

# NIGHT CALLS THE GREEN FALCON

by

**Robert R. McCammon**

## CHAPTER ONE : NEVER SAY DIE

He was in the aeroplane again, falling towards the lights of Hollywood.

Seconds ago the craft had been a sleek silver beauty with two green-painted propellers, and now it was coming apart at the seams like wet cardboard. The controls went crazy, he couldn't hold the stick level, and as the aeroplane fell he cinched his parachute pack tighter around his chest and reached up to pop the canopy out. But the canopy was jammed shut, its hinges red with clots of rust. The propellers had seized up, and black smoke whirled from the engines. The plane nosed towards the squat, ugly buildings that lined Hollywood Boulevard, a scream of wind passing over the fuselage.

He didn't give up. That wasn't his way. He kept pressing against the canopy, trying to force the hinges, but they were locked tight. The buildings were coming up fast, and there was no way to turn the aeroplane because the rudder and ailerons were gone too. He was sweating under his green suit, his heart beating so hard he couldn't hear himself think. There had to be a way out of this; he was a never-say-die type of guy. His eyes in the slits of the green cowl ticked to the control panel, the jammed hinges, the dead stick, the smoking engines, back to the control panel in a frantic geometry.

The plane trembled; the port-side engine was ripping away from the wing. His green boots kicked at the dead rudder pedals. Another mighty heave at the canopy, another jerk of the limp control stick – and then he knew his luck had, at long last, run out. It was all over.

Going down fast now, the wings starting to tear away, Klieg lights swung back and forth over the boulevard, advertising somebody else's

premiere. He marked where the plane was going to hit: a mustard-yellow, five-floored brick building about eight blocks east of the Chinese Theatre. He was going to hit the top floor, go right into somebody's apartment. His hands in their green gloves clenched the armrests. No way out ... no way out ...

He didn't mourn for himself so much, but someone innocent was about to die and that he couldn't bear. Maybe there was a child in that apartment, and he could do nothing but sit in his trap of straps and glass and watch the scene unfold. No, he decided, as the sweat ran down his face. No, I can't kill a child. Not another one. I *won't*. This script has to be rewritten. It wasn't fair, that no one had told him how this scene would end. Surely the director was still in control. Wasn't he? "Cut!" he called out, as the mustard-yellow building filled up his horizon. "Cut!" he said again, louder – then screamed it: "CUT!"

The aeroplane crashed into the building's fifth floor, and he was engulfed by a wall of fire and agony.

## **CHAPTER TWO : AN OLD RELIC**

He awoke, his flesh wet with nightmare sweat and his stomach burning with the last flames of an enchilada TV-dinner.

He lay in the darkness, the springs of his mattress biting into his back, and watched the lights from the boulevard – reflections of light – move across the cracked ceiling. A fan stuttered atop his chest-of-drawers, and from down the hall he could hear the LaPrestas hollering at each other again. He lifted his head from the sodden pillow and looked at his alarm clock on the table beside his bed: twenty-six minutes past twelve, and the night had already gone on forever.

His bladder throbbed. Right now it was working, but sometimes it went haywire and he peed in his sheets. The laundromat on the corner of Cosmo Street was not a good place to spend a Saturday night. He roused himself out of bed, his joints clicking back into their sockets and the memory of the nightmare scorched into his mind. It was from Chapter One of 'Night Calls the Green Falcon', when he couldn't get the plane's canopy up, because he didn't like close places. The director had said, "Cut!" and the

canopy's hinges had been oiled and the sequence had gone like clockwork the second time around.

The nightmare would be back, and so would the rest of them – a reel of car crashes, falls from buildings, gunshots, explosions, even a lion's attack. He had survived all of them, but they kept trying to kill him again and again. Mr. Thatcher at the Burger King said he ought to have his head looked at, and maybe that was true. But Mr. Thatcher was only a kid, and the Green Falcon had died before Mr. Thatcher was born.

He stood up. Slid his feet into slippers. Picked his robe off a chair and shrugged into it, covering his pyjamas. His eyes found the faded poster taped to the wall: NIGHT CALLS THE GREEN FALCON, it said, and showed an assemblage of fist fights, car crashes and various other action scenes. IN TEN EXCITING CHAPTERS! the poster promised. STARRING CREIGHTON FLINT, 'THE GREEN FALCON'.

"The Green Falcon has to piss now," he said, and he unlocked the door and went out into the hallway.

The bathroom was on the other side of the building. He trudged past the elevator and the door where the LaPrestas were yelling. Somebody else shouted for them to shut up, but when they got going there was no stopping them. Seymour the super's cat slunk past, hunting rats, and the old man knocked politely at the bathroom's door before he entered. He clicked on the light, relieved himself at the urinal and looked away from the hypodermic needles that were lying around the toilet. When he was finished, he picked up the needles and put them in the trash can, then washed his hands in the rust-stained sink and walked back along the corridor to his apartment.

Old gears moaned. The elevator was coming up. It opened when he was almost even with it. Out walked his next-door neighbour, Julie Saufley, and a young man with close-cropped blond hair.

She almost bumped into him, but she stopped short. "Hi, Cray. You're prowlin' around kinda late, aren't you?"

"Guess so." Cray glanced at the young man. Julie's latest friend had pallid skin that was odd in sun-loving California, and his eyes were small and very dark. Looks like an extra in a Nazi flick, Cray thought, and then returned his gaze to Julie, whose dark brown hair was cut in a Mohawk and decorated with purple spray. Her spangled blouse and short leather skirt were so tight he couldn't fathom how she could draw a breath. "Had to use the bathroom," he said. Didn't that just sound like an old fool? he asked himself. When he was forty years younger, such a statement to a

pretty girl would have been unthinkable.

“Cray was a movie star,” Julie explained to her friend. “Used to be in ... what did they call them, Cray?”

“Serials,” he answered. Smiled wanly. “Cliff-hangers. I was the –”

“I’m not paying you for a tour of the wax museum, baby.” The young man’s voice was taut and mean, and the sound of it made Cray think of rusted barbed-wire. A match flared along the side of a red matchbook; the young man lit a cigarette, and the quick yellow light made his eyes look like small ebony stones. “Let’s get done what we came here for,” he said, with a puff of smoke in Cray Flint’s direction.

“Sure.” Julie shrugged. “I just thought you might like to know he used to be famous, that’s all.”

“He can sign my autograph book later. Let’s go.” Spidery white fingers slid around her arm, and drew her away.

Cray started to tell him to release her, but what was the use? There were no gentlemen anymore, and he was too old and used-up to be anyone’s champion. “Be careful, Julie,” she said as she guided the man to her apartment.

“My name’s Crystal this week,” she reminded him. Got her keys out of her clutch purse. “Coffee in the morning?”

“Right.” Julie’s door opened and closed. Cray went into his room and eased himself into a chair next to the window. The boulevard’s neon pulse painted red streaks across the walls. The street denizens were out, would be out until dawn, and every so often a police car would run them into the shadows, but they always returned. The night called them, and they had to obey. Like Julie did. She’d been in the building four months, was just twenty years old, and Cray couldn’t help but feel some grandfatherly concern for her. Maybe it was more than that, but so what? Lately he’d been trying to help her get off those pills she popped like candy, and encouraging her to write to her parents back in Minnesota. Last week she’d called herself Amber; such was the power of Hollywood, a city of masks.

Cray reached down beside his chair and picked up the well-worn leather book that lay there. He could hear the murmur of Julie’s voice through the paper-thin wall; then her customer’s, saying something. Silence. A police car’s siren on the boulevard, heading west. The squeak of mattress springs from Julie’s apartment. Over in the corner, the scuttling of a rat in the wall. Where was Seymour when you needed him? Cray opened his memory

book, and looked at the yellowed newspaper clipping from the Belvedere, Indiana *Banner* of March 21st 1946, that said HOMETOWN FOOTBALL HERO HOLLYWOOD BOUND. There was a picture of himself, when he was still handsome and had a headful of hair. Other clippings – his mother had saved them – were from his high-school and college days, and they had headlines like BOOMER WINS GYMNASTIC MEDAL and BOOMER BREAKS TRACK MEET RECORD. That was his real name: Creighton Boomershine. The photographs were of a muscular, long-legged kid with a lop-sided grin and the clear eyes of a dreamer.

Long gone, Cray thought. Long gone.

He had had his moment in the sun. It had almost burned him blind, but it had been a lovely light. He had turned sixty-three in May, an old relic. Hollywood worshipped at the altar of youth. Anyway, nobody made his kind of pictures anymore. Four serials in four years, and then –

*Cut*, he thought. No use stirring up all that murky water. He had to get back to bed, because morning would find him mopping the floor in the Burger King three blocks west and Mr. Thatcher liked clean floors.

He closed the memory book and put it aside. On the floor was a section of yesterday's *LA Times*; he'd already read the paper, but a headline caught his attention: FLIPTOP KILLER CHALLENGES POLICE. Beneath that was a story about the Fliptop, and eight photographs of the street people whose throats had been savagely slashed in the last two months. Cray had known one of them: a middle-aged woman called Auntie Sunglow, who rocketed along the boulevard on roller skates singing Beatles songs at the top of her lungs. She was crazy, yes, but she always had a kind tune for him. Last week she'd been found in a trash dumpster off Sierra Bonita, her head almost severed from her neck.

Bad times, Cray mused. Couldn't think of any worse. Hopefully the police would nail the Fliptop before he – or she – killed again, but he didn't count on it. All the street people he knew were watching their backs.

Something struck the wall, in Julie's apartment. It sounded like it might have been a fist.

Cray heard the springs squalling, like a cat being skinned alive. He didn't know why she sold her body for such things, but he'd learned long ago that people did what they had to do to survive.

There was another blow against the wall. Something crashed over. A chair, maybe.

Cray stood up. Whatever was going on over there, it sounded rough.

Way too rough. He heard no voices, just the awful noise of the springs. He went to the wall and pounded on it. "Julie?" he called. "You all right?"

No answer. He put his ear to the wall, and heard what he thought might have been a shuddering gasp.

The squall of the springs had ceased. Now he could hear only his own heartbeat. "Julie?" He pounded the wall again. "Julie, answer me!" When she didn't respond, he knew something was terribly wrong. He went out to the corridor, sweat crawling down his neck, and as he reached out to grip the doorknob of Julie's apartment he heard a scraping noise that he knew must be the window being pushed upward.

Julie's window faced the alley. The fire escape, Cray realised. Julie's customer was going down the fire escape.

"Julie!" he shouted. He kicked the door, and his slipper flew off. Then he threw his shoulder against it, and the door cracked on its hinges but didn't give way. Again he rammed into the door, and a third time. On the fourth blow the door's hinges tore away from the wood and it crashed down, sending Cray sprawling into the apartment.

He got up on his hands and knees, his shoulder hurting like hell. The young man was across the untidy room, still struggling with the reluctant window, and he paid Cray no attention. Cray stood up, and looked at the bed where Julie lay, naked on her back.

He caught his breath as if he'd been punched in the stomach. The blood was still streaming from the scarlet mass of Julie Saufley's throat, and it had splattered across the yellow wall like weird calligraphy. Her eyes were wet and aimed up at the ceiling, her hands gripped around the bars of the iron bed-frame. Without clothes, her body was white and childlike, and she hardly had any breasts at all. The blood was everywhere. So red. Cray's heart was labouring, and as he stared at the slashed throat he heard the window slide up. He blinked, everything hazy and dreamlike, and watched the young blond man climb through the window onto the fire escape.

Oh God, Cray thought. He wavered on his feet, feared he was about to faint. Oh my God ...

Julie had brought the Fliptop Killer home to play.

His first impulse was to shout for help, but he squelched it. He knew the shout would rob his breath and strength, and right now he needed both of them. The LaPrestas were still fighting. What would one more shout be? He stepped forward. Another step, and a third one followed. With the rusty agility of a champion gymnast, he ran to the open window and slid

out to the fire escape.

The Fliptop Killer was about to go down the ladder. Cray reached out, grasped the young man's t-shirt in his freckled fist, and said hoarsely, "No ."

The man twisted towards him. The small black eyes regarded him incuriously: the emotionless gaze of a clinician. There were a few spatters of blood on his face, but not many. Practice had honed his reflexes, and he knew how to avoid the jetting crimson. Cray gripped his shirt; they stared at each other for a few ticks of time, and then the killer's right hand flashed up with an extra finger of metal.

The knife swung at Cray's face, but Cray had already seen the blow coming in the tension of the man's shoulder and as he let go of the shirt and scrambled backwards the blade hissed past.

And now the Fliptop Killer stepped towards him – a long stride, knife upraised, the face cold and without expression, as if he were about to cut a hanging piece of beef. But a woman screamed from an open window, and as the man's head darted to the side Cray grasped the wrist of his knife hand and shouted, "Call the po –"

A fist hit him in the face, crumpling his nose and mashing his lips. He pitched back, stunned – and he fell over the fire escape's railing into empty space.

## **CHAPTER THREE : A RED MATCHBOOK**

His robe snagged on a jagged piece of metal. The cloth ripped, almost tore off him, and for three awful seconds he was dangling five floors over the alley, but then he reached upward and his fingers closed around the railing.

The Fliptop Killer was already scrambling down the fire escape. The woman – Mrs. Sargenza, bless her soul – was still screaming, and now somebody else was hollering from another window and the Fliptop Killer

clambered down to the alley with the speed and power of a born survivor.

Cray pulled himself up, his legs kicking and his shoulder muscles standing out in rigid relief. He collapsed onto his knees when he'd made it to the landing's safety. He thought he might have to throw up enchiladas, and his stomach heaved, but mercifully there was no explosion. Blood was in his mouth, and his front teeth felt loose. He stood up, black motes buzzing before his eyes. Looked over the edge, gripping hard to the railing.

The Fliptop Killer was gone, back to the shadows.

"Call the police," he said, but he didn't know if Mrs. Sargenza had heard him, though she disappeared from her window and slammed it shut. He was trembling down to his gnarly toes, and after another moment he climbed back into the room where the corpse was.

Cray felt her wrist for a pulse. It seemed the sensible thing to do. But there was no pulse, and Julie's eyes didn't move. In the depths of the wound he could see the white bone of her spine. How many times had the killer slashed, and what was it inside him that gave him such maniacal strength? "Wake up," Cray said. He pulled at her arm. "Come on, Julie. Wake up."

"Oh, Jesus!" Mr. Myers from across the hall stood in the doorway. His hand went to his mouth, and he made a retching sound and staggered back to his apartment. Other people were peering in. Cray said, "Julie needs a doctor," though he knew she was dead and all a doctor could do was pull the bloodied sheet over her face. He still had her hand, and he was stroking it. Her fingers were closed around something; it worked loose and fell into Cray's palm.

Cray looked at it. A red matchbook. The words GRINDERSWITCH BAR printed on its side, and an address just off Hollywood and Vine, three blocks over.

He opened the red matchbook. Two matches were missing. One of them had been used to light the Fliptop Killer's cigarette, out in the hallway. The Fliptop Killer had been to the Grinderswitch, a place Cray had walked past but never entered.

"Cops are on their way!" Mr. Gomez said, coming into the room. His wife stood at the door, her face smeared with blue anti-ageing cream. "What happened here, Flint?"

Cray started to speak, but found no words. Others were entering the room, and suddenly the place with its reek of blood and spent passions was too tight for him; he had a feeling of suffocation, and a scream flailed



behind his teeth. He walked past Mr. Gomez, out the door and into his own apartment. And there he stood at the window, the brutal neon pulse flashing in his face and a red matchbook clenched in his hand.

The police would come and ask their questions. An ambulance without a siren would take Julie's corpse away, to a cold vault. Her picture would be in the *Times* tomorrow, and the headline would identify her as the Fliptop Killer's ninth victim. Her claim to fame, he thought, and almost wept.

*I saw him, he realised. I saw the Fliptop. I had hold of the bastard.*

And there in his hand was the matchbook Julie had given him. The bartender at the Grinderswitch might know the Fliptop. The bartender might *be* the Fliptop. It was a vital clue, Cray thought, and if he gave it up to the police it might be lost in shufflings of paper, envelopes and plastic bags that went into what they called their evidence storage. The police didn't care about Julie Saufley, and they hardly cared about the other street victims, either. No, Julie was another statistic – a 'crazy', the cops would say. The Fliptop Killer loved to kill 'crazies'.

Julie had given him a clue. Had, perhaps, fought to keep it with her dying breath. And now what was he going to do with it?

He knew, without fully knowing. It was a thing of instincts, just as his long-ago gymnastic training, track-and-field and boxing championships were things of instincts. Inner things, that once learned and believed in could never be fully lost.

He opened the closet's door.

A musty, mothball smell rolled out. And there it was, on its wooden hanger amid the cheap shirts and trousers of an old dreamer.

It had once been emerald-green, but time had faded it to more of a dusky olive. Bleach stains had mottled the flowing green cape, and Cray had forgotten how that had happened. Still, he'd been a good caretaker: various rips had been patched over, the only really noticeable mar a poorly-stitched tear across the left leg. The cowl, with its swept-back, crisply winglike folds on either side of the head and its slits for the eyes, was in almost perfect condition. The green boots were there on the floor, both badly scuffed, and the green gloves were up on the shelf.

His Green Falcon costume had aged, just like its owner. The studio had let him keep it, after he came out of the sanatorium in 1954. By then serials were dying anyway, and of what use was a green suit with a long cape and wings on the sides of its cowl? In the real world, there was no

room for Green Falcons.

He touched the material. It was lighter than it appeared, and it made a secret – and dangerous – whispering noise. The Green Falcon had made mincemeat out of a gallery of villains, roughnecks and killers, every Saturday afternoon in the cathedrals of light and shadow all across America. Why, then, could the Green Falcon not track down the Fliptop Killer?

Because the Green Falcon is dead, Cray told himself. Forget it. Close the door. Step back. Leave it to the police.

But he didn't close the door, nor did he step back. Because he knew, deep at his centre, that the Green Falcon was not dead. Only sleeping, and yearning to awaken.

He was losing his mind. He knew that clearly enough, as if somebody had thrown ice water in his face and slapped him too. But he reached into the closet, and he brought the costume out.

The siren of a police car was approaching. Cray Flint began to pull the costume on, over his pyjamas. His body had thinned, not thickened, with age; the green tights were loose, and though his legs were knotty with muscles, they looked skinny and ill-nourished. His shoulders and chest still filled out the tunic portion of the costume, though, but his thin, wiry arms had lost the blocky muscularity of their youth. He got the costume zipped up, worked his feet into the scuffed boots, then put on the cape and laced it into place. The dust of a thousand moth wings shimmered gold against the green. He lifted the gloves off the shelf, but discovered the moths had enjoyed an orgy in them and they were riddled with holes. The gloves would have to stay behind. His heart was beating very hard now. He took the cowl off its hanger. The police car's siren was nearing the building. Cray ran his fingers over the cowl, which still gleamed with a little iridescence, as it had in the old days.

*I shouldn't do this, he told himself. I'm going crazy again, and I'm nothing but an Indiana boy who used to be an actor ...*

*I shouldn't ...*

He slipped the cowl over his head, and drew its drawstring tight. And now he saw the world through cautious slits, the air coming to his nostrils through small holes and smelling of mothballs and ... yes, and something else. Something indefinable: the brassy odour of a young man's sweat, the sultry heat of daredevilry, maybe the blood of a split lip incurred during a fight scene with an over-eager stuntman. Those aromas and more. His stomach tightened under the green skin. *Walk tall and think tall, he*

remembered a director telling him. His shoulders pulled back. How many times had he donned this costume and gone into the battle against hoodlums, thugs and murderers? How many times had he stared Death in the face through these slits and walked tall into the maelstrom?

*I'm Creighton Flint*, he thought. And then he looked at the faded poster that promised a world of thrills and saw STARRING CREIGHTON FLINT, 'THE GREEN FALCON'.

The one and only.

The police car's siren stopped.

It was time to go, if he was going.

The Green Falcon held the matchbook up before his eye-slits. The Grinderswitch was a short walk away. If the Fliptop Killer had been there tonight, someone might remember.

He knew he was one stride away from the loony bin, and if he went through that door dressed like this there was no turning back. But if the Green Falcon couldn't track down the Fliptop, nobody could.

It was worth a try. Wasn't it?

He took a deep breath, and then the one stride followed. He walked out into the hallway, and the residents gathered around Julie Saufley's door saw him and every one of them recoiled as if they'd just seen a man from Mars. He didn't hesitate; he went past them to the elevator. The little numerals above the door were on the upward march. The policemen were coming up, he realised. It would not be wise to let them see the Green Falcon.

"Hey!" Mr Gomez shouted. "Hey, who the hell are *you*?"

"He must be nuts!" Mrs LaPresta said, and her husband – in a rare moment – agreed.

But Cray was already heading towards the door marked STAIRS. The cape pinched his neck and the mask was stuffy; he didn't remember the costume being so uncomfortable. But he pulled open the door and started quickly down the stairway, the matchbook clenched in his hand and the smell of Julie's blood up his nostrils.

He was puffing by the time he reached the ground floor. But he crossed the cramped little lobby, went out the revolving door and on to Hollywood Boulevard where the lights and the noise reminded him of a three-ring circus. But he knew full well that shadows lay at the fringes of those lights, and in those shadows it was dangerous to tread. He started walking west,

towards Vine Street. A couple of kids zipped past him on skateboards, and one of them gave a fierce tug at his cape that almost strangled him. Horns were honking as cars passed, and ladies of the night waved and jiggled their wares from the street corner. A punk with his hair in long red spikes peered into Cray's eyeholes and sneered, "Are you for *real*, man?" The Green Falcon kept going, a man with a mission. A black prostitute jabbed her colleague in the ribs, and both of them hooted and made obscene noises as he passed. Here came a group of Hare Krishnas, banging tambourines and chanting, and even their blank eyes widened as they saw him coming. But the Green Falcon, dodging drunks and leather-clad hustlers, left them all in the flap of his cape.

And then there was the Grinderswitch Bar, jammed between a porno theatre and a wig shop. Its blinking neon sign was bright scarlet, and out in front of the place were six big Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Cray paused, fear fluttering around in the pit of his stomach. The Grinderswitch was a place of shadows; he could tell that right off. There was a meanness even in the neon's buzz. Go home, he told himself. Forget this. Just go home and –

Do what? Vegetate? Sit in a lousy chair, look at clippings and reflect on how lucky you are to have a job sweeping the floor at a Burger King?

No. He was wearing the armour of the Green Falcon now, and why should he fear? But still he paused. To go into that place would be like walking into a lion's den after rolling around in fresh meat. Who was Julie Saufley, anyway? His friend, yes, but she was dead now, and what did it matter? Go home. Put the costume back on its hanger, and forget. He looked at the door, and knew that beyond it the monsters waited. Go home. Just go home.

## **CHAPTER FOUR : ONE-EYED SKULLS**

He swallowed thickly. *Walk tall and think tall*, he told himself. If he did not go in, the very name of the Green Falcon would be forever tainted. Pain he could take; shame he could not.

He grasped the door's handle, and he entered the Grinderswitch.

The six motorcycle owners, husky bearded men wearing black jackets

that identified them as members of the ONE-EYED SKULLS gang, looked up from their beers. One of them laughed, and the man sitting in the centre seat gave a low whistle.

The Green Falcon paid them no attention. Bass-heavy music pounded from ceiling-mounted speakers, and on a small upraised stage a thin blonde girl wearing a g-string gyrated to the beat with all the fervour of a zombie. A few other patrons watched the girl, and other topless girls in g-strings wandered around with trays of beers and cheerless smiles. The Green Falcon went to the bar, where a flabby man with many chins had halted in his pouring of a new set of brews. The bartender stared at him, round-eyed, as the Green Falcon slid onto a stool.

“I’m looking for a man,” Cray said.

“Wrong joint, Greenie,” the bartender answered. “Try the Brass Screw, over on Selma.”

“No, I don’t mean that.” He flushed red under his mask. Trying to talk over this hellacious noise was like screaming into a hurricane. “I’m looking for a man who might have been in here tonight.”

“I serve beer and liquor, not lonely hearts club news. Take a hike.”

Cray glanced to his left. There was a mug on the bar full of GRINDERSWITCH matchbooks. “The man I’m looking for is blond, maybe in his early or mid-twenties. He’s got pale skin and his eyes are very dark – either brown or black. Have you seen anybody who –”

“What the hell are you doin’ walking around in a friggin’ green suit?” the bartender asked. “It’s not St Patrick’s Day. Did you jump out of a nuthouse wagon?”

“No. Please, try to think. Have you seen the man I just described?”

“Yeah. A hundred of ’em. Now I said move it, and I’m not gonna say it again.”

“He took one of those matchbooks,” Cray persisted. “He might have been sitting on one of these stools not long ago. Are you sure you –”

A hand grasped his shoulder and swung him around. Three of the bikers had crowded in close, and the other three watched from a distance. A couple of go-go dancers rubbernecked at him, giggling. The bass throbbing was a physical presence, making the glasses shake on the shelves behind the bar. A broad, brown-bearded face with cruel blue eyes peered into Cray’s mask; the biker wore a bandana wrapped around his skull and a necklace from which rusty razor blades dangled. “God Almighty, Dogmeat. There’s somebody *inside* it!”

The biker called Dogmeat, the one who'd whistled as Cray had entered, stepped forward. He was a burly, grey-bearded hulk with eyes like shotgun barrels and a face like a pissed-off pit bull. He thunked Cray on the skull with a thick forefinger. "Hey, man! You got some screws loose or what?"

Cray smelled stale beer and dirty armpits. "I'm all right," he said, with just a little quaver in his voice.

"I say you *ain't*," Dogmeat told him. "What's wrong with you, comin' into a respectable joint dressed up like a Halloween fruitcake?"

"Guy was just on his way out," the bartender said. "Let him go." The bikers glared at him, and he smiled weakly and added, "Okay?"

"No. Not okay," Dogmeat answered. He thunked Cray's skull again, harder. "I asked you a question. Let's hear you speak, man."

"I'm ... looking for someone," Cray said. "A young man. Blond, about twenty or twenty-five. Wearing a t-shirt and blue jeans. He's got fair skin and dark eyes. I think he might have been in here not too long ago."

"What're you after this guy for? He steal your spaceship?" The others laughed, but Dogmeat's face remained serious. Another thunk of Cray's skull. "Come on, that was a joke. You're supposed to laugh."

"Please," Cray said. "Don't do that anymore."

"Do what? This?" Dogmeat thunked him on the point of his chin.

"Yes. Please don't do that anymore."

"Oh. Okay." Dogmeat smiled. "How about if I do this?" And he flung his half-full mug of beer into Cray's face. The liquid blinded Cray for a few seconds, then washed out of his mask and ran down his neck. The other One-Eyed Skulls howled with laughter and clapped Dogmeat on the back.

"I think I'd better be going." Cray started to get up, but Dogmeat's hand clamped to his shoulder and forced him down with ridiculous ease.

"Who are you supposed to be, man? Dogmeat asked, feigning real interest. "Like ... a big bad superhero or somethin'?"

"I'm nobo –" He stopped himself. They were watching and listening, smiling with gap-toothed smiles. And then Cray straightened up his shoulders, and it came out of him by instinct. "I'm the Green Falcon," he said.

There was a moment of stunned silence, except for that thunderous music. Then they laughed again, and the laughter swelled. But Dogmeat didn't laugh; his eyes narrowed, and when the laughter had faded he said, "Okay, Mr Green Falcon sir. How about takin' that mask off and ... like ...

let's see your secret identity." Cray didn't respond. Dogmeat leaned closer. "I *said*, Mr Green Falcon sir, that I want you to take your mask off. Do it. *Now*."

Cray was trembling. He clenched his fists in his lap. "I'm sorry. I can't do that."

Dogmeat smiled a savage smile. "If you won't, I will. Hand it over."

Cray shook his head. No matter what happened now, the die was cast. "No. I won't."

"Well," Dogmeat said, softly, "I'm really sorry to hear that." And he grasped the front of Cray's tunic, lifted him bodily off the stool, twisted and threw him across a table eight feet away. Cray went over the table, crashed into a couple of chairs and sprawled to the floor. Stars and rockets fired in his brain. He got up on his knees, aware that Dogmeat was advancing towards him. Dogmeat's booted foot drew back, the kick aimed at the Green Falcon's face.

## **CHAPTER FIVE : THE STAR AND QUESTION MARK**

A shriek like the demons of Hell singing Beastie Boys tunes came from the speakers. "Christ!" Dogmeat shouted, clapping his hands to his ears. He turned, and so did the other One-Eyed Skulls.

A figure stood over at the record's turntable near the stage, calmly scratching the tone-arm back and forth across the platter. The Green Falcon pulled himself up to his feet, and stood shaking the explosions out of his head. The figure let the tone-arm skid across the record with a last fingernails-on-chalkboard skreel, and then the speakers were silent.

"Let him be," she said, in a voice like velvet smoke.

The Green Falcon's eyes were clear now, and he could see her as well as the others did. She was tall – maybe six-two or possibly an inch above that – and her Amazonian body was pressed into a tigerskin one-piece bathing suit. She wore black high heels, and her hair was dyed orange and cropped close to her head. She smiled a red-lipped smile, her teeth startlingly white against her ebony flesh.

“What’d you say, bitch?” Dogmeat challenged.

“Gracie!” the bartender said. “Keep out of it.”

She ignored him, her amber eyes fixed on Dogmeat. “Let him be,” she repeated. “He hasn’t done anything to you.”

“Lord, Lord.” Dogmeat shook his head with sarcastic wonder. “A talkin’ female monkey! Hey, I ain’t seen you dance yet! Hop up on that stage and shake that black ass!”

“Go play in somebody else’s sandbox,” Gracie told him. “Kiddie time’s over.”

“Damned right it is.” Dogmeat’s cheeks burned red, and he took a menacing step towards her. “Get up on that stage! Move your butt!”

She didn’t budge.

Dogmeat was almost upon her. The Green Falcon looked around, said, “Excuse me,” and lifted an empty beer mug off a table in front of a pie-eyed drunk. Then he cocked his arm back, took aim, and called out, “Hey, Mr Dogmeat!”

The biker’s head swivelled towards him, eyes flashing with anger.

The Green Falcon threw the beer mug, as cleanly as if it were a shotput on an Indiana summer day. It sailed through the air, and Dogmeat lifted his hand to ward it off, but he was way too late. The mug hit him between the eyes, didn’t shatter but made a satisfying clunking sound against his skull. He took two steps forward and one back, his eyes rolled to show the bloodshot whites, and he fell like a chopped-down sequoia.

“Sonofabitch!” the brown-bearded one said, more in surprise than anything else. Then his face darkened like a stormcloud and he started towards the Green Falcon with two other bikers right behind him.

The Green Falcon stood his ground. There was no point in running; his old legs would not get him halfway to the door before the bikers pulled him down. No, he had to stand there and take whatever was coming. He let them get within ten feet, and then he said, in a calm and steady voice, “Does your mother know where you are, son?”

Brown Beard stopped as if he’d run into an invisible wall. One of the others ran into him and bounced off. “*Huh?*”

“Your mother,” the Green Falcon repeated. “Does she know where you are?”

“My ... my mother? What’s she got to do with this, man?”



“She gave birth to you and raised you, didn’t she? Does she know where you are right now?” The Green Falcon waited, his heart hammering, but Brown Beard didn’t answer. “How do you think your mother would feel if she could see you?”

“His mother wouldn’t feel nothin’,” another of them offered. “She’s in a home for old sots up in Oxnard.”

“You shut up!” Brown Beard said, turning on his companion. “She’s not an old sot, man! She’s just ... like ... a little sick. I’m gonna get her out of that place! You’ll see!”

“Quit the jawin’!” a third biker said. “We gonna tear this green suit apart or not?”

The Green Falcon stepped forward, and he didn’t know what he was about to say but lines from old scripts were whirling through his recollection like moths through klieg lights. “Any son who loves his mother,” he said, “is a true American, and I’m proud to call him friend.” He held his hand out towards Brown Beard.

The other man stared at it, and blinked uncertainly. “Who ... who the hell *are* you?”

“I’m the Green Falcon. Defender of the underdog. Righter of wrongs, and champion of justice.” *That’s not me talking*, he realised. *It’s from Night Calls the Green Falcon, Chapter Five*. But he realised also that his voice sounded different, in a strange way. It was not the voice of an old man anymore; it was a sturdy, rugged voice, with a bass undertone as strong as a fist. It was a hero’s voice, and it demanded respect.

No one laughed.

And the biker with the brown beard slid his hand into the Green Falcon’s, and the Green Falcon gripped it hard and said, “Walk tall and think tall, son.”

At least for a few seconds, he had them. They were in a thrall of wonder, just like the little children who’d come to see him during the public relations tour in the summer of 1951, when he’d shaken their hands and told them to respect their elders, put up their toys, and do right: the simple secret of success. Those children had wanted to believe in him, so badly; and now in this biker’s eyes there was that same glimmer – faint and faraway, yes – but as clear as a candle in the darkness. This was a little boy standing here, trapped in a grown-up skin. The Green Falcon nodded recognition, and when he relaxed his grip the biker didn’t want to let go.

“I’m looking for a man who I think is the Fliptop Killer,” the Green Falcon told them. He described the blond man who’d escaped from the window of Julie Saufley’s apartment. “Have any of you seen a man who fits that description?”

Brown Beard shook his head. None of the others offered information, either. Dogmeat moaned, starting to come around. “Where is he?” Dogmeat mumbled. “I’ll rip his head off.”

“Hey, this joint’s about as much fun as a mortician’s convention,” one of the bikers said. “Women are ugly as hell, too. Let’s hit the road.”

“Yeah,” another agreed. “Ain’t nothin’ happenin’ around here.” He bent down to help haul Dogmeat up. Their leader was still dazed, his eyes roaming in circles. The bikers guided Dogmeat towards the door, but the brown-bearded one hesitated.

“I’ve heard of you before,” he said. “Somewhere. Haven’t I?”

“Yes,” the Green Falcon answered. “I think you probably have.”

The man nodded. Pitched his voice lower, so the others couldn’t hear: “I used to have a big stack of Batman comics. Read ’em all the time. I used to think he was *real*, and I wanted to grow up just like him. Crazy, huh?”

“Not so crazy,” the Green Falcon said.

The other man smiled slightly, a wistful smile. “I hope you find who you’re lookin’ for. Good luck.” He started after his friends, and the Green Falcon said, “Do right.”

And then they were gone, the sounds of their motorcycles roaring away. The Green Falcon glanced again at the bartender, still hoping for some information, but the man’s face remained a blank.

“You want a beer, Greenie?” someone asked, and the Green Falcon turned to face the tall black go-go dancer.

“No, thank you. I’ve got to go.” To where he didn’t know, but the Grinderswitch was a dead end.

He had taken two steps towards the door when Gracie said, “I’ve seen him. The guy you’re after.” The Green Falcon abruptly stopped. “I know that face,” Gracie went on. “He was in here maybe two, three hours ago.”

“Do you know his name?”

“No. But I know where he lives.”

His heart kicked. “Where?”

“Well ... he might live there or he might not,” she amended. She came

closer to him, and he figured she was in her late twenties but it was hard to tell with all the makeup. “A motel on the Strip. The Palmetto. See, I used to ... uh ... work there. I was an escort.” She flashed a quick warning glance at the bartender, as if she just dared him to crack wise. Then back to the Green Falcon again. “I used to see this guy hanging out around there. He comes in here maybe two or three times a week. Asked me out one time, but I wouldn’t go.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “Too white. Amazin’ Grace doesn’t have to go out with just anybody. I choose my own friends.”

“But you remember seeing him at the Palmetto?”

“Yeah. Or at least somebody who fits that description. I’m not saying it’s the same guy. Lots of creeps on the Strip, and those hot springs motels lure most of them one time or another.” She licked her lower lip; the shine of excitement was in her eyes. “You really think he’s the Fliptop?”

“I do. Thank you for telling me, Miss.” He started towards the door, but again her husky voice stopped him.

“Hey, hold on! The Palmetto’s about ten or twelve blocks east. You got a car?”

“No.”

“Neither do I, but there’s a cab stand down the street. I’m just clocking out. Right, Tony?”

“You’re the star,” the bartender said, with a wave of his hand.

“You want some company, Greenie? I mean ...” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re not a crazy yourself, are you?” Gracie laughed at her own question. “Hell, sure you are! You’ve *got* to be! But I’m heading that way, and I’ll show you the place if you want. For free.”

“Why would you want to help me?” he asked.

Gracie looked wounded. “I’ve got civic pride, that’s why! Hell, just because I strut my butt in this joint five nights a week doesn’t mean I’m not a humanitarian!”

The Green Falcon considered that, and nodded. Amazin’ Grace was obviously intelligent, and she probably enjoyed the idea of a hunt. He figured he could use all the help he could get. “All right. I’ll wait while you get dressed.”

She frowned. “I *am* dressed, fool! Let’s go!”

They left the Grinderswitch and started walking east along the boulevard. Gracie had a stride that threatened to leave him behind, and his green suit drew just as many doubletakes as her lean ebony body in its tigerskin wrapping. The cab stand was just ahead, and a cab was there, engine running. A kid in jeans and a black leather jacket leaned against the hood; he was rail-thin, his head shaved bald except for a tuft of hair in the shape of a question mark on his scalp.

“You got a fare, kid,” Gracie said as she slid her mile-long legs in. “Move it!”

The kid said, “I’m waitin’ for –”

“Your wait’s over,” Gracie interrupted. “Come on, we don’t have all night!”

The kid shrugged, his eyes vacant and uninterested, and got behind the wheel. As soon as the Green Falcon was in, the kid shot away from the kerb with a shriek of burning rubber and entered the flow of westbound traffic.

“We want to go to the Palmetto Motel,” Gracie said. “You know where that is?”

“Sure.”

“Well, you’re going the wrong way. And start your meter, unless we’re going to ride for free.”

“Oh. Yeah.” The meter’s arm came down and the mechanism started ticking. “You want to go east, huh?” he asked. And without warning he spun the wheel violently, throwing the Green Falcon and Gracie up against the cab’s side, and the vehicle careened in a tight U-turn that narrowly missed a collision with a BMW. Horns blared and tyres screeched, but the kid swerved into the eastbound lane as if he owned Hollywood Boulevard. And the Green Hornet saw a motorcycle cop turn on his blue light and start after them, at the same time as a stout Hispanic man ran out of a Chock Full O’ Nuts coffee shop, yelling and gesturing frantically.

“Must be a caffeine fit,” Gracie commented. She heard the siren’s shrill note and glanced back. “Smart move, kid. You just got a blue-tailed fly on your ass.”

The kid laughed, sort of. The Green Falcon’s gut tightened; he’d already seen the little photograph on the dashboard that identified the cab driver. It was a stout Hispanic face.

“Guy asked me to watch his cab while he ran in to pick up some coffee,” the kid said, with a shrug. “Gave me a buck, too.” He looked in the

rearview mirror. The motorcycle cop was waving him over. “What do you want me to do, folks?”

The Green Falcon had decided, just that fast. The police might be looking for him since he’d left the apartment building, and if they saw him like this they wouldn’t understand. They’d think he was just a crazy old man out for a joyride through fantasy, and they’d take the Green Falcon away from him.

And if anyone could find the Fliptop Killer and bring him to justice, the Green Falcon could.

He said, “Lose him.”

The kid looked back, and now his eyes were wide and thrilled. He grinned. “Roger willco,” he said, and pressed his foot to the accelerator.

The cab’s engine roared, the vehicle surged forward with a power that pressed the Green Falcon and Gracie into their seats, and the kid whipped around a Mercedes and then up on to the kerb where people screamed and leapt aside. The cab, its exhaust pipe spitting fire, rocketed towards the plate-glass window of a lingerie store.

Gracie gave a stunned little cry, gripped the Green Falcon’s hand with knuckle-cracking force, and the Green Falcon braced for impact.

## **CHAPTER SIX : HANDFUL OF STRAWS**

The kid spun the wheel to the left, and the cab’s fender knocked sparks off a brick wall as it grazed past the window. Then he veered quickly to the right, clipped away two parking meters, and turned the cab off Hollywood on to El Centro Avenue. He floorboarded the gas pedal.

“Let me outta here!” Gracie shouted, and she grasped the door’s handle, but the cab’s speedometer needle was already nosing past forty. She decided she didn’t care for a close acquaintance with asphalt, and anyway the Green Falcon had her other hand and wasn’t going to let her jump.

The motorcycle cop was following, the blue light spinning and the siren getting louder. The kid tapped the brakes and swerved in front of a gasoline truck, through an alley and behind a row of buildings, then back on to El Centro and speeded southward. The motorcycle cop came out of

the alley and got back on their tail, again closing the gap between them.

“What’s your name?” the Green Falcon asked.

“Me? Ques,” he answered. “Because of –”

“I can guess why. Ques, this is very important.” The Green Falcon leaned forward, his fingers clamped over the seat in front of him. “I don’t want the policeman to stop us. I’m –” Again, lines from the scripts danced through his mind. “I’m on a mission,” he said. “I don’t have time for the police. Do you understand?”

Ques nodded. “No,” he said. “But if you want to give the cop a run, I’m your man.” The speedometer’s needle was almost to sixty, and Ques was weaving in and out of traffic like an Indy racer. “Hold on,” he said.

Gracie screamed.

Ques suddenly veered to the left, almost grazing the fenders of cars just released from a red light at the intersection of El Centro and Fountain Avenue. Outraged horns hooted, but then the cab had cleared the intersection and was speeding away. Ques took a hard right on to Gordon Street, another left on Lexington and then pulled into an alley behind a Taco Bell. He drew up close to a dumpster and cut the headlights.

Gracie found her voice. “Where the hell did you learn to drive? The demolition derby?”

Ques got himself turned around in the seat so he could look at his passengers. He smiled, and the smile made him almost handsome. “Close. I was a third unit stunt driver in *Beverly Hills Cop II*. This was a piece of cake.”

“I’m getting out right here.” Gracie reached for the door’s handle. “You two never saw me before, okay?”

“Wait.” The Green Falcon grasped her elbow. The motorcycle cop was just passing, going east on Lexington. The siren had been turned off, and the blue light faded as he went on.

“Not in the clear yet,” Ques said. “There’ll be a lot of shellheads looking for us. We’d better sit here a while.” He grinned at them. “Fun, huh?”

“Like screwing in a thornpatch.” Gracie opened the door. “I’m gone.”

“Please don’t go,” the Green Falcon said. “I need you.”

“You need a good shrink is what you need. Man, I must’ve been crazy myself to get into this! You thinking you could track down the Fliptop!” She snorted. “Green Falcon, my ass.”

“I need you,” he repeated firmly. “If you’ve got connections at the Palmetto, maybe you can find someone who’s seen him.”

“The Fliptop?” Ques asked, his interest perked again. “What about that sonofabitch?”

“I saw him tonight,” the Green Falcon said. “He killed a friend of mine, and Grace knows where he might be.”

“I didn’t say that, man. I said I knew where I’d seen a guy who looked like the guy who’s been coming into the Grinderswitch. That’s a big difference.”

“Please stay. Help me. It’s the only lead I’ve got.”

Gracie looked away from him. The door was halfway open and she had one leg out. “Nobody cares about anybody else in this city,” she said. “Why should I stick around and get my ass in jail ... or *worse*?”

“I’ll protect you,” he answered.

She laughed. “Oh, yeah! A guy in a green freaksuit’s going to protect me! Wow, my mind feels so much better! Let me go.” He hesitated, then did as she said. She sat on the seat’s edge, about to get out. About to. But a second ticked past, and another, and still she sat there. “I live on Olympic Boulevard,” she said. “Man, I am a *long* way from home.”

“Green Falcon, huh?” Ques asked. “That what you call yourself?”

“Yes. That’s ...” A second or two of indecision. “That’s who I am.”

“You got information about the Fliptop, why don’t you give it to the cops?”

“Because ...” *Why not, indeed?* he asked himself. “Because the Fliptop’s killed nine times, and he’s going to kill again. Maybe tonight, even. The police aren’t even close to finding him. *We* are.”

“No, we’re not!” Gracie objected. “Just because I saw a guy at a motel a few times doesn’t mean he’s the Fliptop! You’ve got a handful of straws, man!”

“Maybe I do. But it’s worth going to the Palmetto to find out, isn’t it?”

“You just don’t want to go to the cops because you’re afraid they’ll pitch you into the nuthouse,” Gracie said, and the way the Green Falcon settled back against the seat told her she’d hit the target. She was silent for a moment, watching him. “That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said, because he knew it was. “I ...” He hesitated, but they were listening and he decided to tell it as it had been, a long time ago.

“I’ve spent some time in a sanatorium. Not recently. Back in the early ‘fifties. I had a nervous breakdown. It ... wasn’t a nice place.”

“You used to be somebody, for real?” Ques inquired.

“The Green Falcon. I starred in serials.” The kid’s face showed no recognition. “They used to show them on Saturday afternoons,” Cray went on. “Chapter by chapter. Well, I guess both of you are too young to remember.” He clasped his hands together in his lap, his back bowed. “Yes, I used to be somebody. For real.”

“So how come you went off your rocker?” Gracie asked. “If you were a star and all, I mean?”

He sighed softly. “When I was a young man I thought the whole world was one big Indiana. That’s where I’m from. Some talent scouts came through my town one day, and somebody told them about me. Big athlete, they said. Won all the medals you can think of. Outstanding young American and all that.” His mouth twitched into a bitter smile. “Corny, but I guess it was true. Heck, the world was pretty corny back then. But it wasn’t such a bad place. Anyway, I came to Hollywood and I started doing the serials. I had a little talent. But I saw things ...” He shook his head. “Things they didn’t even know about in Indiana. It seemed as if I was on another world, and I was never going to find my way back home. And everything happened so fast ... it just got away from me, I guess. I was a star – whatever that means – and I was working hard and making money, but ... Cray Boomershine was dying. I could feel him dying, a little bit more every day. And I wanted to bring him back, but he was just an Indiana kid and I was a Hollywood star. The Green Falcon, I mean. Me. Cray Flint. Does that make any sense to you?”

“Not a bit,” Gracie said. “Hell, *everybody* wants to be a star! What was wrong with you?”

His fingers twined together, and the old knuckles worked. “They wanted me to do a public relations tour. I said I would. So they sent me all across the country ... dressed up like this. And the children came out to see me, and they touched my cape and they asked for my autograph and they said they wanted to grow up just like me. Those faces ... they gave off such an innocent light.” He was silent, thinking, and he drew a deep breath and continued because he could not turn back. “It was in Watertown, South Dakota. April 26th, 1951. I went on stage at the Watertown Palace theatre, right after they showed the tenth and final chapter of ‘Night Calls the Green Falcon’. That place was packed with kids, and all of them were laughing and happy.” He closed his eyes, his hands gripped tightly



together. "There was a fire. It started in a storeroom, in the basement." He smelled acrid smoke, felt the heat of flames on his face. "It spread so *fast*. And some of the kids ... some of them even thought it was part of the show. Oh God ... oh my God ... the walls were on fire, and children were being crushed as they tried to get out ... and I heard them screaming: Green Falcon! Green Falcon!" His eyes opened, stared without seeing. "But the Green Falcon couldn't save them, and fourteen children died in that fire. He couldn't save them. Couldn't." He looked at Ques, then to Gracie and back again, and his eyes were wet and sunken in the mask's slits. "When I came out of the sanatorium, the studio let me keep the costume. For a job well done, they said. But there weren't going to be any more Green Falcon serials. Anyway, everybody was watching television, and that was that."

Neither Ques nor Gracie spoke for a moment. Then Gracie said, "We're going to take you home. Where do you live?"

"Please." He put his hand over hers. "I can find the Fliptop Killer. I know I can."

"You *can't*. Give it up."

"What would it hurt?" Ques asked her. "Just to drive to that motel, I mean. Maybe he's right." He held up his hand before she could object. "*Maybe*. We could drive there and you could ask around, and then we'll take him home. How about it?"

"It's crazy," she said. "And *I'm* crazy." But then she pulled her leg back in and shut the door. "Let's try it."

The Palmetto Motel was a broken-down stucco dump between Normandie and Mariposa, on the cheap end of Hollywood Boulevard. Ques pulled the cab into the trash-strewn parking lot, and he spoke his first impression: "Place is a crack gallery, folks." He saw shadowy faces peering through the blinds of second-floor windows, and blue firelight played across a wall. "Bullet holes in a door over there." He motioned towards it. "From here on we watch our asses." He stopped the cab next to a door marked OFFICE and cut the engine.

"It's sure gone to Hell since I worked here," Gracie said. "Nothing like addicts to junk a place up." Not far away stood the hulk of a car that looked as if it had been recently set afire. "Well, let's see what we can see." She got out, and so did the Green Falcon. Ques stayed behind the wheel, and when Gracie motioned him to come on he said nervously, "I'll give you moral support."

"Thanks, jerkoff. Hey, hold on!" she said, because the Green Falcon was

already striding towards the Office door. He grasped the knob, turned it, and the door opened with a jingle of little bells. He stepped into a room where lights from the boulevard cut through slanted blinds, and the air was thick with the mingled odours of marijuana, a dirty carpet, and ... what else was it?

Spoiled meat, he realised.

And that was when something stood up from a corner and bared its teeth.

The Green Falcon stopped. He was looking at a stocky, black-and-white pit bull, its eyes bright with the prospect of violence.

“Oh shit,” Gracie whispered.

Soundlessly, the pit bull leapt at the Green Falcon, its jaws opened for a bone-crushing bite.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN : THE WATCHMAN**

The Green Falcon stepped back, colliding with Gracie. The pit bull's body came flying towards him, reached the end of its chain and its teeth clacked together where a vital member of the Green Falcon's anatomy had been a second before. Then the dog was yanked back to the wall, but it immediately regained its balance and lunged again. The Green Falcon stood in front of Gracie, picked up a chair to ward the beast off, but again the chain stopped the pit bull short of contact. As the animal thrashed against its collar, a figure rose up from behind the counter and pulled back the trigger on a double-barrelled shotgun.

“Put it down,” the man told the Green Falcon. He motioned with the shotgun. “Do it or I swear to God I'll blow your head off.” The man's voice was high and nervous, and the Green Falcon slowly put the chair down. The pit bull was battling with its chain, trying to slide its head out of the collar. “Ain't nobody going to rob me again,” the man behind the counter vowed. Sweat glistened on his gaunt face. “You punks gonna learn some respect, you hear me?”

“Lester?” Gracie said. The man's frightened eyes ticked towards her. “Lester Dent? It's me.” She took a careful step forward, where the light

could show him who she was. "Sabra Jones." The Green Falcon stared at her. She said, "You do remember me, don't you, Lester?"

"Sabra? That really you?" The man blinked, reached into a drawer and brought out a pair of round-lensed spectacles. He put them on, and the tension on his face immediately eased. "Sabra! Well, why didn't you say so?" He uncocked the shotgun and said, "Down, Bucky!" to the pit bull. The animal stopped its thrashing, but it still regarded the Green Falcon with hungry eyes.

"This is a friend of mine, Lester. The Green Falcon," she said with all seriousness.

"Hi." Lester lowered the shotgun and leaned it behind the counter. "Sorry I'm a little jumpy. Things have changed around here since you left. Lot of freaks in the neighbourhood, and you can't be too careful."

"I guess not." Gracie glanced at a couple of bullet holes in the wall. Flies were buzzing around the scraps of hamburger in Bucky's feedbowl. "Used to be a decent joint. How come you're still hanging around here?"

Lester shrugged. He was a small man, weighed maybe a hundred and thirty pounds, and he wore a Captain America t-shirt. "I crave excitement. What can I say?" He looked her up and down with true appreciation. "Life's being pretty good to you, huh?"

"I can't complain. Much. Lester, my friend and I are looking for somebody who used to hang around here." She described the man. "I remember he used to like Dolly Winslow. Do you know the guy I mean?"

"I think I do, but I'm not sure. I've seen a lot of 'em."

"Yeah, I know, but this is important. Do you have any idea what the guy's name might have been, or have you seen him around here lately?"

"No, I haven't seen him for a while, but I know what his name was." He grinned, gap-toothed. "John Smith. That's what all their names were." He glanced at the Green Falcon. "Can you breathe inside that thing?"

"The man we're looking for is the Fliptop Killer," the Green Falcon said, and Lester's grin cracked. "Do you know where we can find Dolly Winslow?"

"She went to Vegas," Gracie told him. "Changed her name, the last I heard. No telling where she is now."

"You're lookin' for the Fliptop Killer?" Lester asked. "You a cop or somethin'?"

"No. I've got ... a personal interest."

Lester drummed his fingers on the scarred countertop and thought for a moment. “The Fliptop, huh? Guy’s a mean one. I wouldn’t want to cross his path, no sir.”

“Anybody still around who used to hang out here?” Gracie asked. “Like Jellyroll? Or that weird guy who played the flute?”

“That weird guy who played the flute just signed a million-dollar contract at Capitol Records,” Lester said. “We should all be so weird. Jellyroll’s living uptown somewhere. Pearly’s got a boutique on the Strip, makin’ money hand over fist. Bobby just drifted away.” He shook his head. “We had us a regular club here, didn’t we?”

“So everybody’s cleared out?”

“Well ... not everybody. There’s me, and the Watchman.”

“The Watchman?” The Green Falcon came forward, and the pit bull glowered at him but didn’t attack. “Who’s that?”

“Crazy old guy, lives down in the basement,” Lester said. “Been here since the place was new. You won’t get anything out of him, though.”

“Why not?”

“The Watchman doesn’t speak. Never has, as far as I know. He goes out and walks, day and night, but he won’t tell you where he’s been. You remember him, don’t you, Sabra?”

“Yeah. Dolly told me she saw him walking over on the beach at Santa Monica one day, and Bobby saw him in downtown LA. All he does is walk.”

“*Can* he speak?” the Green Falcon asked.

“No telling,” Lester said. “Whenever I’ve tried talkin’ to him, he just sits like a wall.”

“So why do you call him the Watchman?”

“You know the way, Sabra.” Lester motioned towards the door. “Why don’t you show him?”

“You don’t want to see the Watchman,” she said. “Forget it. He’s out of his mind. Like me for getting into this. See you around, Lester.” She started out, and Lester said, “Don’t be such a stranger.”

Outside, Gracie continued walking to the cab. The Green Falcon caught up with her. “I’d like to see the Watchman. What would it hurt?”

“It would waste my time and yours. Besides, he’s probably not even here. Like I said, he walks all the time.” She reached the cab, where Ques was waiting nervously behind the wheel.

“Let’s go,” Ques said. “Cars have been going in and out. Looks like a major deal’s about to go down.”

“Hold it.” The Green Falcon placed his hand against the door before she could open it. “If the Watchman’s been here so long, he might know something about the man we’re looking for. It’s worth asking, isn’t it?”

“No. He doesn’t speak to *anybody*. Nobody knows where he came from or who he is, and he likes it that way.” She glanced around, saw several figures standing in a second-floor doorway. Others were walking across the lot towards a black Mercedes. “I don’t like the smell around here. The faster we get out, the better.”

The Green Falcon stepped back, and let her get into the cab. But he didn’t go around to the other door. “I’m going to talk to the Watchman,” he said. “How do I get to the basement?”

She paused, her eyelids at half-mast. “You’re a stubborn fool, aren’t you? There’s the way down.” She pointed at a door near the office. “You go through there, you’re on your own.”

“We shouldn’t leave him here,” Ques said. “We ought to stay –”

“Shut up, cueball. Lot of bad dudes around here, and I’m not getting shot for anybody.” She smiled grimly. “Not even the Green Falcon. Good luck.”

“Thanks for your help. I hope you –”

“Can it,” she interrupted. “Move out, Ques.”

He said, “Sorry,” to the Green Falcon, put the cab into reverse and backed out of the lot. Turned left across the boulevard, and headed west.

And the Green Falcon stood alone.

He waited, hoping they’d come back. They didn’t. Finally, he turned and walked to the door that led to the Palmetto Motel’s basement, and he reached for the knob.

But somebody came out of another room before he could open the door, and the Green Falcon saw the flash of metal.

“Hey, *amigo*,” the man said, and flame shot from the barrel of the small pistol he’d just drawn.

## CHAPTER EIGHT : YOURS TRULY

The Hispanic man lit his cigarette with the flame, then put the pistol-shaped lighter back into his pocket. “What kinda party you dressed up for?”

The Green Falcon didn't answer. His nerves were still jangling, and he wasn't sure he could speak even if he tried.

“You lookin' for a score or not?” the man persisted.

“I'm ... looking for the Watchman,” he managed to say.

“Oh. Yeah, I should've figured you were. Didn't know the old creep had any friends.” Somebody called out, “Chico! Get your ass over here, *now!*” The man sneered, “When I'm ready!” and then he sauntered towards the group of others who stood around the Mercedes. The Green Falcon went through the door and into darkness.

He stood on a narrow staircase, tried to find a light-switch but could not. Two steps down and his right hand found a lightbulb overhead, with a dangling cord. He pulled it, and the lightbulb illuminated with a dim yellow glow. The concrete stairs descended beyond the light's range, the walls made of cracked grey cinderblock. The Green Falcon went down, into a place that smelled as damp and musty as a long-closed crypt. Halfway down the steps, he halted.

There had been a sound of movement, over on the right. “Anyone there?” he asked. No answer, and now the sound had ceased. Rats, he decided. Big ones. He came to the bottom of the stairs, darkness surrounding him. Again he felt for a lightswitch, again with no reward. The smell was putrid: wet and decaying paper, he thought. He took a few steps forward, reaching out to both sides; his right arm brushed what felt like a stack of magazines or newspapers. And then the fingers of his left hand found a wall and a lightswitch, and when he flicked it a couple of naked bulbs came on.

He looked around at the Watchman's domain.

The basement – a huge, cavernous chamber – might have put the periodicals department of the LA Public Library to shame. Neat stacks of

books, newspapers, and magazines were piled against the walls and made corridors across the basement, their turns and windings as intricate as a carefully-constructed maze. The Green Falcon had never seen anything like it before; there had to be thousands – no, hundreds of thousands – of items down here. Maps of Los Angeles, Hollywood, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills and other municipalities were mounted on the walls, tinged with green mould but otherwise unmarred. Here stood a stack of telephone books six feet tall, there were multiple stacks of old *Hollywood Reporters*. The place was an immense repository of information, and the Green Falcon was stunned because he'd never expected anything like this. A bank of battered filing cabinets stood against one wall, more newspapers stacked on top of them. There had to be thirty years of accumulated magazines and papers just in this part of the basement alone, and the chamber stretched the length of the motel. He couldn't restrain his curiosity; he went to one of the filing cabinets, which had precise little alphabet letters identifying their contents, and opened a drawer. Inside were hundreds of notebook pages covered with what appeared to be licence-plate numbers and the make and colour of the cars that carried them, all written in an elegant, almost calligraphic handwriting. Another drawer held lists of items found in various trashcans at scores of locations and dates. A third drawer bulged with pages that seemed to record the routes of pedestrians through the city streets, how long to the second they stayed in this or that store or restaurant, and so forth.

And it dawned on the Green Falcon that this was exactly what the Watchman did: he watched, recorded, filed away, all to the service of some bizarre inner logic, and he'd been doing it for years.

Something moved, back beyond the room in which the Green Falcon stood. There was a quick rustling sound of papers being disturbed ... then silence. The Green Falcon wound his way through the maze, found another lightswitch that illuminated two more bulbs at the rear of the basement. Still more periodicals, maps and filing cabinets stood in that area of the basement as well, but there was a cot, too, and a desk with a blue blotter.

And a man in a long, dirty olive coat, huddled up with his back wedged into a corner and his Peter Lorre eyes looked as if they were about to pop from their sockets.

"Hello," the Green Falcon said quietly. The man, grey-bearded and almost emaciated, trembled and hugged his knees. The Green Falcon walked closer and stopped, because the Watchman was shaking so hard he might have a heart attack. "I've come to talk to you."

The Watchman's mouth opened in his sallow face, gave a soft gasp and

closed again.

“I’m looking for someone you might help me find.” The Green Falcon described the man. “I think he might be the Fliptop Killer, and I understand a man fitting that description used to come around here. He might have been friends with a girl named Dolly Winslow. Do you know the man I’m talking about?”

Still no response. The Watchman looked as if he were about to jump out of his skin.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m the Green Falcon, and I wish you no harm.”

The Watchman was so terrified there were tears in his eyes. The Green Falcon started to speak again, but he realised the futility of it. The Watchman was a human packrat, and Amazin’ Grace had been right: there was nothing to be gained here.

He almost took off his mask and threw it aside in disgust. What had made him think he could track down the Fliptop? he asked himself. A red matchbook from a dead girl’s hand? A glimpse of the killer’s face, and an ill-founded yearning for a counterfeit past? It was ridiculous! He was standing in a motel’s dank basement with a drug deal going on over his head, and he’d better get out of here as fast as he could before he got his throat cut. “I’m sorry to have bothered you,” he told the Watchman, and he started walking towards the stairs. He heard the Watchman gasp and crawl across the floor, and he looked back to see the man rummaging with frantic speed inside an old mildewed cardboard box.

This is no place for me, the Green Falcon realised. In fact, there was no place at all left for the Green Falcon, but Cray Flint’s mop was waiting at the Burger King.

He kept going to the stairs, burdened with rage.

“Dear Davy,” the voice rang out. “I am sorry I can’t come to Center City this summer, but I’m working on a new mystery ...”

The Green Falcon stopped.

“... and I’m very busy. I just wanted you to know that I appreciate your letter, and I like to hear from my fans very much. Enclosed is something I want you to have, and I hope you’ll wear it with pride. Remember to respect your elders, put up your toys, and do right ...”

He turned, his heart pounding.

“Yours truly, The Green Falcon.” And the Watchman looked up, smiling, from the yellowed, many-times-folded letter in his hands. “You signed it,”



he said. "Right here. Remember?" He held it up. Then scrambled to the box again, rummaged and came up with an old wallet covered in multi-coloured Indian beads. He flipped it open and showed what was pinned inside. "I kept it, all this time. See?"

The plastic button said THE GREEN FALCONEERS. "I see." Cray's voice cracked.

"I did right," Davy said. "I always did right."

"Yes." The Green Falcon nodded. "I know you did."

"We moved from Center City." Davy stood up; he was at least six inches taller than the Green Falcon. "My dad got a new job, when I was twelve. That was –" He hesitated, trying to think. "A long time ago," he decided. A frown slowly settled on his deeply-lined face. "What happened to you?"

"I got old," the Green Falcon said.

"Yes sir. Me, too." His frown started to slip away, then took hold again. "Am I still a Falconeer?"

"Oh, yes. That's a forever thing."

"I thought it was," Davy said, and his smile came back.

"You've got a nice collection down here." The Green Falcon walked amid the stacks. "I guess gathering all this takes a lot of time."

"I don't mind. It's my job."

"Your job?"

"Sure. Everybody's got a job. Mine is watching things, and writing them down. Keeping them, too."

"Have you actually read all these papers and magazines?"

"Yes sir. Well ... most of them," he amended. "And I remember what I read, too. I've got ... like ... a Kodak in my brain."

Did he mean a photographic memory? the Green Falcon wondered. If so, might he recall the man Gracie remembered? "Davy," he said, in his heroic voice, "I've come to you because I need your help. I'm trying to find the Fliptop Killer. Have you heard of him?"

Davy nodded without hesitation.

"Can you think of a man like the one I described? A man who was a friend of –"

"Dolly Winslow," Davy finished for him. "Yes sir. I remember him. I never liked him, either. He laughed at people when he didn't think they

were looking.”

So far, so good. The Green Falcon felt sweat on the back of his neck. “I want you to concentrate very hard, like a good Falconeer. Did you ever hear the man’s name?”

Davy rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, and his eyes took on a steely glint. He walked to a filing cabinet, bent down and opened the bottom drawer. Looked through dozens of envelopes. And then he pulled one of them out, and he brought it to the Green Falcon. On it Davy had written: 23. “Dolly’s room,” he said. “He cleaned his wallet out in her trash can one night.”

The Green Falcon went to the desk and spilled the envelope’s contents out on the blotter. There was a torn-open Trojans wrapper, two dried-up sticks of Doublemint gum, a few cash register receipts, a ticket stub to a Lakers game, and ...

“His name’s Rod Bowers. It’s on the library card,” Davy said. “His address, too.”

The library card had been torn into quarters, but Davy had taped it back together again. And there was the name and address: RODNEY E. BOWERS, 1416D Jericho Street, Santa Monica.

“That was over a year ago, though. He might not be there now,” Davy said.

The Green Falcon’s hands were shaking. Davy had taped together another piece of paper: a receipt that had been torn into many fragments. On that receipt was the name of a business: The House of Blades. On December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1986, Rodney Bowers had bought himself a Christmas present of a John Wayne Commemorative Hunting Knife.

“Did I do right?” Davy asked, peering over the Green Falcon’s shoulder.

“You sure did, son.” He grasped the younger man’s arm. “You’re ...” He said the first thing that came to mind: “The number one Falconeer. I have to go, now. I’ve got a job to do.” He started striding, his pace quick, towards the stairs.

“Green Falcon, sir?” Davy called, and he paused. “I’ll be here, if you ever need my help again.”

“I’ll remember,” the Green Falcon answered, and he climbed the stairs with the taped-together library card and the House of Blades receipt gripped in his hand.

He went through the door into the parking lot – and instantly heard

someone shouting in Spanish. Somebody else was hollering from the second floor, and there were other angry voices. The man named Chico was standing next to the Mercedes, and suddenly he drew a pistol – not a cigarette lighter this time, but a .45 automatic. He shouted out a curse and began firing into the Mercedes, glass from the windshield exploding into the air. At the same time, two men got out of another car, flung themselves flat on the pavement, and started spraying Chico with gunfire. Chico’s body danced and writhed, the .45 going off into the air.

“Kill ’em!” somebody yelled from the second floor. Machine-gun fire erupted, and bullets ricocheted off the concrete in a zigzagging line past the Green Falcon.

Oh my God! Cray thought. And he realised he’d come out of the basement into the middle of a drug deal gone bad.

The two men on the pavement kept firing. Now figures were sprinting across the parking-lot, shooting at the men on the second floor. Machine-gun bullets cut one of them down, and he fell in a twitching heap. The Green Falcon backed up, hit the wall and stayed there – and then a man in a dark suit turned towards him, a smoking Uzi machine-gun in his hand, his face sparkling with the sweat of terror. He lifted the weapon to spray a burst at the Green Falcon.

## **CHAPTER NINE : HELL OR HIGH WATER**

A black-and-white streak shot across the parking lot, and the pit bull hit the gunman like a miniature locomotive. The man screamed and went down, the Uzi firing an arc of tracers into the sky. And Lester ran past, stopped almost in front of the Green Falcon, fired a shotgun blast at another man and then skidded on his belly behind the protection of a car.

The Green Falcon ran towards the street – and was almost struck by a cab that whipped into the lot with a shriek of burning rubber.

Ques hit the brake, and Gracie shouted, “Come on, fool!” as she threw the door open. The Green Falcon heard a bullet hiss past his head, and then he grasped the door and hung on as Ques reversed out of the lot and sped away on Hollywood.

Gracie pulled the Green Falcon in, and they got the door closed, but

Ques still kept a leaden foot on the accelerator. “Slow down!” she told him. “We don’t want the cops stopping us!” He didn’t respond, and she slapped him on the question mark. “SLOW DOWN!”

Ques did, but only by a little. “They had guns,” he said shakily. “Real guns!”

“What’d you expect drug dealers to carry? Slingshots?” She looked at the Green Falcon. “You in one piece?” He nodded, his eyes huge behind his mask. “We were circling the block, waiting for you to come out. We figured you’d never get out of this neighbourhood alive. We were almost right, huh?”

“Yes,” he croaked.

“Welcome to the big city. You find the Watchman?”

“I did.” He drew a couple of deep breaths, could still smell the gunsmoke. “And something else, too.” He gave the library card to Ques. “That’s where we’re going. I think it’s the Fliptop Killer’s name and address.”

“Not *that* again!” Gracie protested. “Man, we’re taking you home!”

“No. We’re going to Santa Monica. You don’t have to get out of the cab if you don’t want to – in fact, I’d rather you didn’t. But I’m going to find the Fliptop, with you or without you.”

“It’ll be without me, all right,” she answered, but the way he’d said that let her know he was through talking about it. The man had a mission, and he was going to do it come hell or high water. She settled back into her seat, muttering, and Ques turned towards the Santa Monica Freeway.

The address was near the beach, so close they could smell the sea. The building was dark-bricked, one of those old Art Deco places that probably used to be a hotel when Santa Monica was young. Ques pulled the cab to a halt in front of it and cut the engine.

“I want both of you to stay here,” the Green Falcon said. “I’m going in alone.” He started to get out, but Gracie caught his arm.

“Hey, listen. If the Fliptop’s really in there, this is the time to call the cops. No joke.”

“I don’t know that he’s in there. It’s an old library card; he might have moved. But if he’s there, I’ve got to see his face for myself. Then we can call the police.”

“She’s right,” Ques told him. “Listen, it’s crazy to go in there. You don’t have a gun or anything.”

“The Green Falcon,” he said adamantly, “never carries a gun.”

“Yeah, and the Green Falcon’s only got one life, fool!” Gracie didn’t release her grip. “Playtime’s over. I mean it. This isn’t some old serial, this is real life. You know what reality is?”

“Yes, I do.” He turned the full wattage of his gaze on her. “The reality is that ... I think I’d rather die as the Green Falcon than live as an old man with a screwed-up bladder and a book of memories. I want to walk tall, just once more. Is that so terrible?”

“It’s nuts,” she answered. “And *you’re* nuts.”

“So I am. I’m going.” He pulled loose from her and got out of the cab. He was scared, but not as much as he thought he’d be. It wasn’t as bad as indigestion, really. And then he went up the front steps into the building, and he checked the row of mailboxes in the alcove.

The one for apartment D had BOWERS on it.

Apartments A, B, and C were on the first floor. He climbed the stairs, aided by a red-shaded light fixture on the wall, and stood before Apartment D’s door.

He started to knock. Stopped his hand, the fist clenched. A thrill of fear coursed through him. He stood there, facing the door, and he didn’t know if he could do it or not. He wasn’t the Green Falcon; there was no such entity, not really. It was all a fiction. But Julie’s death was not a fiction, and neither was what he had been through tonight to reach this door. The sane thing was to back off, go down those stairs, get to a phone and call the police. Of course it was.

He heard a car’s horn blare a quick tattoo. The cab, he thought. Ques, urging him to come back?

He knocked at the door, and waited. His heart had lodged in his throat. He tensed for a voice, or the sudden opening of the door.

The stairs creaked.

He heard the cab’s horn again. This time Ques was leaning on it, and suddenly the Green Falcon knew why.

He turned, in awful slow-motion, and saw the shadow looming on the wall.

And there he was: the young blond, dark-eyed man who’d slashed Julie’s throat. Coming up the staircase, step by step, not yet having seen the Green Falcon. But he would, at any second, and each step brought them closer.

The Green Falcon didn't move. The killer's weight made the risers moan, and he was smiling slightly – perhaps, the Green Falcon thought, musing over the feel of the blade piercing Julie's flesh.

And then the Fliptop Killer looked up, saw the Green Falcon at the top of the stairs, and stopped.

They stared at each other, standing not quite an arm's length apart. The killer's dark eyes were startled, and in them the Green Falcon saw a glint of fear.

"I've found you," the Green Falcon said.

The Fliptop Killer reached to his back, his hand a blur. It returned with the bright steel of the hunting knife, taken from a sheath that must fit down at his waistband. He moved fast, like an animal, and the Green Falcon saw the blade rising to strike him in the throat or chest.

"*It's him!*" Gracie shouted, as she burst into the alcove and to the foot of the steps.

The killer looked around at her – and it was the Green Falcon's turn to move fast. He grasped the man's wrist and struck him hard in the jaw with his right fist, and he felt one of his knuckles break but the killer toppled backwards down the stairs.

The man caught the railing before he'd tumbled to the bottom, and he still had hold of the knife. A thread of blood spilled from his split lower lip, his eyes dazed from a bang of his skull against a riser. The Green Falcon was coming down the steps after him, and the Fliptop Killer struggled up and backed away.

"Watch out!" the Green Falcon yelled as Gracie tried to grab the man's knife. The killer swung at her, but she jumped back and the blade narrowly missed her face. But she had courage, and she wasn't about to give up; she darted in again, clutching his arm to keep the knife from another slash. The Green Falcon tensed to leap at the man, but suddenly the killer struck Gracie in the face with his left fist and she staggered back against the wall. Just that fast, the man fled towards the front door.

The Green Falcon stopped at Gracie's side. Her nose was bleeding and she looked about to pass out. She said, "Get the bastard," and the Green Falcon took off in pursuit.

Out front, the Fliptop Killer ran to the parked cab. Ques tried to fight him off, but a slash of the blade across Ques' shoulder sprayed blood across the inside of the windshield; the Fliptop Killer looked up, saw the man in the green suit and cape coming after him. He hauled Ques out of

the cab and leapt behind the wheel.

As the cab's tyres laid down streaks of rubber, the Green Falcon grasped the edge of the open window on the passenger side and just had an instant to lock his fingers, broken knuckle and all, before the cab shot forward. Then he was off his feet, his body streamlined to the cab's side, and the vehicle was roaring north along serpentine Jericho Street at fifty miles an hour.

The Green Falcon hung on. The killer jerked the wheel back and forth, slammed into a row of garbage cans and kept going. He made a screeching left turn at a red light that swung the Green Falcon's body out from the cab's side and all but tore his shoulders from their sockets, but still the Green Falcon hung on. And now the Fliptop Killer leaned over, one hand gripping the wheel, and jabbed at the Green Falcon's fingers with the knife. Slashed two of them, but the Green Falcon's right hand darted in and clamped around the wrist. The cab veered out of its lane, in front of a panel truck whose fender almost clipped the Green Falcon's legs. The killer thrashed wildly, trying to get his knife-hand free, but the Green Falcon smashed his wrist against the window's frame and the fingers spasmed open; the knife fell down between the seat and the door.

Beachfront buildings and houses flashed by on either side. The cab tore through a barricade that said **WARNING NO VEHICLES BEYOND THIS POINT.**

The Green Falcon tried to push himself through the window. A fist hit his chin and made alarm bells go off in his brain. And then the Fliptop Killer gripped the wheel with both hands, because the cab was speeding up a narrow wooden ramp. The Green Falcon had the taste of blood in his mouth, and now he could hear a strange thing: the excited shouts of children, the voices of ghosts on the wind. His fingers were weakening, his grip about to fail; the voices, overlapped and intermingled, said *Hold on Green Falcon hold on ...*

And then, before his strength collapsed, he lunged through the window and grappled with the Fliptop Killer as the cab rocketed up on to a pier and early-morning fishermen leapt for their lives.

Fingers gouged for the Green Falcon's eyes, could not get through the mask's slits. The Green Falcon hit him in the face with a quick boxer's left and right, and the killer let go of the wheel to clench both sinewy hands around the Green Falcon's throat.

The cab reached the end of the pier, crashed through the wooden railing, and plummeted into the Pacific Ocean twenty feet below.

## CHAPTER TEN : NIGHTMARE NETHERWORLD

The sea surged into the cab, and the vehicle angled down into the depths.

The Fliptop Killer screamed. The Green Falcon smashed him in the face with a blow that burst his nose, and then the sea came between them, rising rapidly towards the roof as the cab continued to sink.

The last bubbles of air exploded from the cab. One headlight still burned, pointing towards the bottom, and for a few seconds the instrument panel glowed with weird phosphorescence. And then the lights shorted out, and darkness claimed all.

The Green Falcon released his prey. Already his lungs strained for a breath, but still the cab was sinking. One of the killer's thrashing legs hit his skull, a hand tearing at his tunic. The Green Falcon didn't know which was up and which was down; the cab was rotating as it descended, like an out-of-control aircraft falling through a nightmare netherworld. The Green Falcon searched for an open window but found only the windshield's glass. He slammed his fist against it, but it would take more strength than he had to break it.

*Cut*, he thought. Panic flared inside him, almost tore loose the last of the air in his lungs. *Cut!* But there was no director here, and he had to play this scene out to its end. He twisted and turned, seeking a way out. His cape was snagged around something – the gear shift, he thought it was. He ripped the cape off and let it fall, and then he pulled his cowl and mask off and it drifted past him like another face. His lungs heaved, bubbles coming out of his nostrils. And then his flailing hands found a window's edge; as he pushed himself through, the Fliptop Killer's fingers closed on his arm.

The Green Falcon grasped the man's shirt, and pulled him through the window too.

Somewhere below the surface, he lost his grip on the Fliptop Killer. His torn tunic split along the seams, and left him. He kicked towards the top with the legs that had won a gold medal in his junior year swim meet, and



as his lungs began to convulse his head broke the surface. He shuddered, drawing in night air.

People were shouting at him from the pier's splintered rail. A wave caught him, washing him forward. The rough surface of a barnacled piling all but ripped the green tights off his legs. Another wave tossed him, and a third. The fourth crashed foam over him, and then a young arm got him around the neck and he was being guided to the beach.

A moment later, his knees touched sand. A wave cast him on to shore, and took the last tatters of his Green Falcon costume back with it to the sea.

He was turned over. Somebody trying to squeeze water out of him. He said, "I'm all right," in a husky voice, and he heard someone else shout, "The other one washed up over here!"

Cray sat up. "Is he alive?" he asked the tanned face. "Is he alive?"

"Yeah," the boy answered. "He's alive."

"Good. Don't let him go." Cray snorted seaweed out of his nostrils. "He's the Fliptop Killer."

The boy stared at him. Then shouted to his friend, "Sit on that dude 'til the cops get here, man!"

It wasn't long before the first police car came. The two officers hurried down to where Cray sat at the edge of the land, and one of them bent down and asked his name.

"Cray Fl ..." He stopped. A piece of green cloth washed up beside him, was pulled back again just as quickly. "Cray Boomershine," he answered. And then he told them the rest of it.

"This guy got the Fliptop!" one of the kids standing nearby called to his friend, and somebody else repeated it and it went up and down the beach. People crowded around, gawking at the old man who sat in his pyjamas on the sand.

The second police car came, and the third one brought a black go-go dancer and a kid with a question mark on his scalp and a bandage around his shoulder. They pushed through the crowd, and Gracie called out, "Where is he? Where's the Green Fal –"

She stopped, because the old man standing between two policemen was smiling at her. He said, "Hello, Gracie. It's all over."

She came towards him. Didn't speak for a moment. Her hand rose up, and her fingers picked seaweed out of his hair. "Lord have mercy," she

said. "You look like a wet dog."

"You got that sucker, didn't you?" Ques watched the cops taking the Fliptop, in handcuffs, to one of the cars.

"We got him," Cray said.

A TV news truck was pulling on to the beach. A red-haired woman with a microphone and a guy carrying a video-camera and powerpack got out, hurrying towards the centre of the crowd. "No questions!" a policeman told her, but she was right there in Cray's face before she could be restrained. The camera's lights shone on him, Gracie and Ques. "What happened here? Is it true that the Fliptop Killer was caught tonight?"

"No questions!" the policeman repeated, but Gracie's teeth flashed as she grinned for the camera.

"What's your name?" the woman persisted. She thrust the microphone up to Cray's lips.

"Hey, lady!" Ques said. The microphone went to him. "Don't you recognise the Green Falcon?"

The newswoman was too stunned to reply, and before she could find another question a policeman herded her and the cameraman away.

"We're going to the station and clear all this mess away," the officer who had hold of Cray's elbow said. "All three of you. Move it!"

They started up the beach, the crowd following and the newswoman trying to get at them again. Gracie and Ques got into one of the police cars, but Cray paused. The night air smelled sweet, like victory. The night had called, and the Green Falcon had answered. What would happen to him, Gracie and Ques from this moment on, he didn't know. But of one thing he was certain: they had done right.

He got into the police car, and realised he still wore his green boots. He thought that maybe – just maybe – they still had places to go.

The police car carried them away, and the TV news truck followed.

On the beach, the crowd milled around for a while. Who was he? somebody asked. The Green Falcon? Did he used to be a somebody? Yeah, a long time ago. I think I saw him on a rerun. He lives in Beverly Hills now, went into real estate and made about ten million bucks, but he still plays the Green Falcon on the side.

Oh yeah, somebody else said. I heard that too.

And at the edge of the ocean a green mask and cowl washed up from the foam, started to slip back into the waves again.

A little boy picked it up. He and his dad had come to fish on the pier this morning, before the sun came up and the big ones went back to the depths. He had seen the cab go over the edge, and the sight of this mask made his heart beat faster.

It was a thing worth keeping.

He put it on. It was wet and heavy, but it made the world look different, kind of.

He ran back to his dad, his brown legs pumping in the sand, and for a moment he felt as if he could fly.

**The End**