised  
purple...

The Midnight Limited rattled like a junkie's last fix, steel wheels grinding hymns to the rails from Frisco's fog to the lakefront's glitter. Slutpuppy, still calling herself Kathleen in whispers, curled against me in the sleeper car, her breath hot jazz on my neck, the envelope of crumpled bills fat between the mattress and the thin steel floor.

Thirty grand. Enough to buy a cathouse in Reno or a quiet farm where corn grew taller than regrets. But her eyes in the swaying lantern light flickered like

Lola's flashbulb-hungry, not sated.

"Quill," she murmured, nails tracing my  
scars,

"we're free."

Freedom's just a word pimps whisper to  
marks before the knife.

I lit a Chesterfield, watched smoke coil  
like ghosts in the draft.

Outside, Nebraska plains blurred black  
as spilled ink, coyotes howling backup

to the engine's blues. The porter knocked once, shadow long as a .38.

"Ice water, sah?" His grin showed gold teeth like hidden headlights. I waved him off. Slutpuppy's hand slid lower. We coupled slow, the train's rhythm our metronome-off-beat, desperate, ending in sweat and silence.

At dawn, the first ghost tapped the window: Lola's porcelain face, throat grinning wide against the glass, fogging it with bay water breath. She vanished when I blinked.

Slutpuppy slept on, mouth a small pink  
scar. I pocketed the Luger from under  
the pillow. Ghosts don't bleed, but lead  
makes 'em listen.

10

We hit Chicago at noon, the Loop a  
concrete jungle steaming with stockyard  
stink and jazz from invisible horns. The  
Blackstone Hotel swallowed us—marble  
lobby, bellhops with eyes like dice,  
elevators creaking like old coffins.

Suite 714: velvet drapes, a Philco radio

spinning "Strange Fruit," champagne on ice we didn't order.

"Why here?" I asked, dumping the cash in the safe.

"Silky had contacts," she said, slipping into a black sheath that hugged her like original sin.

"Capone's ghosts still run numbers. We fence what's left of the heat—the derringer, your Luger—then steamers south to Havana. Rum, cigars, no ledgers."

Her fingers lingered on the safe dial. I  
caught the tremble.

"Spill it, Puppy. Lola's tailing us. I  
saw her at dawn."

She laughed, dice on felt.

"Mirrors and morphine, Quill. Drink."

We did. Rye burned clean. But the mirror  
over the vanity cracked a smile down the  
middle when we kissed-clown mask  
fracture.

Pimpcat's voice echoed from the bathroom  
faucet: "Suckers." I smashed the glass.  
Slutpuppy watched, eyes marble-cracked.

11

Night fell like a dropped body. We hit  
the Green Mill, Al Capone's old haunt  
where the walls whispered bootleg  
secrets and the band played "St. James  
Infirmary" like a funeral dirge. His  
body, missed the short purgatory, now  
rotting in Alcatraz hell. Smoke thick as  
cathouse promises, dames in furs,

gorillas in tuxes eyeing us like fresh meat. Our contact: "Fat Sammy" Rizzo, a weasel in a homburg who ran guns from Gary and girls from Gary. He slid into the booth, breath like garlic and grave dirt, a satchel of clean bills for our hardware.

"Valiente's book burned Frisco," he hissed.

"You two the ashes?" Slutpuppy purred the meet.

Guns traded smooth as a striptease. But

Sammy's pinky ring gleamed-jack of  
spades etched in onyx. He leaned close.

"Ledger floated ashore. Craddock's boys  
paid big. Puppy, Silky says hello-from  
Manila. Alive."

Her derringer was gone. Mine stayed  
holstered. Sammy laughed, a wet gargle.  
Outside, his Hudson Hornet purred,  
headlights popping like Cord predator  
eyes. We walked into the alley fog.  
Footsteps echoed-soft, cat-pawed. Lola  
emerged from a dumpster shadow,  
cheongsam dripping Chicago rain, razor

humming drunken riffs.

"Share," she mouthed. I fired blind.

Alley cats scattered. No blood, just  
cards: queen of hearts, joker  
tongueless, ace of guilt.

12

Back at the Blackstone, the safe yawned  
empty. Thirty grand gone. Maid service?  
Bellhop? Her? Slutpuppy sat on the bed,  
slip candle-smoke silk, pouring rye with  
hands steady as death.

"Double-cross?" I growled.

"Insurance," she said.

"Silky taught me: always another roll."

She tossed a key.

"Station locker. Twenty-five K left.

Enough."

Pulse like a hound in heat. I grabbed  
her throat—not hard, but enough to feel  
the lie pulse.

"Pimpcat's alive. You knew." She twisted  
free, eyes Medusa snakes.

"He slit Lola for love, Quill. Jealous.  
Book was bait. Now he's Manila rich,  
we're Chicago broke unless we take  
Havana."

Below, the radio wailed "Gloomy Sunday."  
Power cut, needle still spun. Craddock  
stepped from the closet-monsignor collar  
crisp, powder corpse-white.

"Confession time, Quill. City needs  
witnesses drowned." His shotgun barked

whorehouse-short. I dove, glass  
shattering rainbows. Slutpuppy's  
derringer-wait, gone?—flashed from her  
garter. Pop. Craddock leaked black,  
clown mask under flesh. He faded  
giggling. Lobby siren wailed. We bolted,  
fire stairs to the garage.

13

Midnight rain lashed like bay waves. My  
Chevy (rented, anonymous, mud-splashed  
from despair) coughed to life in the  
underground gloom. We peeled into the  
Loop, tailed by a DeSoto growling low—

vertical grille bars like prison teeth,  
whitewalls screaming on wet pavement.

"Locker first," she yelled over the  
wipers' jizz. Union Station loomed, Art  
Deco ghost ship under clock towers  
ticking doomsday. Locker 419: bills  
sodden, but real. Her smile wicked. Then  
the DeSoto blocked the exit ramp,  
headlights blinding. Doors flew-two  
gorillas, Fat Sammy grinning pinky-ring  
jack. Pimpcat lounged in back, zoot  
chalk-stripe, alive, patent-leather paws  
clapping slow.

"Quill, you drive like a widow. Puppy-my  
sliding doll."

Slutpuppy's face cracked varnish. "You  
died, cat."

He grinned devil-sharp. "Boats float.  
Ghosts sink." Shotgun blast spiderwebbed  
the windshield. I floored it, tires  
howling blues. We sideswiped a pillar-  
sparks, screams, DeSoto spinning like a  
drunk's top. Out into Grant Park fog,  
lake winds whipping Michigan to frenzy.  
Lola rode the hood, razor etching treble  
clefs in glass.

## 14

We ditched the Chevy at the Planetarium,  
shadows under Neptune's dome. Foot to  
the Adler tracks, silver rails gleaming  
moon-sick. The Limited's sister train  
whistled-ghost on rails, pulling east  
again. No time for tickets. We hopped an  
empty boxcar, hayloft dark, ledger  
dreams scratching in our veins.  
Pimpcat's crew thundered close-tires on  
gravel, spotlights slicing.

Slutpuppy clutched the bills, derringer

out.

"End him, Quill."

Engine roared. They rammed the grade crossing. Metal screamed symphony.

Boxcar lurched. We tumbled, rolling into ditch weeds sharp as switchblades.

Flashbulbs popped-Lola's camera, illuminating the wreck: DeSoto crushed accordion, Sammy's gold teeth in the dash, Pimpcat crawling free, suit torn, grin eternal. Clown mask phantom rose beside him, shotgun weeping my bullet hole. Craddock's wafers crumbled in the

wind.

"Jury's in." Pimpcat fired wild.

Lola's razor sang. Slutpuppy charged,  
derringer spitting justice.

Pop-pop.

Pimpcat slumped, eyes cracked marble  
final. Train howled away. Ghosts circled  
the pyre, then evaporated—gardenias,  
formaldehyde, foghorn widows. No bodies.  
Just wreck and rain washing sins to the  
lake.

## 15

Dawn broke gray as nicotine over Gary  
steel mills. We hitched east, thumb out  
like promises, bills slimmed to ten  
grand. A trucker with reefer eyes  
dropped us in South Bend-motel neon  
flickering "No Vacancy" like a lie.

Room 13: sagging bed, radiator jazz. She  
stripped slow, slip pooling salt and  
panic.

"Havana now?" I watched her move-waif-

witch hunger.

"Ledger's curse. Burn the cash." She  
laughed.

"Burn the ghosts first." Her thighs  
parted invitation.

We tangled fierce, 5/4 time off rails.

After, she slept open-mouthed, animal  
spent. I burned the bills in the sink-  
flames blue as Craddock's powder.

Pocketed the derringer. Left a note:

Miss longer.

Outside, the fog slid patent-leather,  
hungry tricks. Her train ticket east  
waited on the nightstand.

16

South Bend depot, fog off St. Joe River  
thick as bay lies. She sat alone, trench  
too big, hair pinned broken-promise.

Pimpcat's Cord ghosted the lot-garnet  
red, headlights popping. No driver.  
Lola's flashbulb popped once.

Slutpuppy turned-too late. Razor  
whispered treble. She crumpled, eyes

gold-ruthless fading. I watched from  
shadows, Luger heavy. The Cord purred  
away, sliding into mist. No plates.  
Ledger page fluttered from her hand-  
Craddock's sins, paper boat. I tore it,  
set adrift in a puddle Pacific-bound.

Ticket booth man yawned. "East or west,  
mac?"

"Manila," I said. Train whistled low. I  
boarded alone.

Behind, Chicago shrank jeweled liar.  
Ahead: eternity's cheap motels. Ghosts

**rode with me-razor grin, clown crack,  
her dice laugh. The lips pressed rough  
reeds...**

**Fog kept sliding, slick as pimpcat,  
slutpuppy slicker. Story never ends. It  
just switches tracks.**

**-end of inky noir Book Two-**

**BOOK THREE: THE SHANGHAI WHISPER OF  
QUILL'S BLOODY REED**

AND THE SLUTPUPPY'S PHANTOM FANG  
AS THE ORIENTAL LIMITED STEAMS INTO  
ETERNITY

Manila, 1938 – the year the Pearl of the  
Orient learned to bleed opium and jazz,  
under a sky stitched with typhoon thread  
and lantern lies...

17

The SS President Hoover vomited me onto  
the Manila docks like a bad oyster,  
steam horns wailing goodbye to the  
Pacific's gray churn. Six weeks from

Frisco's fog-via Yokohama, where geishas  
whispered bay-water secrets-to this stew  
of carabao carts, American sailors, and  
Filipina sirens slinging San Miguels  
under Spanish bells.

Thirty grand burned to ash in South  
Bend; all I carried was the Luger  
(cleaned, oiled), Slutpuppy's derringer  
(tucked like a widow's promise), and  
ghosts heavier than hemp rope. Her last  
gasp echoed in my bunk dreams: razor  
treble, dice laugh fading. Lola's  
flashbulb popped in typhoon squalls.  
Pimpcat's patent-leather slide haunted

the waves. Craddock's wafers dissolved  
in rice wine.

I checked into the Bayview Hotel—  
colonial relic, fans chopping air like  
machetes, ceiling mirrors reflecting a  
face cracked like the clown's mask. Room  
313: bed sagging as a corrupt judge,  
mosquito net veiling sins.

"Mr. Quill?" The desk clerk, a mestizo  
with eyes like dice, slid a cable.  
Manila rich waits. Pier 7 midnight.  
Silky.

Pulse hounded. I lit a Chesterfield,  
watched smoke coil into Medusa snakes.  
Freedom's a steamer ticket that never  
cashes.

18

Pier 7 reeked of fish guts, hemp, and  
girlie perfume-jeepneys rattling like  
junkie hearts, Chinamen hawking opium  
pearls. Midnight fog rolled in from the  
bay, thick as courtroom perjury. A  
launch bobbed: black hull, lanterns dim  
as dying flashbulbs. No name, just eyes-  
hidden headlights popping like the

Cord's predator glare.

Pimpcat lounged on deck, zoot suit  
chalk-stripe crisp, alive again,  
grinning devil-teeth over a stogie.

"Quill, you swim like a rat. Puppy send  
her love?" His Spanish-Irish lilt  
slithered like patent leather on wet  
tile.

Beside him, a new dame: Jade Fang, half-  
Chinese viper in qipao red as Lola's  
cheongsam, slit to revelations, nails  
lacquered blood-moon. Her eyes hummed  
razor songs.

"She's bay food," I said, Luger heavy under armpit. "Ledger curse got her in South Bend."

He laughed, wet gargle. "Ledgers float, Quill. Ghosts sink slower."

Jade poured tuak-coconut fire-into bamboo cups. The launch chugged into Manila Bay, stars pricking like .32 kisses. "Shanghai run," Pimpcat purred. "Opium kings want Frisco names. Fifty grand split. You drive, I slide."

Jade's hand traced my scars. Skin salt-  
panic taste. Slutpuppy's echo. I drank.  
The bay swallowed the city lights. Below  
deck: mirrors ceilinged, record player  
spinning "Gloomy Sunday" in Tagalog.  
Ghosts didn't wait for invites.

19

Dawn painted Corregidor orange-optimist,  
guns silent but hungry. We docked at a  
smuggler's cove—white sand scarred black  
by typhoons. Pimpcat vanished into palms  
with a satchel: ledger pages reborn,  
sodden sins dried crisp. Jade stayed,

qipao sighing to deck like candle smoke.

"Silky trades me like silk," she  
whispered, thighs parting invitation.

"Make me forget property."

Echo of Puppy. I did. We moved 5/4 jazz,  
off-balance inevitable-her cheongsam  
whispers, my scars drumming. Salt,  
panic, opium dream. After, she slept  
open-mouthed, small dragon spent. I  
counted shadows.

At 3:17 the porthole fogged: Slutpuppy's  
face, throat treble-clef from South Bend

razor, gold-ruthless eyes fogging glass  
with St. Joe River mist. She mouthed  
Miss longer. Vanished on blink.  
Derringer cold against ribs.

Pimpcat returned, satchel lighter.  
"Buyer's en route. Shanghai tong." His  
eyes flicked Jade, then me-cracked  
marble.

Outside, footsteps cat-pawed. Lola  
climbed from the hold, cheongsam  
dripping bay, camera flashing white  
fire. "Share." Clown mask rose shotgun-  
weeping my Chicago bullet. Craddock

powdered in monsignor rags. Jury reconvened.

Pimpcat's .45 barked. Ghosts laughed backward records. I fired Luger-lead through mist. Jade woke screaming razor hymn. Launch rocked earthquake-slow.

20

We fled into jungle-vines switchblade-thick, monkeys howling blues backup. Satchel slung crossback, bills crisp as Craddock's wafers. Jade clutched derringer, qipao torn to map of desires.

Pimpcat slid ahead, paws sure. "Tong  
cave ahead. Hide till steamer."

Slutpuppy's ghost paced parallel, fog  
sliding patent-leather. "You left me,"  
she purred through fronds. Lola flashed:  
jack spades, queen hearts, joker  
tongueless. Cards rained like Frisco  
fog. Pimpcat spun, fired wild. "Damn  
Puppy-always jealous."

Cave mouth yawned: opium lanterns  
flickering outer-space suns, tong boss-a  
fat mandarin with pinky-ring ace of  
guilt-waiting with gorillas in silk

pajamas. "Valiente book?" Mandarin hissed.

Satchel traded. Bills fat. But Jade's eyes betrayed—Medusa snakes. "Silky's bait again," she said, derringer on me. "Tong owns ledger. You two ghosts now."

Pimpcat grinned eternal. "Boats float." He lunged. Mandarin's boys drew kris daggers, curved as Lola's razor. Cave echoed 5/4 chaos: shots, screams, flashbulbs popping rainbows. I smashed Jade's wrist—derringer skittered. Grabbed satchel half-full. Pimpcat

slumped, kris in gut, leaking like the  
clown. Ghosts circled pyre: Slutpuppy's  
dice laugh, Lola's gardenia-  
formaldehyde. No fade. They feasted.

21

I bolted cave-mouth, satchel bills  
fluttering moths. Jungle to beach: SS  
Oriental Limited whistle-ghost steamer,  
sister to Midnight rails. No tickets  
needed. Dove aboard as tong jeeps  
growled gravel.

Cabin: mirrors cracked smiling, Philco

wailing "Strange Fruit" in Cantonese.

Jade washed up mid-Pacific, qipao  
plastered sin-map, clinging to rail.

"Tong double-crossed Silky. Book's curse  
mine now." Her hand found me under thin  
blanket-warm, wicked, alive. We coupled  
typhoon-fierce, waves metronome. Ghosts  
watched: Puppy's phantom fang bared,  
Lola grinning treble.

Shanghai loomed, Bund neon jeweled liar.

Tong waited dockside-Hudson Hornet  
ghosts, headlights popping. Bills burned  
sink-blue. Derringer pocketed. Left Jade  
note: Sink slower.

Bund fog cat-thick. I slipped into  
alley-jazz joints throbbing, rickshaws  
pulling souls. Contact: "Whisper" Ling,  
ledger fence for warlords. He poured  
maotai fire. "Frisco sins gold here.  
Chiang needs dirt on Americans." Thirty  
grand reborn.

But his ring: jack spades.

Slutpuppy materialized from steam vent,  
trench too big, hair pinned broken.

"Quill..." Razor from garter. Ghosts  
full jury: Pimpcat paws clapping, clown  
shotgun, Craddock wafers, Lola camera,  
Jade qipao dripping. "Eternity split."

Luger sang. Whisper leaked black. Bills  
scattered Pacific-bound paper boats. I  
dove Bund waters-ink-ice. Surfaced  
alone. Ghosts wheeled gulls over slick  
patch. No bodies.

Nanjing Road motel: neon "No Vacancy"  
flickering lie. Bed sagged. Burned last  
bills. Pocketed ghosts' cards. Steamer  
east whistled-Havana? Reno? Eternity's

**rails.**

**Her laugh echoed dice: Nobody makes it.**

**Fog slid slicker, pimpcat-slutpuppy  
eternal. Story switches tracks, but the  
throat jazz always swallows. Lips rough  
on reeds...**

**-end of inky noir Book Three-**

**BOOK FOUR: THE HEY HEY HAZE OF QUILL'S  
BLOODY REED**

AND THE KANSAS CITY CATS

AS TIANGZIFANG DEVOURS THE JAZZ SOULS

Shanghai, 1939 – the year the Bund fog  
choked on Japanese gunpowder and Kansas  
City sax wails, Tiangzifang alleys  
twisting like opium pipes into  
eternity's dive...

23

Nanjing Road motel neon lied "No  
Vacancy," bed sagged like a tong boss's  
conscience. I'd burned Whisper Ling's  
thirty grand reborn in the sink-blue

flames licking Frisco sins—but ghosts  
don't cash out. Slutpuppy's dice laugh  
echoed from the radiator jazz: Miss  
longer, Quill. Lola's flashbulb popped  
in maotai dreams, razor treble-clef.  
Pimpcat's paws clapped patent-leather  
from the ceiling fan blades. Craddock's  
wafers powdered the ashtray. Jade Fang's  
qipao dripped Bund ink.

Dawn typhoon-gray. I pocketed the  
derringer (Puppy's orphan heir), Luger  
oiled cold, and slipped into  
Tiangzifang—former French Concession  
hutongs gone boho-wild, stone gates

**framing rickshaws, teahouses thumpin'  
jazz from hidden doors. Artsy expat  
traps: white devils paintin' watercolors  
by day, tong girls slingin' snow by  
night. Japanese patrols prowled like  
stray cats, bayonets glintin' under  
lanterns.**

**Desk clerk slipped a cable: Hey Hey  
Club. Alley 17. KC boys got Frisco book  
scraps. Fence tonight. Silky lives.**

**Pulse hounded. Silky sunk Corregidor,  
but ledgers float. Chesterfields coiled  
Medusa. Freedom's a hutong that loops.**

Hey Hey Club hid behind a silk-scroll  
door, stairs down to basement catacomb:  
Kansas City refugees—Count Basie strays,  
ex-Poteen Place horn-men fleein'  
Prohibition ghosts—blowin' bebop wild on  
tenor saxes and upright bass, sweat  
mixin' with opium haze. Dames in qipaos  
slit revelation-high swayed hips money-  
owed, rickshaw coolies nursin' San  
Miguels spiked tuak. Smoke thick as  
cathouse promises, walls whisperin' "One  
O'Clock Jump" like bootleg hymns.

Bar leaned "Fats" Kowalski, Polish-KC  
gorilla with gold teeth like hidden  
headlights, slingin' maotai rye. "Quill?  
Valiente's ash-man. Tong wants ledger  
scraps washed ashore Manila. KC cats  
found pages in a wrecked launch-Craddock  
sins, Puppy thigh-shots. Fifty grand  
clean."

He slid a satchel: oilskin bundle,  
sodden daguerreos readable-powerful  
ghosts wearin' shame nothin'. My scars  
itched.

"Split with the band?"

Fats laughed wet gargle. "They lose  
minds here nightly. Opium kingpin  
'Dragon Joe' buys tonight. Play cool."

Reed players nodded from stage, horns  
poppin' predator eyes. I lit up, watched  
fog crawl rice-paper windows. Puppy's  
phantom paced the bar rag-trench too-  
big, hair pinned broken.

25

Midnight riff crescendo: "Body and Soul"

slit slow, wrists temptin'. Dragon Joe  
slithered in-mandarin fat, pinky-ring  
jack spades onyx-etched, flanked silk-  
pajama gorillas kris-curved. Qipao dame  
on arm: Black Orchid, half-Russian  
viper, lips gardenia-red, eyes clown-  
cracked porcelain.

"Book," Joe hissed maotai breath.

Satchel traded under table-envelope fat  
as South Bend ten-grand slimmed. But  
Orchid's nails traced my Luger bulge:  
"Silky says hello-from Manila yacht.  
Puppy's fang his now."

Pulse drum. Derringer garter-cold. KC  
sax wailed bridge metallic-nickel,  
stealin' lungs. Joe grabbed satchel,  
grinned wafers. Trap.

Gorillas drew. Hey Hey erupted 5/4  
chaos: shots barkin' whorehouse-short,  
mirrors shatterin' thousand guilty  
Orchids. I dove, Luger singin' lead  
through silk. Fats shotgun-kissed a  
gorilla chest-leak black. Band kept  
blowin', reeds bloody prophecy.

Orchid laughed dice-felt: "Share."

Lola materialized stage-smoke, cheongsam  
bay-drip, camera flash white-fire  
treble. Clown mask rose shotgun-weepin'  
Chicago hole. Craddock monsignor  
powdered. Pimpcat zoot-slid from bass  
shadows. Jade qipao-fang. Puppy trench-  
fog. Full jury, eternal.

26

Club inferno: not fire-opium lamps  
tipped, blue blaze chewin' bamboo beams  
like Tenderloin teeth. KC cats scattered  
wild-sax on back, trumpet case ledger-

**shield-howlin' into alleys.**

I grabbed Orchid (warm wicked pulse),  
dragged through kitchen steam vents,  
derringer her spine-tease. "Sing for me,  
doll."

She did-throat gasp orphan-soldered,  
Russian trill stealin' my breath. We  
coupled hutong shadows, qipao sighin'  
salt-panic, 5/4 off-balance inevitable  
under lantern moon. After, open-mouthed  
dragon spent. Ghosts wheeled overhead  
gulls.

Dragon Joe's Packard growled alley-end-  
vertical grille prison-bars, whitewalls  
screamin' wet stone. Japanese patrol  
spotlit: "Yamete!" Rifles barked. I  
fired blind, Luger phosphor. Orchid  
derringer-spat justice. Packard  
accordioned pillar-sparks. Joe crawled  
leak-black, ring jack spades glint.

Satchel bills fluttered paper-boats  
Tiangzifang drains, Pacific-bound. No  
fade-ghosts feasted pyre, gardenia-  
formaldehyde foghorn. KC horns wailed  
distant blues backup.

Dawn nicotine over Suzhou Creek. We  
ditched into artsy warrens—watercolor  
stalls shuttered, expat ghosts paintin'  
sins. Orchid poured tuak bamboo: "Tong  
owns Hey Hey curse now. Silky baits  
eternal."

Her hand slid blanket-thin-thighs parted  
invite. "Havana steamers?"

Pulse hound. Burned remnant bills sink-  
blue. Pocketed her reed-souvenir. Note:  
Sink slower, cats.

Tianzifang depot fog-thick: she sat  
trench-big, hair promise-break.  
  
Pimpcat's phantom Cord ghosted lot-  
garnet headlights pop. Lola flash-pop.  
  
Orchid turned late-razor treble whisper.  
  
Crumpled gold-ruthless fade.

I shadowed Luger-heavy. Cord purred  
mist-no-plates. Craddock page fluttered  
hand-sins boat puddle-Pacific.

Ticket man yawned: "East, west, or  
eternity?"

"Kansas City rails."

Steamer whistled low-ghost Oriental  
Limited sister. Boarded solo. Shanghai  
shrank jeweled liar broken-nails. Ghosts  
rode: fang-grin, clown-crack, Puppy  
dice, KC sax bloody-reed.

Fog slid slicker, hey-hey haze eternal  
hunger. Story switches hutongs, but  
jazz-throat always swallows. Lips rough  
on reeds...

-end of inky noir Book Four-

**BOOK FIVE: THE RUM PHANTOM OF QUILL'S  
BLOODY REED  
AND THE SLUTPUPPY'S CIGAR FANG  
AS HAVANA'S MALECÓN MOANS MAMBO MURDER**

Havana, 1940 – the year the Malecón fog  
sucked rum and revolution, mambo horns  
wailing like widows over ledger  
corpses...

SS Oriente ghosted into Havana harbor,  
salt-crust shedding Tiangzifang haze  
like old skin. Orchid's crumpled echo-  
razor treble in Suzhou drains-faded, but  
Puppy's dice laugh rode the bilge pumps:  
Sink slower, cats. I'd burned Dragon  
Joe's satchel scraps blue, pocketed KC  
reed-souvenir bloody-prophecy,  
derringer/Luger twins cold as Corregidor  
guns. Ghosts heavier: Lola flash, clown  
weep, Pimpcat slide, Jade drip, full  
jury puffing phantom Partagás.

Hotel Nacional swallowed me-marble  
ghosts of Lucky Luciano, fans machete-

chopping ceiling mirrors. Room 666: bed  
sagging Batista bribes, balcony  
overlooking Malecón waves slapping  
concrete like bad debts.

Desk cable: Sans Souci. KC exiles fence  
Frisco pages. Silky cigars from Oriente.  
Midnight. Fats.

Pulse hounded prairie-wild. Silky sunk  
thrice, but pimps float rum-proof.  
Chesterfield coiled, freedom's a conga  
line loop.

Sans Souci cabaret throbbed Vedado  
velvet: mambo mania, rum rivers, Batista  
gorillas tuxed, showgirls feathered  
revelation-thighs. KC Poteen strays-  
Basie horn-men fleein' dustbowl-blew  
"Mambo Jambo" wild, congas skin-slappin'  
off-beat inevitable.

Bar slouched "Papa" Rico, Cuban-Polish  
whale gold-toothed headlights, slingin'  
mojitos maotai-spiked. "Quill?  
Tiangzifang ash. Hey Hey ledger floated  
Manila-Craddock thigh-dags, Puppy garter  
shots. Sixty grand Havana clean."

**Satchel oilskin sins reborn. Scars  
itched Fidel hints.**

**"Split band?"**

**Rico gargled: "They mambo minds lost.**

**Rum king 'El Tigre' buys."**

**Reed-men nodded stage predator-pop. Fog  
crawled balcony lace. Puppy phantom  
conga'd bar-rag, cigarillos smoke  
Medusa.**

**Midnight mambo crescendo:** "Body and Soul" rum-slit slow. El Tigre prowled-tattoo-tiger mandarin fat, ring queen hearts ruby, rumba-dame arm: Cigar Lily, Spanish viper cheongsam-feather, lips Lola-red, eyes porcelain-crack.

"Libro," Tigre hissed breath-cigar.

**Satchel table-trade:** envelope fatter South Bend. Lily nails Luger-tease: "Silky hello-Oriente yacht alive. Puppy fang bites cigars."

Derringer garter-burn. KC trumpet bridge  
steals lungs nickel. Tigre snatched,  
wafers-grin. Trap.

Gorillas kris-conga. Sans Souci 5/4  
blaze: shots short-bark, mirrors guilty-  
thousand Lilys. Luger lead-silk, Rico  
shotgun gorilla-leak black. Band blew  
reeds bloody-mambo.

Lily dice-laugh: "Comparte."

Jury full: Lola bay-flash, clown  
Chicago-weep, Craddock powder, Pimpcat  
zoot-conga, Jade qipao, Orchid Russian-

**trill, Puppy trench-mist.**

**31**

**Inferno rum-lamps tipped blue-mambo  
chewin' palms. KC cats scattered conga-  
wild-trumpet ledger-shield-howlin'  
Malecón alleys. Grabbed Lily (wicked-  
warm), kitchen-drag derringer-spine:  
"Mambo me."**

**Throat orphan-gasp trill steals breath.  
Shadows couple: feathers sigh salt-  
panic, rhythm wave-metronome inevitable.  
Open-mouthed viper spent. Ghosts gulls-**

wheel.

Tigre's Chrysler growled-grille prison-  
vertical, whitewalls wet-pave scream.

Batista patrol spot: "Alto!" Mausers  
barked. Blind-fire phosphor. Lily  
derringer justice-spit. Chrysler pillar-  
accordion sparks. Tigre crawled black-  
leak, ring queen glint.

Bills boats Malecón drains Pacific.

Ghosts pyre-feast gardenia-rumhorn. KC  
horns distant backup.

Dawn nicotine Habana Vieja. Warrens  
watercolor-rum distilleries shuttered.

Lily tuak-mojito: "Tigre curse Sans  
owns. Silky eternal bait."

Thighs invite blanket. "Lawless rails?"

Burned bills sink-blue. Pocketed cigar-  
reed. Note: Mambo slower.

Malecón depot fog: Lily trench-big  
promise-break. Cord phantom lot-  
headlights pop. Lola flash. Lily late-  
turn-cigar-fang treble. Crumpled

ruthless-gold. Shadow Luger. Cord mist-no-plates. Craddock-page boat puddle.

Ticket yawn: "Lawless or eternity?"

"Kansas dust."

Steamer low-whistle Oriental sister.

Solo board. Havana jeweled-liar nails-broke. Ghosts ride: fang-grin crack-dice  
Puppy KC bloody-reed cigar. Fog rum-slick eternal. Jazz-throat swallows.  
Reeds rough-lips...

-end of inky noir Book Five-

BOOK SIX: THE DUSTBOWL WAIL OF QUILL'S  
BLOODY REED  
AND THE LAWLESS GHOST CATS  
AS THE POTEEN PLACE PAYS BACK IN PRAIRIE  
BLOOD

Lawless, Kansas, 1941 – the year the  
dustbowl fog choked wheat ghosts and  
Okie rails, Poteen Place cathouse  
howling sax over ledger graves...

Midnight Limited rattled prairie-black  
from Havana rum to Lawless dust—  
fictional frontier dustbowl sink, KC  
Poteen orbit where Basie strays holed  
post-Prohibition, wheat fields hiding  
clown bunkers, sheriffs bought ledger-  
cheap. Lily's cigar-fang crumpled  
Malecón echo, Puppy dice: Mambo slower.  
Burned Tigre's sixty blue,  
derringer/Luger/reed-cigar twins, jury  
full: Lola/Orchid/Jade/Lily phantom-  
fangs circling like dust devils.

Poteen Place swallowed-adobe cathouse  
neon "Girls! Jazz!", tumbleweed conga,  
wind moaning mambo widows. Room 13: bed  
sagging Dust Bowl debts, ceiling fan  
prairie-machete mirrors.

Cable: Poteen stage. KC ghosts fence  
final Frisco scraps. Silky dust-yacht.  
Dawn. Count.

Hound-pulse wheat-wild. Silky sunk  
Havana, pimps dust-proof. Freedom loops  
derail.

Poteen Place basement throbbed: KC  
lawless cats—Count horn-men dust—Okie—  
wailing "One O'Clock Jump" dustbowl  
bebop, upright bass thumpin' inevitable  
off-beat. Dames feather-qipao swayed  
thighs owed, Okie coolies nursin' tuak—  
mojito. Smoke cathouse-thick, walls "St.  
James Infirmary" bootleg.

Bar "Count" Dust, gorilla gold—  
headlights, slingin' rye-dust. "Quill?  
Havana ash. Sans ledger floated Oriente—  
full Craddock/Puppy dag-shame. Seventy  
grand clean."

**Satchel sins final.**

**"Band split?"**

**Dust gargle: "Lose minds dust-nightly.**

**Dust king 'Wheat Wolf' buys."**

**Reeds stage predator. Dust crawled  
shutters. Puppy phantom bar-rag trench-  
dust.**

**35**

**Dawn wail crescendo: "Body and Soul"**

dust-slit. Wheat Wolf slunk-tattoo-wolf  
fat, ring joker tongueless bone, dust-  
dame: Prairie Thorn, viper feather-  
cheongsam, lips phantom-red, eyes crack.

"Book," Wolf howled breath-wheat.

Trade: envelope fattest. Thorn Luger-  
tease: "Silky hello-dust yacht. Puppy  
eternal fang."

Derringer cold. Trumpet bridge lungs-  
steal. Wolf wafers. Trap.

Gorillas sixgun-conga. Poteen 5/4

dustblaze: shots bark, mirrors thousand  
Thorns. Lead-dust, Count shotgun leak-  
black. Cats blew bloody-reeds.

Thorn dice: "Comparte."

Jury eternal: all  
fangs/flash/weep/slide/powder.

36

Inferno dust-lamps tipped blue-wail  
chewin' adobe. Cats scattered wild-sax  
shield-howlin' wheat fields. Grabbed  
Thorn (warm-wicked), barn-drag

derringer: "Wail me."

Throat trill orphan-steals. Shadows  
couple: feathers salt-dust panic, rhythm  
wind-metronome. Spent open-mouthed.  
Ghosts dust-devil.

Wolf's Dodge growled-grille prison,  
tires dust-scream. Sheriff patrol:  
"Halt!" Rifles dust-bark. Blind  
phosphor. Thorn derringer spit. Dodge  
pillar-sparks. Wolf leak-black, ring  
joker glint.

Bills boats wheat-drains Pacific. Ghosts

**feast pyre wheat-gardenia. Horns  
distant.**

**37**

**Dawn nicotine plains. Warrens dust-art-  
wheat sketches. Thorn rye-dust: "Wolf  
curse Poteen owns. Silky forever."**

**Thighs blanket. "Eternity rails?"**

**Burned bills blue. Pocketed reed-cigar-  
thorn. Note: Dust slower.**

**Depot dust-fog: Thorn trench promise.**

Cord phantom lot pop. Lola flash. Thorn  
turn-late-thorn-fang treble. Crumpled.  
Luger shadow. Cord mist. Page boat  
puddle.

Ticket: "Rails end?"

"Eternity."

Train low-ghost Limited final. Solo.  
Lawless shrank liar-nails. Ghosts full  
ride: every fang grin crack dice reed  
cigar. Dust slick eternal.

-end of inky noir Book Six-

BOOK SEVEN: THE ACCORDION GASP OF  
QUILL'S BLOODY REED  
AND THE SLUTPUPPY'S SEINE FANG  
AS PARIS OCCUPATION FOG CHOKES THE  
LEDGER LIES

Paris, 1942 – the year the Seine fog  
wore swastika lipstick, accordion wails  
gasping under Vichy boots like orphans  
in Montmartre gutters...

Ghost Limited rattled prairie to  
Atlantic port-New York iron screaming  
wartime. Steamer crossed Channel dodging  
U-boats, gray waters cold as Gestapo  
eyes. Then rails through Brest to Paris  
occupation haze, Thorn's prairie-fang  
crumpled in wheat-drain memory, Puppy's  
dice: Dust slower. Burned Wolf's seventy  
blue, derringer/Luger/reed-cigar-thorn  
quartet, jury bloated:  
Lola/Orchid/Jade/Lily/Thorn fangs  
circling Eiffel shadows.

Le Caveau des Oubliettes swallowed-

catacomb cabaret under Moulin Rouge  
bones, neon "Girls! Jazz!" dimmed  
blackout. Room 13 bis: bed sagging  
Pétain bribes, ceiling fan Seine-machete  
mirrors.

Cable: Caveau stage. KC Resistance horns  
fence ultimate Frisco full-ledger. Silky  
Seine-yacht. Twilight. Django.

Grit-hound pulse Occupation-wild. Silky  
sunk Lawless, pimps Seine-proof.  
Freedom's guillotine loop.

Caveau throbbed catacomb: KC Paris  
exiles-Django Reinhardt gypsy-jazz  
strays, Poteen horn-men fleein' wheat  
ghosts-wailing "Nuages" fog-beboop,  
accordion squeeze off-beat inevitable.  
  
Dames beret-qipao swayed thighs  
rationed, Maquis coolies nursin'  
absinthe-tuak. Smoke Gestapo-thick,  
walls "Body and Soul" Resistance  
bootleg.

Bar "Le Comte" Noir, scarecrow gold-  
headlights, slingin' calvados-dust.  
"Quill? Lawless cendre. Poteen ledger

**floated Havana-complete Craddock/Puppy  
dag-shame sins. Eighty grand clean."**

**Satchel oilskin eternal.**

**"Band split?"**

**Noir rasped: "Minds lost fog-nightly.**

**Fog king 'Le Loup' buys."**

**Reeds stage predator-dim. Fog crawled  
ossuary vents. Puppy phantom beret-rag  
Seine-mist.**

**Twilight wail crescendo:** "Body and Soul"  
**fog-slit slow.** Le Loup slunk-tattoo-wolf  
**gaunt, ring ace guilt ivory, fog-dame:**  
**Seine Widow, viper beret-cheongsam, lips**  
**phantom-red, eyes porcelain-crack.**

"**Livre,**" Loup croaked breath-Seine.

**Trade: envelope fattest Vichy. Widow**  
**Luger-tease:** "Silky bonjour-Seine yacht.  
**Puppy eternal fang kindly stops.**"

**Derringer cold-guillotine. Accordion**  
**bridge lungs-steal orphan-gasp. Loup**

wafers. Trap.

Gestapo sixgun-conga. Caveau 5/4

fogblaze: shots bark blackout-short,  
mirrors thousand Widows. Lead-ossuary,  
Comte shotgun leak-black. Exiles blew  
bloody-reeds gypsy.

Widow dice: "Partage."

Jury apocalypse: all  
fangs/flash/weep/slide/powder/gypsy-  
trill.

Inferno fog-lamps tipped blue-gasp  
chewin' bones. Exiles scattered wild-  
accordion shield-howlin' Montmartre  
sewers. Grabbed Widow (wicked-raw),  
ossuary-drag derringer: "Gasp me."

Throat Dickinson-trill orphan-steals: I  
did not stop for the Slutpuppy, but she  
kindly stopped for me.

Shadows couple: berets salt-fog panic,  
rhythm Seine-metronome inevitable. Spent  
open-mouthed reaper. Ghosts ossuary-  
devil.

Loup's Citroën growled-grille prison-blackout, tires fog-scream. Gestapo patrol: "Halt!" MP40s fog-bark. Blind phosphor. Widow derringer spit. Citroën pillar-sparks. Loup leak-black, ring ace glint.

Bills boats Seine-drains Pacific-  
eternal. Ghosts feast pyre fog-gardenia.  
Horns distant gypsy.

42

Dawn nicotine Sacré-Cœur. Warrens fog-

**art-accordion sketches rationed. Widow  
calvados: "Loup curse Caveau owns. Silky  
forever fog."**

**Thighs blanket-raw. "Eternity  
guillotine?"**

**Burned bills blue. Pocketed reed-cigar-  
thorn-widow. Note: Fog slower.**

**Pont des Arts depot fog: Widow beret-big  
promise. Cord phantom lot pop. Lola  
flash.**

**Widow turn-late-Seine-fang treble.**

**Crumpled ruthless spectre. Luger shadow**

**grit.**

**Cord mist-no-plates. Craddock-page boat  
puddle-waves.**

**Ticket man-gold-toothed, eyes almighty-  
Chesterfields coiled grace-smoke: "Rails  
fin?"**

**"Infinity."**

**Train low-ghost Limited apocalypse.**

**Solo. Paris shrank liar-nails  
Occupation.**

**Ghosts full ride: every fang grin crack  
dice reed cigar thorn widow.**

Fog Occupation-slick sliding away.

Rails derail guillotine. Jazz-throat  
swallows unblinking.

Rough lips reeds... grit eternal. No  
remake gloss. Just bones.

-end of inky noir Book Seven-

BOOK EIGHT: AVAILABLE PHANTOMS IN THE  
STORY THAT ATE QUILLS  
AND THE SLUTPUPPY'S FINAL FANG

## AS NOWHERE TAKES ITS CUT

Nowhere, 1943 – the year the war ran out  
of maps and the fog started answering to  
no one...

43

The Liberty ship SS Nowhere coughed me  
onto a dock that didn't exist on any  
chart the Navy handed out.

No flags, no MPs, no port office—just  
oil-slick water, a single sodium lamp  
humming like a dying saxophone, and a  
warehouse with a hand-painted sign:

CUSTOMS & OTHER CONFESSIONS – OPEN TIL  
DOOM.

Inside, a man in a clerk's visor stamped  
passports that had already been burned  
at both ends.

He didn't ask my name.

He asked for the ledger.

I told him it was at the bottom of five  
oceans.

He smiled like he'd already checked.

“Paper floats, Lieutenant. Price is up  
to eighty-five grand.

Payable in any currency—yen, blood, or  
last breath.”

They put me up in a hotel that used to  
be a casino—every room a different  
roulette number, beds tilted toward the  
house.

Mirror still worked; showed me a face  
the war hadn't finished using.

At 3:17 the handle turned—same hour  
every city since Frisco.

This time it was her.

Not a ghost.

Flesh, trench-coat two sizes too big,  
hair pinned with a used .32 shell.

Slutpuppy.

**Throat unslit, eyes still gold-ruthless.**

**“Miss me longer?” she asked, voice  
bourbon spilled on a grave.**

**I didn’t bother with how.**

**In this town the dead punch the clock  
like everybody else.**

**She laid a new ledger on the blanket-  
oilskin dry, pages crisp, my name on the  
first line in Silky’s handwriting:**

**“Quill – one story, paid in full.”**

**Underneath, fresh ink:**

**“Collateral: whatever’s left of his  
soul.”**

We drank warehouse gin while the clerk  
explained the rules.

One buyer.

Midnight.

Dock seven-warehouse burns whether the  
deal goes or not.

Ledger walks or we both stay and become  
footnotes in somebody else's war.

Slutpuppy poured again.

“Eighty-five split my way this time,  
Quill.

You keep the scars, I keep the gasp.”

I looked at her and saw every city we'd  
scorched-Frisco bay water slapping

piers, Chicago snow turning red,  
Shanghai hutongs choking on opium,  
Havana waves licking Malecón concrete,  
Kansas dust drinking wheat blood, Paris  
bone-catacombs, Lawless prairie wind,  
Tiangzifang alleys, Manila typhoon  
thread.

All of it folded into the shape of a  
woman who never learned how to stay  
dead.

I agreed.

In for a penny, in for a pound of flesh—  
mine or hers, didn't matter anymore.

Buyer arrived wearing a major's uniform  
with no insignia and a mask made from  
newspaper headlines—Versailles, Pearl,  
Stalingrad, Guadalcanal.

Voice like a radio between stations.  
Opened a briefcase: gold bars stamped  
with swastikas, eagles, and rising suns—  
every loser of the war minted into one  
neutral currency.

Slutpuppy lifted the ledger.

Pages fluttered like dying moths.

Buyer sniffed.

“Only eighty percent pure,” he said.  
“Missing the last chapter.”

**He meant me.**

**I felt the Luger rise without my hand,  
heard the shot before it left the  
barrel.**

**Slutpuppy's derringer answered-pop-pop-  
two notes of a song we'd been rehearsing  
since 1937.**

**Buyer folded, briefcase clang ing gold on  
concrete.**

**We looked at each other over the body.**

**Same question every time:**

**Love or loot?**

**Neither.**

**Just the rhythm-off-balance, inevitable.**

Warehouse caught as promised—kerosene  
lamps kicking like jazz drummers on  
benzedrine.

We walked out through flames carrying  
opposite halves of the ledger.

Pages curling, names blistering, sins  
turning to ash that smelled of gardenias  
and formaldehyde.

At the dock's end she stopped, offered  
her half.

“Make a paper boat,” she said.

“Set it adrift.

Let the ocean own us for once.”

We did—one boat each, pages overlapping  
like broken wings.

Current took them toward opposite  
horizons.

She lit two cigarettes, passed me one.

“Think we’ll make it?”

“Nobody makes it,” I said.

“Some just take longer to miss.”

She laughed—dice on felt for the last  
time—then stepped backward into the fog.

No footprints.

No body.

Just the echo of an orphan gasp finally  
finding the floorboard it died under.

The clerk reappeared out of the smoke,  
visor streaked with soot.

Stamped my passport:

DEPARTED - NO RETURN DATE - LEDGER  
CLOSED.

He handed me a ticket-no destination, no  
fare, punched once at midnight.

Train waited, engine idling like a  
saxophone holding its breath.

I climbed aboard.

Doors shut.

Wheels turned.

No ghosts in the windows.

No fog on the glass.

Only my reflection-cracked, but un-haunted.

Somewhere behind, the warehouse collapsed into the bay, taking every name we ever bled for.

Somewhere ahead, the tracks ran out of map.

Good.

Stories end when the paper gives up, not when the hero grows wise.

I closed my eyes and listened to the rails count off the years-nickel, dime, treble clef, gasp-until the rhythm blurred into silence.

The lips that pressed rough kisses on  
the reed finally let go.

-end of inky noir book Eight-

THE END