

AN ACE OF DAMES

Most guys go their whole lives without finding a corpse. I need to stop finding them. Usually, it's only a minor inconvenience. But I never know.

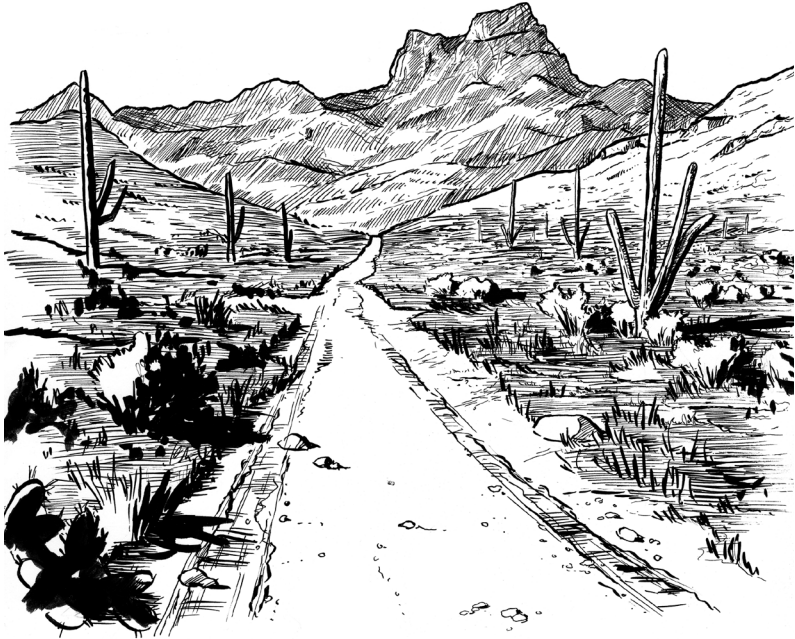
So sit down and join me for a late dinner in Quartzrock, Arizona. It's a desiccated dump in the flat Sonoran Desert near the California border. Imagine a hundred RV parks on the surface of Mercury, and you've got it. Somehow it became a rock show mecca, and swarms of lapidaries settled here. Two are about to depart the business. Permanently.

Not me, though. I'm a geologist, and I'm here for the rock show tomorrow. I'm eating my usual hot beef sandwich in a booth at the Flying Mulewhip under a local artist's masterpiece—*Exaltation of the Mule*—which shows the kind of mule you'd take home to meet your mother. I see this hot dame come in. Long, dark hair, olive skin, Southern Italian or Greek. She's wearing a windbreaker, so I know she's from up north. It's sixty degrees outside, and an Arizona dame would be wearing a puffy coat and Uggs.

She looks around, then starts my way. There's a suspicious bulge in her jacket. I keep eating and pretend to ignore it, but she walks right up to my booth.

“You're Nick Cameron, the consulting geologist?”

AGATES ARE FOREVER



I shrug. She reaches for the jacket bulge, then throws a handful of rocks onto my plate. Gravy splashes all over my shirt and the Formica table.

“Ural mins,” I mumble, which is how you say, “You little minx!” with your mouth full of mashed potatoes.

Hold it. These are the best Lake Superior agates I’ve seen.

“More where those came from,” she says, taking a seat at the opposite end of the booth and giving her raven hair a coquettish toss. She’s on the petite side and a real dish, worth scorching your eyes on. From her emerald eyes to her marathoner thighs, with stratovolcano breasts in between, she’s hotter than a Soviet drill bit at the bottom of the Kola Superdeep Borehole. She sears her eyes into me—her left elbow is on the table and her chin rests on her knuckles as she scans me like a pyrometer drone checking out hot spots on Stromboli.

Now, I know some lapidaries in Ashland, Wisconsin, on Chequamegon Bay, which is like the El Dorado of Lake Superior

AN ACE OF DAMES

agates. And I know some yeggs opened Johnny Rocco's rock shop safe for fifty pounds of agates last Thursday. So I think the stuff's likely hot.

"How much is more?" I ask.

"I'm at the Truck Stop," she says, rising. "Ice cream truck. Come see me and find out."

But I don't follow her out. I let her go and finish my meal.

The Truck Stop is not a truck stop. It's a motel. Trucks converted to rooms, cabins, whatever you call them. Scattered around on a two-acre patch of gravel. One is an old ice cream truck.

I stay in the garbage truck. It has a steel door with two combination dead bolts. See, when I come to town, I have stuff people want to steal. And I have enemies. I broke the Flagstaff Archaeopteryx ring. You probably heard of that. I've exposed more counterfeit dinosaur eggs, claws, and teeth than you can imagine. And whenever a new Lost Dutchman's Mine scam comes along, which is about every month, I hand the case to the Feds on a relish tray. The grifters in that racket hate me. The last thing they want on their tail is a thirty-five-year-old PhD geologist who boxes for fun and packs a Colt Commander.

I ask Janie, the waitress, for a refill on my coffee, and she comes back with the pot.

"Hey, Janie, you know that dame?" I ask.

"No, you big mug," she says, feigning jealousy and tilting a hip. "What'd the little chippy want?"

I like Janie. She gets it.

"Got some rocks to sell." I show her the agates.

"Nice. You buying?" She gives me a wink as she coos, "buying."

"Nope. But I'll take a look. At the agates. Already had a good look at her."

Janie says a mug like me could get in big trouble with a floozy like that, but it doesn't matter because Sheriff Pershing will run her out of town within the hour anyway.

AGATES ARE FOREVER

I've seen all my usual clients—I hold court at the Flying Mule-whip on rock show eve—so I pay my tab, leave Janie my usual 100 percent tip, and head for the Truck Stop. It's only a half mile, so I walk. Geologists do a lot of walking. Especially in the dirt, which I'm doing now because there's a dearth of sidewalks in this pigsty.

I unlock the garbage truck, settle in, and open my vintage Samsonite travel bar. I think Philip Marlowe had one. If not, he should have. I pour myself an Old Cornpone, which is my favorite bourbon. I own a dozen barrels of it, sitting in a Kentucky rack house somewhere. It's not for me—I only drink a few bottles per year. It's an alternative investment. It's like a zero-coupon bond that gets bottled when it matures.

Now, what do I do with the rock-throwing minx? First thing I do is call Johnny Rocco and get a description of the stolen agates. They sound mediocre, not worth cracking a safe for. Not even worth putting in a safe in the first place, to tell the truth. But he says there were a few good ones, and maybe those are the ones the dame threw on my plate. I wouldn't trust Johnny farther than I can throw the Cape York meteorite, but stealing is stealing, and if the agates are his, I'll get them back.

I look out the window. The garbage truck has only one, but it's big, barred with a wrought-iron grid, and eight feet off the ground, so totally secure. The ice cream truck is about twenty-five yards away, and there are no lights on. It's too early for her to be in bed. Unless she's turning a trick, as Janie would say. But I don't think that's her style, not that she'd have trouble finding customers. She's probably in the Truck Stop Clubhouse, a Western bar and restaurant next to the tank truck. The tank truck is for large families. No, I won't go and see. She knows where to find me.

Tomorrow afternoon, I'll be appraising at the fossil tent. It's tiring work, so I try to catch some shut-eye. For bedtime reading I have a copy of *Two Smart Dames* I found at a local junk store. Copyright 1949. The cover art is appropriately lurid for the genre

AN ACE OF DAMES

but doesn't fit the title. The two smart dames are in negligees. Why not graduation gowns with thigh splits? I doze off as Shaun O'Malley, PI, finds his partner on a slab in the morgue. But around midnight, I hear the bell on the ice cream truck jingling. It's a little brass bell where you shake the clapper. Some cutesy ice cream truck thing. I go to the window. There she is, standing by the bell, looking my way. She knows I'm here, and she wants to talk. I go to her truck.

Some dames ask me to look at their rocks when they really want something else. Not this one. She wants to get right to it. The rocks, I mean.

She says her name is Theo and offers me a drink. Jägermeister, which is like a handful of black jelly beans with an Everclear chaser. I respectfully decline. Then she drags out some burlap bags and plops them on a table.

A geologist usually wears his loupe on a lanyard around his neck. For me, that's just a garroting waiting to happen. I keep mine in my jacket pocket. When I go for it, she leaps to the bed and grabs a roscoe from under the pillow. She points the gun at the floor with her finger off the trigger, using the two-handed Weaver hold, her eyes on my right hand and ready for instant response. This dame knows what she's doing. Her gun's a Smith & Wesson snub-nosed revolver. Five shots for sure, no jams, and especially good for a southpaw, which I see she is. I approve.

"Relax, sister," I say, slowly pulling the loupe from my pocket. She puts the gun away but doesn't apologize. She shouldn't. Her reaction was reasonable, under the circumstances.

Most agates are sold by the bushel, but not these. These are prime gemstones, expertly cut and shaped, mainly cabochons but some faceted, all with perfect banding and colors that are rich, rare, and varied. The pick of a thousand bushels. Obviously not from Johnny Rocco's safe. But here's the thing: they were highly polished once, but they've been underwater awhile. A long while.

AGATES ARE FOREVER

Easy to restore the polish, but that's not the point. I think she may have stumbled on some old-timer's cache. But that's not my business. These have been in the drink so long the old-timer would be moldering in the boneyard by now.

"Nice rocks," I say. "So what's your game?"

She says she's selling them for her brother. Not sure I believe that, but I ask if he has more. Yes, he does. Lots more.

"It looks like these have been underwater a long time," I say.

She gives me that wide-eyed "what are you, a wizard?" look I get from devious lapidaries when I call out something that's blazingly obvious to any geologist.

"I think they have," she says.

And that's all she says. No explanation why. That's odd, and I'm not sure I want to get involved. I don't need clients, so I choose them carefully. They need to be frank with me. And not splash gravy on my shirts.

"It's late. Let's talk about it over breakfast," I say.

She can tell I'm suspicious, but I think she respects that. And she hasn't gazed into my eyes with breathless longing, so I say goodnight and hit the rack in the garbage truck.