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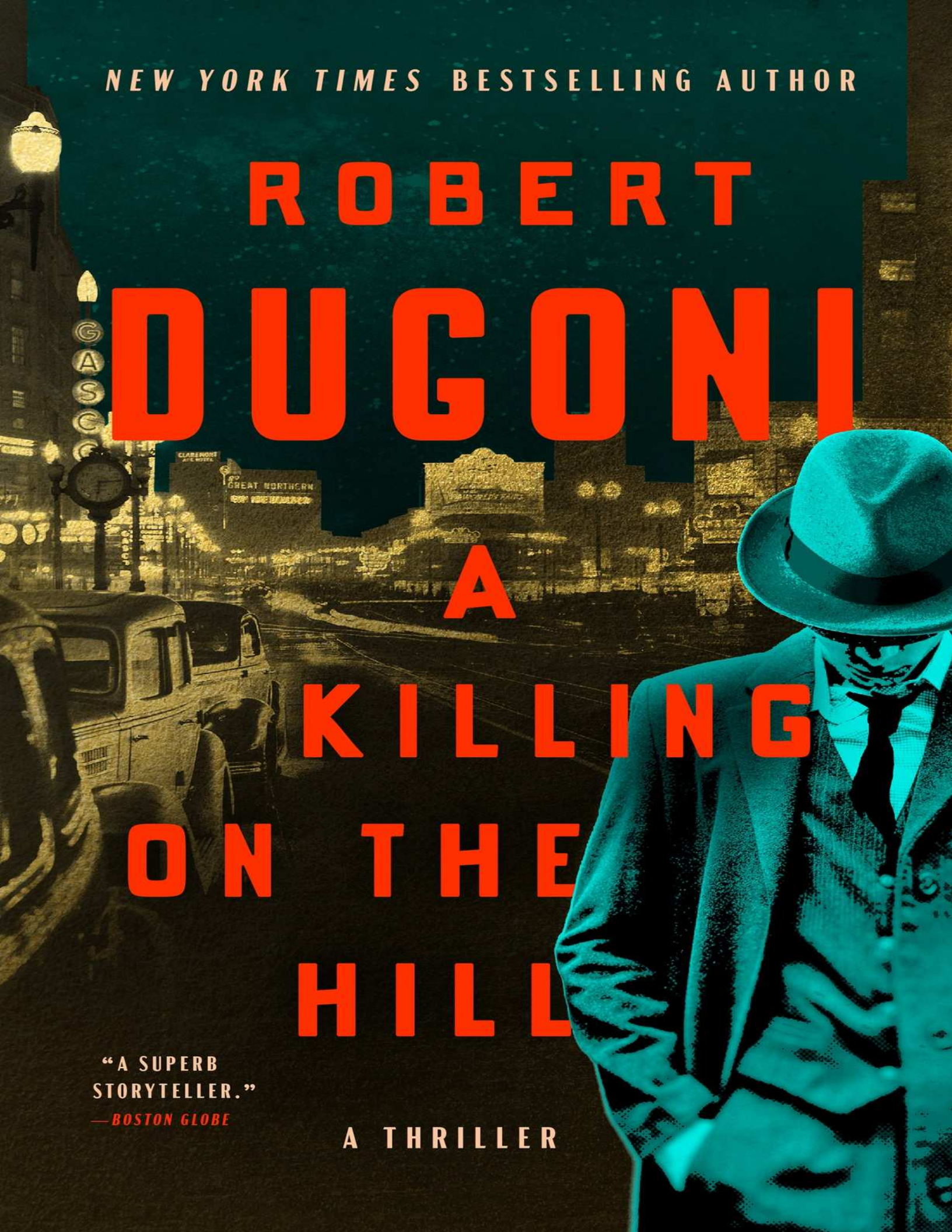
ROBERT
DUGONI

A
KILLING
ON THE
HILL

"A SUPERB
STORYTELLER."

—*BOSTON GLOBE*

A THRILLER



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**A
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Wrongful Death

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Nonfiction with Joseph Hilldorfer

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**A
KILLING
ON THE
HILL**

A THRILLER

**ROBERT
DUGONI**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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First edition

*To the Glendale boys: James, Johnson, Jim, Jeff, Tim,
Mark, Kevin, Alan, Doug, and Dr. Dan. From eastern
Washington to Ireland, Mexico, and everywhere in
between. It's been a lot of fun.*

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There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the
truth and shame the devil.

—Walter Lippmann

Part I

Chapter 1

Mrs. Alderbrook shouted as she banged on my door, giving little consideration to either the early morning hour or the sleeping schedules of the other occupants of her twelve-room boardinghouse, where I rented a room for five dollars a month.

“William? William! You have a telephone call on the house phone!”

I shot out of bed fearing the worst—a call from my mother that my father had become another Depression statistic, like my uncle Ted.

It had been almost a year to the day, June 11, 1932, that I graduated from high school and my father informed me he could no longer provide me room and board. As moths danced around the bare bulb lighting our porch in Kansas City, Missouri, my father expressed his regret and his frustration. “I’m sorry, son. I don’t have the money to send you to college, and, well, your aunt Ida lost Uncle Ted and is coming to live with us. We can’t put her out on the street.”

My uncle Ted wasn’t lost. He’d committed suicide and had to be buried in a nondenominational cemetery.

It made me nervous knowing my father also hung by a financial and emotional thread. “The unemployed don’t need an accountant,” he told me just before he handed me an armed forces recruitment brochure and asked, “Have you thought about the military?”

I had. Every boy in my high school had given the military thought.

“William?” Mrs. Alderbrook persisted. “I can’t tie up the line all morning.”

“I’m coming,” I shouted and struggled to pull on trousers and make myself presentable.

When I yanked the door open, I found the hallway empty of Mrs. Alderbrook’s hulking figure and hightailed it down two flights of stairs in my bare feet, fearing she would indeed hang up. She hadn’t. The receiver to the upright candlestick telephone lay on the scuffed reception desk. I

glanced at the grandfather clock in the lobby—7:10 a.m.

Mrs. Alderbrook glared at me, then lowered her gaze back to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Having a reporter for the *Seattle Daily Star* living in her boardinghouse didn't influence her choice of newspapers. Politics did. The *Post-Intelligencer* was the Republican voice, conservative, respectable, and a little prudish. The *Seattle Daily Times* backed the Democrats and was splashy, bold, and a bit vulgar. Between these two extremes, Howard Phishbaum, the *Daily Star* owner and my boss, sought to establish a secure foothold publishing the city's only afternoon newspaper. How did he intend to do this?

Pizzazz, Shoe! Get me some pizzazz!

Short for Shumacher, "Shoe" had become my nickname at the newspaper, and on the city beat I covered.

"Don't tie up the line," Mrs. Alderbrook huffed.

I placed the receiver to my ear and lifted the mouthpiece to my mouth. My hand quivered. "Hello?" I said, fearing the worst.

"William Shumacher?" The voice was male.

"Yes," I said, relieved.

"No need to shout, son. My hearing is just fine. This is Chief Detective Ernie Blunt."

After a year hustling stories—from the mayor's recall for graft and corruption, and his reelection just six months later, to best-in-class kennel dog shows—I'd finally received my hard-earned press badge from the chief of police. The badge accorded me access to crime scenes, though I had yet to be contacted by a detective, and certainly not one as esteemed as Ernie Blunt, the chief detective of Seattle's famed homicide squad. I moved the speaker away from my mouth. "Yes, Chief Detective."

"I've just received a call to hurry to the Pom Pom Club. Might be a gangster shooting. You know it?"

My adrenaline spiked. A gangster shooting. *Pizzazz!*

"If you want the story, meet me there in fifteen minutes. Top of Profanity Hill at Tenth and Yesler. Can't miss it. Big white house."

"Profanity Hill. Tenth and Yesler. A gangster shooting, you said. Yes."

"Try not holding the mouthpiece so close to your mouth," Blunt said. "I'm liable to go deaf."

I moved the mouthpiece away another few inches. "I'll find it," I

said.

The perch clicked. Mrs. Alderbrook's meaty hand had reached across the counter and ended my call.

I raced up the stairs to my room. In no time I had finished dressing, grabbed my jacket and knit cap, and stocked my leather satchel with pencils and notebook paper before slinging it over my shoulder and hurrying back downstairs. I handed Mrs. Alderbrook the key to my room, which she kept on a hook below my mail slot, then rushed out the door to catch the Second Avenue streetcar at Pike Street for the ten-block ride south to Yesler Way. At Yesler, I transferred to the streetcar that took me up Profanity Hill. My timing was impeccable and fortuitous. I didn't want to walk up First Hill. The city courthouse had once loomed large atop the hill, and stories were told of red-faced lawyers, judges, and litigants lugging heavy briefcases and uttering profanities when the streetcars broke down, which was often, giving First Hill its nickname.

I arrived at Tenth Avenue in just twelve minutes. The silence that precedes dawn still hung heavily over Profanity Hill. The white house did indeed stand out, as Blunt had said it would, but not as I had imagined. Blunt's use of the term "gangster killing" had caused me to imagine a back-alley dive rather than the elegant, two-story home I encountered. The house was nearly a quarter of a block long. Its fresh coat of paint; expansive, sloping lawn; and ornate flower beds were both a sharp contrast to the homes around it and an indication money flowed freely within the club's walls. It had no doubt been one of the many mansions the wealthy built atop the 366-foot slope. First Hill was peppered with Georgian Revivals, and Italianate and Queen Anne Victorians with slate roofs, gabled bays, teakwood furnishings, mosaic tile floors, Oriental carpets, stained-glass windows, and half a dozen fireplaces. As business and industry had expanded, and the necessary waterfront workforce moved to First Hill, the wealthy, loath to mix, fled. Their mansions had become low-rent boardinghouses, hotels, and disorderly houses of prostitution.

I noted a patrol car parked at the curb, and a Cadillac just around the corner from the club's front entrance. My nerves tingled with anticipation as I approached a police officer in his navy-blue uniform and peaked hat standing in front of a heavy-looking entrance door. The door was one of two. The second, an interior door, had a grated "peephole" such as I had

seen at Chinatown speakeasies. Club members either showed a pass or uttered a password. And if the police came by the establishment, the person manning the interior door flipped a switch to flicker the lights, a sign to the staff to hide alcohol and evidence of gambling.

Getting closer, I recognized the officer's grim expression and large form. "Officer Lutz," I said, adjusting the press badge on my lapel.

Lutz was a stout man of German descent, which seemed to give us common ground, though I was just five foot nine and 140 pounds.

"Shoe. How did you get here so fast?" Lutz asked, his voice gravelly from the early morning hour. Lutz was close to retirement. His gray hair had receded in a horseshoe pattern, and his blue eyes had become clouded with age, like my Oma's.

"Got a call of a shooting," I said, having learned from Phish—which is what everyone called Howard Phishbaum—to never reveal a source.

We beat reporters had an unwritten agreement with the police department, especially the brass. The police provided us with story tips and access to crime scenes, police investigations, witnesses, and, ultimately, the prosecutor who would try the case. In return, we wrote favorable articles about the police department. Step out of line, and the chief of police would pull your press badge. The relationship was incestuous, even to me, just a year on the job, but in a depression, most people were a paycheck away from moving to one of the city's Hooverilles, shantytowns named after the former president that housed Seattle's homeless and down-and-out. "Hmm," Lutz grunted. "Well, you can't go in. Not yet. Waiting on the detectives."

"You been in?" I asked.

"Found the body," he said. "Called it in."

"What time was that?"

"Call came in at six thirty this morning. I got here as quick as I could."

"How many shots were fired?"

"Can't be certain."

"Anyone inside when you arrived?"

Another nod. "George Miller, the owner, and his partner, Syd Brunn. A waiter and the bartender too. Also the caretaker who cleans the place was asleep in the back."

"Who got shot?"

“Frankie Ray.”

“The prizefighter?”

Lutz’s eyes narrowed. “Before your time; ain’t he?”

As a boy I had listened to the fights on the radio with my father. Ray, a lightweight boxer, had made his way up the ranks in Washington State. He had a knockout combination that included two right hands. “Right, Right Ray” they had called him. If he hit you, you went down and stayed down—if you knew what was good for you. Had a shot at Tony Canzoneri, the lightweight champ, but lost a preliminary to Barney Ross. Some said Ray took a dive.

“Shame. Guy like that,” Lutz said. “Had a chance to be somebody, and instead he’s just a punk.”

“A punk?”

“A hanger-on, more or less, at least as far as the underworld is concerned. Not a fellow you’d expect to be killed by some gangster.”

“George Miller?” I asked.

Lutz nodded once and looked up at the white house dwarfing us. “Owns a number of clubs, though not like this. This is his crown jewel. The others are much smaller—roadside taverns and other such establishments. And a few disreputable houses too.”

As Lutz talked, his gaze shifted to behind me. Ernie Blunt and King County prosecutor Laurence McKinley approached. The prosecuting attorney’s office and the police also had a symbiotic relationship. A prosecuting attorney often accompanied detectives to crime scenes. The office claimed the cooperation helped bring criminals to justice.

“Shoe,” Blunt said, hand extended. He approached like a battlefield tank. Square and sturdy, from his jaw to his shoulders. When I shook his hand, it was like shaking a catcher’s mitt. He had a five-o’clock shadow but otherwise dressed as if for a night on the town in a well-made, three-piece, dark-brown suit and oxford shoes.

“Detective Blunt,” I said. “Mr. McKinley.” I used their formal names out of deference. I knew McKinley from covering two superior court trials he had prosecuted. In his late thirties, McKinley had a serious look about him. His prematurely gray hair aged him. Whereas Blunt was a brick, McKinley was a reed, over six feet. His suit hung from his shoulders like he’d recently lost weight.

Blunt’s use of my nickname made me feel like I belonged and

relieved some of my nerves. "So this is the Pom Pom Club?" My comment sounded simple, and I rushed to explain. "I expected some basement hole-in-the-wall at the end of an alley. Gangsters here?"

"Just the underworld putting out a little honey to attract bigger flies," Blunt said, then started toward Lutz atop the steps. Everything about Blunt exuded confidence. He acted like he was entering the club as a customer anticipating a good meal and a show.

"Chief Detective," Lutz said. "I'm glad you got here."

"What do you got, Walter?"

"Call came in to the radio operator. Shots fired at six thirty this morning. I was first on scene."

Blunt nodded to the two doors. "Doors open or closed?"

"Open."

"Anybody at the door?"

Lutz shook his head.

"They expected us, then. What next?"

"Next, I stepped inside the club and stopped short."

Blunt gave Lutz a perplexed look.

"Four men in suits and hats stood with their backs against the bar as if on their way out. Hats on, coats draped over their arms. The caretaker too. They stared at me but not one uttered a word."

"Where was the victim?"

"Found him in the adjacent room, face down on the dance floor in a pool of blood."

"Dead?" Blunt asked.

"That's what I asked." He shook his head as if disgusted. "Not one word spoken. They remained silent as statues. I moved to the victim and bent to a knee. I heard gurgling sounds coming from the man's throat and saw pinkish foam on his lips."

"Alive, then."

"When they took him away, he was."

"Who called for an ambulance?"

"I did. Used the telephone in the hallway on the wall. Asked that they send a doc to the Pom Pom Club and gave them the address. Told them to hurry. Ambulance arrived in under five minutes. Took the victim to the city hospital."

"None of the men at the bar has said anything?" McKinley asked.

“Not a word,” Lutz reiterated.

“We’ll see.” Blunt moved past Lutz, McKinley following. I took that as my cue to also enter. I was anxious to see the inside of a swanky nightclub. From the entryway, we stepped down into a barroom that smelled of beer and leftover food.

Five men at a modernistic bar did indeed stand as rigid as Medusa’s victims turned to stone, but I was struck more by the luxurious mahogany bar lined with glasses and beer bottles—as beer was now legal—and a cash register with its tray open, as if it had just rung up another sale. I didn’t see liquor bottles, but liquor was here. A place like this, you could bet on it. Behind the bar, a large mirror reflected the room, making it look twice as large. Beneath the bar sat an iron safe, the door cracked open, a handgun atop it. Down a narrow hall from the bar was a lavatory and the wall phone Lutz had mentioned. The hall looked to open onto a polished wood dance floor, of which I could only see a portion.

One of the men at the bar said, “Hello, Ernie. It’s about time somebody with some authority got here to let us go.” The man, clad in immaculate tropical flannels, spoke calmly, without urgency. As Lutz had described, the men had hats on, and light topcoats draped over their arms.

“Hello, George,” Blunt said, his tone also casual, but his gaze roamed over the barroom and the hallway beyond it.

“Nasty business to have happen in a guy’s place, huh?” the man, whom I now assumed to be George Miller, said. A gangster, Officer Lutz had said, part of the underworld. Miller looked and sounded like a guy on his way to work downtown, not someone who had just killed another man. “It’ll keep business away for a while, I would guess. Seems a guy can’t make an honest living no more without someone trying to take advantage.”

“Save the gab, George,” Blunt said, clearly not buying whatever Miller was selling. “You’ll need it.”

Blunt walked toward the dance hall. I followed. Private dining rooms and wall booths with luxurious overstuffed seats surrounded tables with partly filled liquor glasses, champagne bottles, and plates of half-eaten dinners—what looked like scrumptious steaks, pork chops, chicken, baked potatoes, vegetables, and slices of pie—enough food to feed half of Hooverville. Mounds of cigarette stubs littered ashtrays on the tables, and stale smoke permeated the air. The room’s focal point was a mural on the