



The Roach:

Life In A Tin Can

by Robert Roach

The staccato click of high heels resounded in the man-made valleys of Chicago. Chi-town to some, Shit-town to others. This particular person had no opinion of the city's labels, be the labels formal or informal. She was merely out to survive.

The red-garbed lady noticed an irregular form in an alley's shadow and moved to investigate. Business had been slow and, she figured, if it was a trick she could make a little "geish." If not, and the silhouette was some bitch encroaching on her territory, Sadie'd be sure to make short work of her.

Her long, shapely legs carried her toward the dark figure. Sadie didn't look bad. In fact, she looked damn good—especially considering how fast her profession tended to age its artisans. As she paused by the figure, Sadie realized it was a man, but no more could she discern. Positioning herself so that her comely breasts, barely concealed by the red dress, were highlighted, she reached into her cleavage and extracted a cigarette.

"Light?" she asked in seductive tones.

The shadowy figure struck his lighter, its flames greedily licking the night air. Sadie bent toward the fire and lit her cancer stick. But, try as she might, the lady could not utilize the meager light to pierce the darkness shrouding the man's face.

"Anything I can do for you?" Sadie said in a thick voice, subtly shifting her weight to strike a pose. Initially, silence was her answer. Finally, the figure responded.

"A name, Sadie," he said in a grave voice.

"Oh. It's you," she said, the sugar falling from her tone. "What now?"

"A name," the man repeated.

"What name?" she countered, a slight degree of acid creeping into her voice.

"Word travels fast on the street," he said simply. "You know what I'm talking about. And of all the street folks, you'll be the first to learn what I need to know."

"So?!" Sadie demanded, though not as angrily as before.

"Find the name. I'll find you later," he said, turning to leave.

"Find me at dawn!" she shouted at his receding form. "You know where."

He paused in the alley, the faint illumination of a streetlight bouncing off his fedora. As he turned to look at Sadie's shapely form, the light found his mask and the butt of his hand-crafted pistol. Nodding, he turned and melted into the shadows.

"And no shit about my occupation!!" she screamed to him after he'd disappeared, yet knowing he heard every word.

Sadie wondered why she tolerated his trash—floating in and out of her life as his moods changed. She had her choice of almost any man in the South Side. Why put up with his melodramatic mess? Hell! She hadn't even seen his whole face. Ever.

But, her heart countered, something was there. A power or a mystique—Sadie didn't know how to put it into words. All she knew was that he made her keep wanting more of him. No one could touch her body and soul the way he did.

Sighing at her confusion, Sadie turned and walked toward better business. And a name.

"Hell, Nick! The punk-ass is gonna turn State's evidence. That'll put a lotta pressure on our action!"

The atmosphere in the Packard turned ice cold as the man of Sicilian descent turned toward the man in the horn-rimmed glasses.

"Don't you ever cuss or raise your voice at me, Vito. And leave the real thinking to the real men. While you're accountin' 'er whatever you call what you do, the 'big boys' are callin' the shots. We're part of Frank Nitty's organization. He'll take care of us!"

"He'll cover his end," the horn-rimmed man pouted. "And Nitty'll hang us out like the wash."

"Shut up! Or I'll make you walk the rest of the way!"

Dejected, Vito slumped into his seat and shut his mouth.

As they rode toward the United States Courthouse, another car rolled from the jail in the courthouse's direction. Five policemen acted as escorts and the sole passenger, one Spiro "Axe" Gordon, sat in silence, attentively scanning the areas they rode through. They all knew that assassination in Chicago was the rule, not the exception.

As they turned a corner and the courthouse came into view, all the men breathed a sigh of relief. They'd made it—despite all of Gangland's odds against them. And in a matter of hours, Gordon would have testified, and the mobs would be too busy fighting off legal charges and trying to keep their organizations intact to get back at "Axe" or anyone else involved, for that matter.

On the steps to the courthouse stood Howard Jacks, an aspiring assistant D.A. prosecuting the case. Jacks was aggressive—overly so in fact. And he was using the press coverage this case was drawing to cut out a larger political life for himself. Smart politics for an over-educated sleazeball.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen of the press, please! You'll know everything inside of three hours. Not now."

"How'd your men get a tip on Gordon and on all the information?" one reporter for the *Tribune* persisted.

"That's not easy to answer," Jacks said in an attempt to shield himself from the question.

"Give it a shot!" another man grumbled. Many others echoed his sentiment.

From a tactical viewpoint, Jacks felt it best to comply with the press's wishes. It might be better for him later in his career to have a good rapport with them, he reasoned.

"Our police department really doesn't know how Gordon came into custody. One evening someone shot the street lamps out outside of the Seventeenth Precinct. When the officers ran to investigate, there was Gordon, wrapped up like a present. And the man was so scared he was more than willing to cooperate."

"Rumor has it that the Roach caught 'Axe' and delivered him to your boys. And put enough fear into him to make him talk," a different reporter commented.

"The Roach had nothing to do with this!" Jacks snapped. "That costumed vigilante is nothing more than a nuisance—an unmitigated ass at best! It was the example of Chicago's finest that sparked a flame of retaliation in the

breasts of some honest citizens. The Roach is nothing, I swear to you all that I'll hang that masked bastard up to dry in court, and he'll fry because of his obstruction of true justice!"

A dark-hued reporter, his fedora pulled low on his brow, smiled at Jacks's emotional outburst, but he said nothing. His eyes were peeled for the car bearing Gordon to the courtroom.

"You'll have to catch him first," the reporter laughed. A few of his colleagues joined in, chuckling at the assistant D.A.'s expense. Nervously, Jacks adjusted his tie.

"How'd you land such an important case anyway, Jacks?" the first reporter demanded. "Two years ago you couldn't have gotten the job as office boy in the D.A.'s building. How'd you climb the political ladder so fast?"

"It's clear that both the mayor and the District Attorney have the utmost confidence in my abilities regardless of my age or experience," Jacks coolly responded. He didn't add that he knew of the D.A.'s late night carnal activities, and that a mere threat of making those activities public knowledge helped immensely.

"Here they come!" someone shouted and immediately all eyes snapped in the direction of the oncoming vehicle. The sidewalks were full for this time of day. Taking into account the media coverage the Gordon trial had in the Chicago area, that was to be expected. And as the car rolled slowly down the street, the Roach found it hard to keep his eyes on the machine. Instead, he found himself staring at a man, about 25 years old with a medium build and six feet tall. Why, he couldn't tell.

The man stood calmly by, sipping at a pop or such from a can.

The Roach turned his attention back to the approaching vehicle. It was getting close.

Again, his attention was drawn to the man with the tin can in hand. He stood there as calmly as before, sipping slowly from his beverage.

With considerable will power, the Roach riveted his attention on the car. Everything was going as it should—and that worried him most.

The car got closer and closer, bypassing the vile shouts of the crowd. It cruised by the people as if the streets had been empty. And suddenly it was juxtaposed with the man with the tin can.

As the Roach watched, the man, in one fluid motion, drew back and pitched the can through the car's window. Instantly, the vehicle erupted in flames. And while pandemonium reigned, the man slipped quickly into the crowd.

The Roach stood helplessly by. He saw it all go down, but he could do nothing to prevent it. And now, his vantage point prevented him from pursuing the assassin. The cops, after such an occurrence, would doubtless have quick trigger fingers. And were it known that he was the Roach, Jacks' fervent wish would have become reality. So the Roach stood by helplessly as the tin can man escaped, realizing that all of his work had been for naught.

Dawn's bright red fingers chased away the inky mystery of night and darkness. And as day traded with night for supremacy over the Windy City, Sadie Hudson heard a light tapping on her door. The sound startled her because she'd been listening so intently for the footsteps which would foretell it, that the knock out of the blue shook her momentarily.

As Sadie rose to answer the door she flung the early edition of the paper aside, stepping past the picture of "Axe" Gordon—a gangster who had been "hit" the day before. The sorry-ass police department had no idea where to begin finding information to solve the murder of the State's witness. She sneered at how a city full of cops couldn't come up with one clue. Not one

name. But she, Sadie, could.

The red lady opened the door to admit the shadowy visitor. She was happy to see him and angry with herself for being happy.

"Come in," she said in a surly voice to mask her feelings.

The Roach entered, taking the room in at a glance.

"Still the same Sadie," he remarked, the usual iron in his voice gone—in its place was something akin to tenderness in other men. But could such a thing exist in so hard a man?

"I couldn't quite afford a new bedroom set on this week's earnings," she replied with caustic sarcasm.

He simply smiled, cutting Sadie a swift look. And, ignoring her tone, he got down to the business at hand.

"The name, Sadie," he said.

"The mask," she retorted.

"We've been through this before," he said in a quiet voice, "and it always ends up the same. Let's not waste time—I'll agree to refrain from comments about your sordid, suck-ass job—"

"Hey!—"

"And you agree not to comment about the mask. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Now," he said, removing his trench coat and fedora, "the name, Sadie."

She looked at his handsome face. His lean, high cheekbones tapering toward his expressive mouth. The cool depths of his grey eyes. She had told herself all night that she would never allow herself to be enticed by the attraction—that soul-deep attraction she felt for him. But, from the moment he stepped through her doorway, she knew that in the end her heart would have its way. And Sadie would have been surprised to know that similar thoughts had gone through the Roach's mind.

She cursed herself lightly as she stepped closer to the masked man—realizing that, as always, one thing would lead to another.

The Roach in turn struggled to control his breathing. A warrior, under no circumstances, should lose his fighting edge. He must always be cool. But somewhere in the center of his mind, he knew that she touched some primordial part of his total being. And that perplexed him.

"The name," he said in a voice that didn't even hit at the tumultuous thoughts and emotions racing through his mind and heart.

Sadie silently cursed him for making her make the first move—and cursed herself for making it.

"In time," she said in a soft voice, her right hand stealing up to lightly stroke his cheek. As if of one mind, the two came together, their faces meeting at the halfway point of space between them. Their lips touched, and time stood still.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning when the Roach stood before a mirror, adjusting his navy blue tie and straightening the ruffles on his pine-striped vest. Seeing that all was in order, he put on his pin-striped jacket—the final component of his three-piece suit.

Sadie looked up at him from the rumpled sheets, in awe and in some state she couldn't define—a state somewhere between confusion and love.

"Why do you do it?" she demanded in soft tones which all but hid the force behind the question. "How can someone as ruthless as you make me feel the way you do? And how can you walk away from this moment and go blow some poor junkie to Hell? I can't understand that."

He turned and looked at her in silence for a second.

"I never kill indiscriminately and never when there's so much as a splinter

of doubt. I merely prey on those who prey on the defenseless. . . And as for your fears that the feeling isn't real for me, ask yourself if I'd return otherwise."

"Damn it!" she exclaimed, silently promising herself that she wouldn't cry. "There are times when I almost convince myself that we could be happy. Why not hang up that mask and let's give it a shot?"

"Why can't you quit walking the streets?" he softly retorted.

"Maybe I will! But you'll always be some freakin', low-life vigilante. What makes you think you have the right?! Did God ordain you to come down here and blow holes through people?! And what makes you think the innocent folks even want you here?!"

Again he stared at her in total silence before answering her question.

"I see it in their eyes," he responded coolly. "And no, I don't think God came down to give me divine right over life or death. If you think it's always been my life's ambition to walk through garbage—both physical and human—you're bent in the brain. But if I didn't do what I could—what I am—I couldn't look at myself in the mirror. And this is the only way I know to make a realistic contribution. Shit! You and I both know the cops are useless."

"Yeah," Sadie replied, trying to look deeper into the man. "But you aren't telling me the whole story."

"It's something you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

Instead, he reached for his coat and hat.

"The name," he said in a tired voice.

"Cantrell," she replied, turning her eyes away from his form.

She heard him walk toward the door—and only then because he chose not to move in total silence. He paused at the doorway, opening it slightly.

"I'll be back. Soon," he said in a light voice. And then he shut the door behind him.

As Sadie heard his footsteps retreat, she forgot her promise.

Nick smiled as he bought the *Daily News* from a corner paperboy.

"Look at this!" he demanded of Vito, pointing at the headline. "All charges dropped! I tolja we didn't have nothing to worry about. We're in Frank Nitty's organization."

"I'm happy about all of that," the man in the horn-rimmed glasses said, "but I don't like being a bagman. What if we're caught?!"

"Shuddup!" Nick swiftly countered. "We're as innocent as babies. All Mr. Nitty wants us to do is drop the money off uptown. And that's a small favor, considerin' all the trouble he got us out of."

"Maybe you're right," Vito conceded.

"Of course I'm right! Now let's catch the Central."

And as the two punks rushed to catch the electric railway, they were unaware that their every move was being documented.

The Roach had made his rounds, touching on almost everyone in his large system of informants. The name "Cantrell" was fresh on the street. More proof of Sadie's thoroughness. It was eleven-thirty in the morning—a hard time to find shadows to slip through—but somehow the Roach managed to find a way. Thus far, all he was drawing were blanks. Then, almost dramatically, that all changed.

"Yol Coach!" he heard hissed at him from the blackness of a shack around 49th. "Over here," the voice he immediately categorized as "Papa Bear" said.

"Papa Bear" was a washed-up athlete turned wino who got his name from his avid devotion to the Cubs and the Bears.

"I gotta thank ya' for the help with them young jerks the other day. They'd a' got away with all my hootch money if you haddinta been there. What's become a' the youth a' today? No respect."

"I'm glad you're happy," the Roach replied, "but I've got extremely important things to do, Papa Bear."

"That's why I called you over," the wino wheezed. "I heard yer lookin' for some outta town muscle named Cantrell."

The Roach's grey eyes flashed with excitement. "Where?"

"I seen 'im when he arrived two days ago. They was takin' him to a room over in the Michigan Bou'vard Garden Apartments on 47th."

"How do you know it was him?"

"I was put in charge a' ammo durin' the Great War 'n' I can sniff out explosives whenever the wind shifts. After I found out how 'Axe' bought it, I put two 'n' two together."

"Excellent! Is he still there?"

"Naw! After his name hit the streets, they had 'im moved."

"Damn! Do you know where?"

"Naw. But I'm positive ya' might be able to milk the statistics outta 'Crow.' I'm sure she knows."

"Last question. Who is 'they'?"

"Some a' Nitty's affiliates. Pretty bad boys."

"Thanks, 'Papa,'" the Roach said, slipping a sawbuck into his hand. "This ought to buy a ticket and a bottle." And with that he was gone.

"Crow" was an over-the-hill moll. She was past the days of usefulness, either physically or as a confidante. Nonetheless, she was occasionally privy to an inside scoop or two. Today was an example of such. Lucky for the Roach.

"Crow" sat alone in a speakeasy, her head sagging toward the wooden bar. Her eyes were turned in the floor's direction, but they wouldn't focus. This brew was good. Not at all like the wooden stuff that ate away part of her mind. Suddenly, "Crow" wasn't alone.

"What's shakin', baby?" she heard a stern voice say.

In a dizzy, weaving manner, she sat up to look the Roach in the eyes—or as closely as she could come to such.

"I know you," she slobbered, pointing a gnarled finger at him, "And I don't like you. Ssho get 'way from me!"

"Not 'til I know what you know. Cantrell."

"You ain't gettin' sshit!" she exclaimed, lurching to her feet.

"Just tell me," the Roach said. "Cantrell."

"You can't make me sshay nothin'! Get outta my face!"

"Oh yes I can, Crow. I can hit you where it really hurts. One word from me and you won't be able to scrape together a thimble full of brew. No beer. No whiskey. No scotch. Not even a freakin' bottle of wine. And you know that if anyone in Chicago can do it, I can."

The drunken woman stopped to think for a moment. The full fact of his statement almost sobered her. Almost. But, even though clouds remained in her head, she knew it'd be best to comply. Everyone on the streets knew the Roach didn't bullshit.

"The bastard'sh at the Hotel Sshherman, on East Randolph. An' I hope

Frank'sh boysh carve holesh in you that ain't even been invented!"

The Roach merely stared at the drunken cow until she could no longer take those piercing eyes. After she'd stilled the cancerous tongue in her head, he turned and strolled out of the tavern to fresher air.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon when Cantrell was finally alone. When he was finally rid of those pin-heads who were little better than barbarians—viewing their weapons as a means to butcher. They had no finesse. That's why Nitty had contacted him for this job.

It didn't worry him that his name was on the streets. A name doesn't catch a man. Either he'd have to make a mistake or a better man would have to take him. He didn't intend on doing the former and the latter was out of the question. Plus he had four of Nitty's muscle boys to work as a buffer zone between him and anything that might arise. The messengers had brought the money, and the "doc" had fixed him up with some premium smack. Yes, Mr. Cantrell's world was looking excellent.

Cantrell's plane was scheduled to leave Chicago Municipal Airport at 3:45 p.m. He was most anxious to get out to the West Coast and spend his loot. The hitman knew a number of silly actresses who'd be easily impressed by the flash of green, and it was these ladies he longed to be with.

He lay in bed, puffing on a cigar and cleaning his fingernails with a hunting knife when the door suddenly splintered.

Cantrell's surprise was short lived. The man was a paid assassin. He hadn't become one of the best of his breed by letting momentary shock get the better of him. His eyes automatically locked on the fast moving figure, and with almost casual ease, tossed his knife straight for his attacker's heart.

As the Roach felt the door go to pieces he curled into a ball, swiftly rolling across the floor. His quick vision took the room instantaneously. Cantrell lay on the bed against the north wall. To the right of his bed was the doorway to the bathroom. The doorway to the hall—the door he'd just ruined—was on the west wall and the windows were on the east wall. And, the Roach noted, Cantrell had a weapon in hand.

For another, the lengthy coat would have been a hindrance and the suit restrictive, but not so with the Roach. Rather, the suit and coat seemed more like a second skin than apparel.

The Roach squared himself with Cantrell, bringing his feet underneath his body. Immediately he saw the blade flashing through the air at him. With an eye-blurring flick of his gun hand, the Roach deflected the weapon out of the air. But, in that instant, Cantrell had drawn his gun.

The impassioned blue eyes of Cantrell and the cold grey eyes of the Roach locked for the briefest of seconds, yet, in some ways, the moment was like a lifetime. They immediately knew they hated each other and always would. Then their guns went off almost simultaneously. And the earth-shattering thunder was followed with a deathly silence.

Howard Jacks stood on the corner of 35th and Halsted. He had been conspicuously certain that he stood underneath a street light because one could never be quite certain of his fate on the South Side. The assistant D.A. had been standing alone on the corner for the better portion of an hour. Obviously, he'd been stood up.

The aspiring lawyer had been dubious when he received a phone call late that night. The caller, some voice he couldn't identify, said he had the information to blow the Gordon Case wide open again. But Jacks had to come alone.

Totally frustrated, the assistant D.A. waved his hands in a peculiar manner. And inside of thirty seconds, a police captain and a few men surrounded him.

"Call your men off," Jacks said to him. "It looks like— whoever— isn't going to show. Stinking low-life criminal trash! The mayor should simply blow all this South Side scum into the lake! Every man, woman and child!"

"Yes, sir," the captain said in a voice bordering on boredom. "So you'll be returning to your home on Gold Coast then, sir?"

Jacks cut the man a quick glance, stinging under the captain's insinuation of the lawyer's hypocrisy.

"Men have lost their jobs for less than that!" Jacks snapped. And, seeing that his threat had no effect, Howard shut up.

"Yes, I'll be going home, captain. You're dismissed."

Jacks climbed into his Ford and began his trek home. Thirty-fifth Street seemed awfully dark—darker than usual to the man. Shrugging any forebodings from his mind, the assistant D.A. continued east on 35th. He noticed Comiskey Park as he passed by the edifice. It seemed even larger in the depths of night. The Ford paused at the intersection of 35th and Federal and all was calm. That's when Jacks felt unusually strong hands rip him from his car.

When his senses returned, Jacks found himself in the middle of the street. Alone. But just for a moment. The same strong hands jerked him to his feet and whirled him around. And Jacks found himself staring into the cool grey eyes of a man dressed in dapper fashion. The lawyer needed no introductions. The descriptions of this man had reached his ears long ago. Jacks almost soiled his pants from fear. He was alone in the Roach's power.

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting long," the Roach commented, but his face showed no indication that he felt what he said. "I had to park your car. It wouldn't do for it to roll away, get stolen or in an accident."

The Roach grasped the collar of Jack's overcoat, jerking him toward the baseball park.

"What are you going to do with me?" Howard asked when his tongue returned.

"To the meeting we agreed upon," the Roach curtly replied.

"I--I-- was there!" Jacks stammered in a high-pitched voice.

The Roach merely stared at the man.

"I said alone when I spoke to you on the phone. But I knew sniveling trash like you wouldn't be able to keep his word. That's why I had the meeting at 35th and Halsted. I knew you'd have to pass by the park to get back to the Coast."

Again, Jacks cringed at the way his neighborhood's name was used—almost as if it was a piece of rotten fruit being spit from one's mouth.

The Roach led him up the ramps which would ultimately lead them to the lower level seats. After descending a few rows from their entrance, the Roach shoved Jacks into an aisle. Three figures, their hands tied behind their backs, sat there quietly.

"Sit," the Roach said and the lawyer immediately obeyed.

Switching on a flashlight, the Roach introduced the men.

"Nate Cantrell, meet Howard Jacks. Mr. Cantrell is a hired murderer. Mr. Jacks is a hired mouthpiece. I trust you other gentlemen know each other? Nick Valentina and Vito Osiros, Mr. Jacks—the men you were supposed to prosecute yesterday. And I'm positive you gangsters know each other."

"Why're we here?" Nick demanded. "Let me loose of this rope 'n' we won't be here long!"

The Roach simply glared at the fool.

"Shut up!" Vito hissed. "He took us both once before!"

"That was different! I wasn't ready!"

Without uttering a word, the Roach drew his nine inch blade and cut the man's bonds. After which, he merely stood in front of Nick, arms folded.

The punk glanced at his witnesses, giving his courage a chance to catch up to the situation. Then, with no apparent warning, he hooked for the Roach's head. A quick movement of the dark man's head and shoulders made Nick miss wildly, his arms unmoved. Again Nick took a swing, and again he missed. The third try, Nick attempted to jab punch the Roach in the mouth. Still the masked vigilante evaded the blow, his arms still crossed.

"Third strike and you're out," he said ominously. Suddenly his arms were uncrossed. His first punch, a left to the gangster's mouth, broke the scum's jaw and knocked out at least four teeth. With Valentina reeling, the Roach turned off all of the man's lights with a crushing right to his nose. Needless to say, the nose was broken also.

As Nick slumped unconsciously across a few bleacher seats, the Roach picked up his flashlight from the seat he had laid it on and continued as if nothing had happened.

"This, Mr. Prosecutor, is the hit-man who killed 'Axe' Gordon. I think that if you search Room 3B of the Hotel Sherman on Randolph, you'll find materials that will match with those used to kill Gordon and five policemen. He also has a slug in his shoulder that will need attention."

"These two," he continued, gesturing toward Nick and Vito, "are little fish in a big pond. They, as you may know, have been extremely visible pushers in the last five or six months. Through them, you might be able to trace and destroy about one third of the street action you would have gotten had Gordon been able to testify."

"They're lies," Vito protested in a weak voice.

In response, the Roach reached into his vest pocket and extracted a package.

"These photographs will back my word. They show this couple going to visit Cantrell at the Sherman with his money for the hit. That makes them accomplices. They also show them distributing. That nabs them for possession and selling. Even you could get a conviction with the evidence I've gathered for you."

Jacks cut him a look that would shrivel a soul. But, as a credit to whatever brains he had, he kept his mouth shut.

"However," the Roach proceeded, "I was unable to locate their distributor. Maybe you'll be able to bleed that information out of them."

"Why didn't you simply blow them away like you usually do, you masked glory-hound!?" Jacks snapped, his ego getting the better of his judgement.

On reflex, the Roach backhanded the man across the face.

"The next time I allow you to speak to me, keep a civil tongue in your head," the shadowy figure replied in a low, cold voice. "The answer would be obvious if you had any kind of a brain. I want them prosecuted so that the ring is thoroughly exposed. Since Gordon's dead, we won't get the whole organization, but we can get a decent-sized portion. Go call your men, lawyer."

Jacks couldn't help but feel that the Roach's inflection on the last word mirrored the vigilante's disgust with him. Or maybe disgust at how Jacks had soiled the justice behind the word.

The assistant D.A. turned to look at Valentina, wondering if the man would stay unconscious until help arrived. And when Howard turned back toward the Roach, the masked man was gone.

He stepped from the building, enwrapped by the shadows of the night. He lit a cigarette—merely for his mystique in the neighborhood. And as he snapped his lighter's lid down, he noticed a shining Packard—its motor running but its lights off. Moving like a wraith through the darkness, he reached the passenger's side of the car unnoticed, immediately recognizing the main passenger within.

"Hello, Frank," the Roach said in a hollow voice.

Instantly, Nitty's muscle boys, visibly shook by the Roach's sudden appearance, pulled out their pieces. Yet the Roach remained perfectly still.

"Put 'em away!" Nitty barked at his men. And then, with a smile on his face, he turned toward the Roach.

"Hello there, Roach!" he returned. "I see you finished up what you started with 'Axe.' My compliments on such good work. You know, I could use a good man like you."

The Roach merely chuckled. Frank merely smiled.

"Anyway, I wanted you to meet a friend of mine. Doctor Haversheim, meet the Roach. Roach, meet Doctor Haversheim—usually referred to as 'Doc.'"

Nitty watched the Roach closely for a reaction. He was pleased when he got none. The boss gangster knew the Roach fully realized the importance of that name, but the dark caricature didn't even twitch a muscle.

"Yes," Frank continued, "the good doctor is our supplier—the supplier 'Axe' would have fingered on the stand. And that might've severely hurt our organization. However, with him dead and us being able to alter a few documents and records, he's in the clean and so are we. And when the time is right for him to start producin' again, he will. In the clear."

"I figured that someone with your pull was whoever got me those photographs. And so you set up the little fish as a smoke screen while you covered the big game. Smart. But why give up a hit-man like Cantrell?"

"I didn't. You got him clean. I thought I'd provided for him, but you got to him anyway. A nice piece of work there, Roach."

"So why this meeting? Really?"

"To say thanks," Nitty laughed.

"Really," the Roach repeated in a stony voice.

"To show you that you don't scare me," Nitty said, his own voice becoming hard. "And to see how much I scared you."

"And?"

"And I think that the mobs finally have a worthy opponent. Or a great ally—my offer still stands."

"One day it'll be you," the Roach commented. "One day."

Nitty merely smiled. "We'll see," he said.

With that, the Roach took one step back from the Packard. And before Nitty's unbelieving eyes, he was swallowed by the shadows.