

Night Ride

by Charles Beaumont

He was a scrawny white kid with junkie eyes and no place for his hands, but he had the look. The way he ankled past the tables, all alone by himself; the way he yanked the stool out, then, and sat there doing nothing: you could tell. He wasn't going to the music. The music had to come to him. And he could wait.

Max said, "High?"

I shook my head. You get that way off a fresh needle, but then you're on the nod: everything's upbeat. "Goofers, maybe," I said, but I didn't think so.

"Put a nickel in him, Deek," Max said, softly. "Turn him on."

I didn't have to. The kid's hands crawled up and settled on the keys. They started to walk, slow and easy, taking their time. No intro. No chords. Just, all of a sudden, music. It was there all the while, Poppa-san, how come you didn't notice?

I couldn't hear a hell of a lot through all the lip-riffs in that trap, but a little was plenty. It was real sound, sure enough, and no accident. The Deacon had been dead right. Blues, first off: the tune put down and then brushed and a lot of improvising on every note; then finally, all of them pulled into the melody again, and all fitting. It was gut-stuff, but the boy had brains and he wasn't ashamed of them.

Max didn't say anything. He kept his eyes closed and his ears open, and I knew he was hooked. I only hoped it wouldn't be the same old noise again. We'd gone through half a dozen box men in a year.

Not like this one, though.

The kid swung into some chestnuts, like "St. James Infirmary" and "Bill Bailey," but what he did to them was vicious. St. James came out a place full of spiders and snakes and screaming broads, and Bailey was a dirty bastard who left his woman when she needed him most. He played "Stardust" like a Boy Scout helping a cripple across the street. And you want to know something about "Sweet Georgia Brown"? Just another seedy hustler too tired to turn a trick, that's all.

Of course, nobody knew what he was doing. To the customers, those smears and slides and minor notes were only mistakes; or maybe the ears didn't even notice.

"What's his name?" Max said.

"David Green."

"Ask him to come over when he's through."

I sliced my way past the crowd, tapped the kid's shoulder, told him who I was. His eyes got a little life in them. Not much.

"Max Dailey's here," I said. "He wants some words."

Eight notes and you wouldn't touch "Laura" with a ten-foot pole. "Okay," the kid said.

I went back. He dropped the knife for a while and played "Who," straight, or pretty straight. The way I'd heard it the night before, anyway, when it was too hot to sleep and I'd gone out for that walk. Funny thing about a box: a million guys can hammer it, they can play fast and hit all the notes and transpose from

here to Wednesday. But out of that million, you'll find maybe one who gets it across. And like as not he can't play fast and won't budge out of C. Davey Green wasn't what you'd call a virtuoso, exactly. He didn't hit all the notes. Only the right ones.

After a while he came over and sat down.

Max grabbed his paw. "Mr. Green," he said, "you are a mess of fingers."

The kid nodded; it *could* have been "Thanks."

"You don't do a whole lot, but it's mostly good. The Deacon likes it." He took off his sunglasses and folded them real slow. "I'm a tight man with a compliment, Mr. Green," he said. "Rebop with the mouth, that passes the time of day, but I'm here for other reasons."

A chick in a green sarong popped out of the smoke. She had a little here and a little there. "Gents?"

"Bushmill's and soda," Max said, "and if you don't carry it, Bushmill's and nothing. Mr. Green?"

"Same, whatever it is," he said.

My cue: I got up and killed the rest of my martini. Max always liked to business solo. "Gotta make a phone call, boss," I said. "Meet you outside."

"Good enough."

I told the kid maybe we'd see him around and he said, sure, maybe, and I took a fade.

Outside it was hot and wet, the way it gets in N.O. I wandered up one side of Bourbon, down the other, lamping the broads. Tried a joint, but the booze was watered and the dancer didn't know. A pint-sized you-all with a nervous tic and rosy cheeks. She came on like a pencil sharpener. I blew the place.

Jazz might have been born in New Orleans, but it left home a long time ago.

Max was waiting in front of the Gotcha Club: he wasn't smiling, he wasn't frowning. We walked some blocks. Then, in that whispery-soft voice of his, he said: "Deek, I think maybe we have us a box."

I felt proud, oh yes; that's how I felt. "Cuckoo."

"Got to be handled right, though. The kid has troubles. Great troubles."

He grinned. It was the kind of a grin a hangman might flash at a caught killer, but I didn't know that. I didn't even know there'd been a crime. All I thought was, the Band of Angels has got ten new fingers.

We broke at the pad, but the train didn't leave till eight the next P.M., so I had a party by myself. It didn't help. I dreamed all night about that little girl, and I kept hitting her with the car and backing up and hitting her and watching her bleed.

Funny part was, once it wasn't me in the car, it was Max, and the little girl was David Green....

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The kid hooked up with us in Memphis. No suitcase, same clothes, same eyes. We were doing a five-nighter at the Peacock Room, going pretty good but nothing to frame on the wall. Davey eared a set and tapped Max's bass. "So I'm here," he said. "Want me to sit it?"

Max said no. "You listen. After the bit, then we'll talk."

Kid shrugged. Either he didn't give a damn or he was elsewhere. "Hello, Mr. Jones," he said.

"Hello, Mr. Green," I said. Brilliant stuff. He slumped into a chair, stuck his head on his arms and that was it.

Nobody was hot, so we played some standard dance tunes and faked a jam session and sort of piddled around until two. Then we packed up and headed for the hotel.

"This is the Band of Angels," Max said, but he didn't say it before we were at attention, all present and accounted for. "Deacon Jones you already know. He is a trumpet, also a cornet and sometimes, when we're in California, a flute. I'm bass; you know that, too. The tall, ugly fellow over there is Bud Parker, guitar. Rollo Vigon and Parnelli Moss, sax and valve trombone. Hughie Wilson, clarinet. Sig Shulman, our drummer, the quiet, thoughtful guy to my right. All together, the very best in the world—when they want to be. Gentleman, our new piano: David Green."

The kid looked scared. He passed a limp hand around, as if he wished he was in Peoria. He almost jumped when Max put the usual to him. Who wouldn't?

"We're a jazz band, Green. Do you know what jazz is?"

Davey threw me a glance and ran his hand over his hair. "You tell me."

"I can't. No one can. It was a stupid question." Max was pleased: if the kid had tried an answer, that would've been bad. "But I'll tell you *one* of the things it is. It's vocabulary. A way of saying something. You can have a small vocabulary or a large one. We have a large one, because we have a lot on our minds. If you want to make it with the Angels, you've got to remember that."

Sig began to tap out some rhythm on a table, impatiently.

"Another thing. You've got to forget about categories. Some bands play Storyville, some play Lighthouse; head music and gut music—always one or the other. Well, we don't work that way. Jazz is jazz. Sometimes we'll spend a week kanoodling on the traditional, flip over and take up where Chico Hamilton leaves off. Whichever says what we have to say best. It's all in how we feel at the time. You dig?"

Davey said he dug. Whenever Max got the fever like this and started the sermon, you didn't plan to argue. Because he meant it; and he knew what he was talking about. Maybe it was the twentieth time most of us heard the routine, but it made sense. Practically everybody thinks of jazz in steps: from this to that. And there aren't any steps. Which is more "advanced"—Stravinsky or Mozart?

Davey didn't know how important it was for him to say the right thing, but he managed fine. For a few minutes he'd laid his troubles down. "I never thought of it just that way," he said. "It's quite a theory."

"Take it in, Green. Think hard about it. What you've been doing is high up, but one way. I believe you can be all ways. I believe it because I have faith in you."

He stuck his hand on Davey's shoulder, almost the same way he'd done with each of us over the years,

and I could see that it hit the kid just as hard.

"I'll try, Mr. Dailey," he said.

"Make it Max. Doesn't take as long, and it's friendlier."

Then it was all over. Max closed the Bible and broke out some Catto's scotch, which is a drink he does not generally like to share; then he got the kid into a corner, by themselves.

I should have felt great, and in a way I did, but something was spoiling it. I went over to the window for some fresh: the sidewalks had been hosed down and they put up a nice clean smell, next best to summer rain.

"Nice kid." I looked over; it was Parnelli Moss. He still had the shakes, but not so bad as sometimes. Hard to see how a man could hit the bottle the way Parnelli did and still finger a horn. Hard to see how he could stay alive.

He was wound. And I wasn't in any mood for it. "Yeah."

"Nice fine kid." He held the ice-water near his forehead. Cold turkey, on and off. "Max hummin' up a new crutch."

I ignored it: maybe it'd go away.

It didn't. "Good?" Parnelli said.

"Good."

"Poor Mr. Green. Deek, you listen—he'll stay good, but he won't stay nice. Hey, look out with that hoe, there, Max!"

"Parnelli," I said, just as cool as I could, "you're a fair horn but that's all I can say for you."

"That's what I mean," he said, and grinned. I suddenly wanted to pitch him out of the window. Or jump, myself. I couldn't tell why.

He rolled the glass across his forehead. "Give us this day," he said, singsong, "our Dailey bread—"

"Shut up." I kept it in whispers, so no one else would hear. Moss was loaded; he had to be. "Parnelli, listen, you want a hook in Max. That's okay, that's fine by me. Stick it in and wiggle it. But keep it away from me—I don't want to hear about it."

"What's the matter, Deek—afraid?"

"No. See, the way I look at it, Max picked you up when your own mother wouldn't have done it, even with rubber gloves. You were O, Parnelli. Zero. Now you're eating. You ought to be on your goddamn knees to him!"

"Father," Parnelli said, with a real amazed look, "I am. I *am!*"

"He's been a nurse to you," I said, wondering why I was so sore and why I wanted to hurt the guy this much. "Nobody else would have bothered."

"For a fact, Deek."

"They'd have let you kick off in Bellevue."

"For a fact."

I wanted to slug him then, but I couldn't. I knew he hated Max Dailey. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why. It was like hating your best friend.

"You like the kid, Deek? Green, I mean?"

"Yeah," I said. It was true. I felt—maybe that was it—responsible.

"Tell him to cut out, then. For the love of Christ, tell him that."

"Go to hell!" I swung across to the other room: it was like busting out of a snake house. Davey Green was there, all to himself, sitting. Only he was different. Those hard, bitter-type lines were gone. Now he just looked—sad.

"How you makin' it?"

The kid looked up. "The hard way," he said. "I've been talking to Mr. Dailey. He's—quite a guy."

I pulled up a chair. My back was sweating. Cold sweat. "How you mean?"

"I don't know, exactly. I never met anyone like him before. The way he has of, well, of knowing what's wrong and how it's wrong, and pulling it out of you—"

"You got troubles, kid?" The sweat was getting colder.

He smiled. He was damned young, maybe only twenty-five; handsome, in a Krupa kind of way. It wasn't junk. It wasn't booze. "Tell the Deacon."

"No troubles," he said. "Just a dead wife."

I sat there, getting scared and sick and wondering why. "How far back?"

"A year," he said, like he still didn't believe it. "Funny thing, too. I never used to be able to talk about it. But Mr. Dailey seemed to understand. I told him everything. How Sal and I met, when we got married and went to live in the development, and—" He shoved his face against the wall quick.

"If you talk about it, kid, you get rid of it," I said.

"That's what Mr. Dailey told me."

"Yeah." I know. It was exactly what Mr. Dailey had told me, six years ago, after the accident.

Except I was still dreaming about that little girl, as if it had happened yesterday....

"You think I'll fit in, Deek?" the kid asked.

I looked at him and remembered what Parnelli had said; and I remembered Max, his voice, low, always low; and it got too much.

"Cinch," I said, and blew back to my room on the second floor.

I don't bug easy, never did, but I had a crawly kind of a thing inside me and it wouldn't move. They have a word for it: premonition.

"... tell him to cut out, Deek. For the love of Christ, tell him that ..."

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Next night the kid showed up on time in one of Rollo's extra suits. He looked very hip but also very skunked, and you could see that he hadn't had much sack time.

Max gave him a little introduction to the crowd and he sat down at the box.

Things were pretty tense. A one. A two.

We did "Night Ride," our trademark, and the kid did everything he was supposed to. Very fine backing, but nothing spectacular, which was good. Then we broke and he got the nod from Max and started in on some sad little dancing on "Jada." It isn't easy to make that tune sad. He did it.

And the crowd loved it.

He minored "Lady Be Good," and then threw a whole lot of sparks over "The A Train"; and the Peacock Room began to jam. I mean, we were always able to get them to listen, and all that foot-stomping routine, but this was finally *it*.

Davey Green wasn't good. He was great. He Brubecked the hell out of "Sentimental Lady"—keeping to Max's arrangement enough so we could tag along, but putting in five minutes more—and it was real reflective, indeed. Then, with everything cool and brainy, he turned right around and there was Jelly Roll, up from the dead, doing "Wolverine" the way it hadn't been done.

And all the hearing aids were turned to "loud" when he rode out a solo marked Personal. Almighty sad stuff; bluesy; you knew—I knew—what he was thinking about. Him and his wife in bed on a hot morning, with the sun screaming in, them half-awake, and the air bright and everything new. Red ice. Warm blues.

Max listened with his eyes tight shut. He was saying: Don't touch a thing, boys; don't make a move. You might break it. Leave the kid alone.

Davey stopped, suddenly. Ten beat pause. And we thought it was over, but it wasn't. He was remembering something else now, and I knew that that first was just the beginning.

He started a melody, no life in it, no feeling: Just the notes: "If You Were the Only Girl in the World"—then he smeared his fist down the keys and began to improvise. It was wicked. It was brilliant. And the cats all swallowed their ties.

But I got his message. It came into me like private needles:

*There's a girl in a box,
Deacon Jones, Deacon Jones,
And that girl in a box
Is nothin' but bones ...*

Which girl you talking about? I wondered. But there wasn't any time to figure it out, because he was all done. The Peacock Room was exploding and Davey Green was sitting there, sitting there, looking at his

hands.

"A one. A two," softly from Max.

We all took off on "St. Louis Blues," every one of us throwing in something of his own, and I blew my horn and it was break time.

Max put on his blinkers and went over to the kid. I could barely hear him. "Very clean, Mr. Green." The kid was still with it, though: he didn't seem to be listening. Max whispered a few things and came on down off the stand. He was ten feet tall.

"We've got it, Deek," he said. There was a light in back of his forehead. "It's ours now."

I knocked the spit out of my trumpet and tried a grin. It was a falsie.

Max put a hand on my shoulder. "Deek," he said, "that was a sanitary solo you blew, but I'm worried. You've been thinking about the accident. Right?"

"No."

"I don't blame you a lot. But we're *complete* now, you dig, and we're going high. So forget about the goddamn thing or talk it over with me after the show. I'm available." He smiled. "You know that, don't you, Deek?"

I'd been praying to God he wouldn't say it. Now it was said. "Sure, Max," I told him. "Thanks."

"Nothing," he said, and went over to Bud Parker. Bud was hooked and Max kept him supplied. It always seemed okay because otherwise he'd be out stealing, or maybe killing, for the stuff.

Now I wasn't so sure. Parnelli leaned over and blew a sour note out of his valve bone. "Nice kid," he said. "I think Max'll want to keep him."

So right. With ten hot fingers, we started doing business in a great big way. I don't know why. Why did Woody Herman die for weeks in a Chicago pad and then move two blocks away and hit like a mother bomb? It just happens.

We got out of the Corn Belt fast, got booked into the Haig in L.A. and out-pulled everything since Mulligan. Quartets and trios were all the bit then, and that made us a ricky-tick Big Band, but nobody cared. In a month the word got around and they were coming down from Frisco to give a listen.

I didn't have much to do with either Max or Davey: they were buddy-buddy now. Max almost never let him out of sight—not that he neglected us. Every couple of P.M.'s he'd show, just like always, ready with the jaw. He was available. "Got to take care of my boys . . ." But Davey was the star of the show, and he didn't circulate much. It was enough just to see him, anyway. His piano was getting better, but he was getting worse. Every night he told the story about him and Sally, how happy they were, how much he loved her, and how she got whatever she got and died. Every mood they might have had, he pulled it out of the box. And always ended up in Weep City. Used to be he'd get mad as hell at the son of a bitch that took her breath out of her body and put her underground; now he was mostly just sad, lonely, brought down.

And the Band of Angels couldn't do anything wrong. Before, we were a bunch of smart musicians; we could give you Dixieland or we could give you Modern; hot or cold; and nothing you could call a style. With Davey's fingers, we had a style. We were just as smart, could play all the different jazz, but we were blues men. We played mostly for the dame at the end of the bar, all alone, with too much paint or

too much fat. Or for the little guy who won't dance so they think he hates women, only he's crazy about women, but he's scared of what will happen when he's up that close. We played for little chicks with thick glasses, thick chicks with little asses, and that drunk loser who kissed it all good-bye.

Blues men.

A paid ad said it: "The Max Dailey band plays to that piece of everybody that got hurt and won't heal up."

Blues men.

The Haig would have kept us six months more, forever maybe, but we had to spread the Gospel. Max's Gospel. What was wrong with Birdland?

Not a thing. Max had been sniffing around The Apple for years, but who were we then?

Day we hit, he tiptoed in church-style. Spoke even lower, to Davey.

"Kid, this layout is all for the Bird."

Common knowledge.

"Big troubles that spade had, yes, indeed," he said. "Big talent."

We crept out; later on we came back and ripped that church apart at the seams. Davey was going like never before, but you couldn't get at him: he was lower than a snake's kidney. Once after a show I asked him did he want to go out and have a beer with the Deacon, and he allowed that was all right, but Max came along and I wasn't about to break through.

And that's the way it went. *Downbeat* tagged us as "the most individual group in action today" and we cut a flock of albums—*Blue Mondays*; *Moanin' Low*; *Deep Shores*—and it was gravy and champagne for breakfast.

Then, I can't remember what night it was, Max came up to my place and he didn't look gleeful. First time I'd seen him alone since Rollo got picked up for molesting. He made it real casual.

"Deek, you seen Davey around?"

Something jumped up my throat. "Not for quite a while," I said.

He did a shrug.

"You worried?" I asked.

"Why should I be worried? He's of age."

He powdered; then, the next night, it went and blew itself to pieces. I'd finished my bit with the horn—Saturday P.M.—when Parnelli tapped me and said, "Look out there." I saw people. "Look out there again," he said.

I saw a chick. She was eyeballing Davey.

"Max's going to *love* that," Parnelli said. "He's just going to eat that all up, oh yes."

When it was over, the kid ankleed down and gave the doll a full set of teeth. She gave them back. And

they went over to a dark corner and sat down.

"Oo-weee. Mr. Green has got himself a something. I do declare. And won't you kindly lamp Big M?"

Max was looking at them, all right. You couldn't tell exactly what he was thinking, because none of it showed in his face. He turned the knobs on his bass, slow, and looked. That's all.

After a while Davey and the girl got up and headed for the stand.

"Max, I'd like you to meet Miss Schmidt. Lorraine."

Hughie Wilson's eyes fell out, Bud Parker said "Yeah," and even Rollo picked up—and Rollo doesn't go the girl route. Because this chick was hollerin': little-girl style, pink dress and apple cheeks and a build that said, I'm all here, don't fret about that, just take my word for it.

"She's been coming to hear us every night," Davey said.

"I know," Max said. "I've seen you around, Miss Schmidt."

She smiled some pure sunshine. "You have a fine band, Mr. Dailey."

"That's right."

"I particularly loved 'Deep Shores' tonight. It was—"

"Great, Miss Schmidt. One of Davey's originals. I guess you knew that."

She turned to the kid. "No, I didn't. Davey—Mr. Green didn't tell me."

Our little box man grinned: first I'd seen him do it for real. You wouldn't have recognized him.

And that's all she wrote. It was plain and simple: Davey was going upstairs with this baby and she was liking it; and let no cat put these two asunder.

She showed up on the dot every P.M., always solo. Listen out the sets and afterward, she and the kid would cut out. He looked plenty beat of a morning, but the change was there for all to see. No question: David Green was beginning to pick up some of the marbles he had lost.

And Max never said a word about it, either. Pretended he didn't gave a hoot one way or the other; nice as hell to both of them. But Parnelli wouldn't wipe that look off his face.

"Playing out the line," he'd say. "Max is a smart fella, Deek. Anybody else, he'd put it on the table. Say: 'We're taking a European tour' or something like that. Not our bossman. Smart piece of goods ..."

It got thicker between Davey and his doll, and pretty soon, if you listened hard, you could hear bells. You could hear more. I didn't know why, you couldn't finger the difference: but it was there, okay. We were playing music. Like a lot of guys play music. But we'd lost something.

But Max wasn't upset—and he was a tuning fork on two legs—so I figured it must be me. The dreams again, maybe. They were coming all the time, no matter how much I talked about them ...

It wasn't me, though. We were beginning to sound lousy and it kept up that way, night after night, and I was afraid I knew why, finally.

Three days after Davey had announced his engagement to Lorraine, the dam cracked. Like:

We'd all gathered on the stand and Max has one-twoed for "Tiger Rag" and we started to play. And *suddenly* it was all fine again. The sound was there, only a lot richer than it had ever been. Davey's piano was throttled up and spitting out sadness again, throwing that iron frame around all of us. Keeping us level.

Parnelli tapped me and I went cold. I looked at Davey—he was gone; out of it—and I looked into the audience, and the chick was gone too. I mean she wasn't there. And Max was picking those strings, eyes squinched, happy as a pig in September.

We swung into "Deep Shores" and I think I'm not sure, but I think—that's when it all got clear to me. After six years.

I played it out, though. Then I started for Davey, but Max stopped me.

"Better leave the kid alone," he whispered. "He's had a rough one."

"What do you mean?"

"The chick was n.g., Deek."

"I don't believe it."

"She was n.g. I knew it right along, but I didn't want to say anything. But—listen, I've been around. She would have counted the kid out."

"What'd you do?" I asked.

"I proved it," he said. His voice was dripping with sympathy. "Chicks are all the same, Deek. Hard lesson to learn." He shrugged his shoulders. "So leave the kid alone. He'll tell you all about it—with his hands. You've just been bothered with those dreams of yours. Why don't you drop by tonight and—"

"What'd you do, Max?"

"I laid her, Deek. And it was easy."

I jerked my shoulder away and started up the stairs, but the box was empty. Davey was gone.

"Where does the doll hang out?" I said.

Max gave with the hands. "Forget it, will you? It's all over now. The kid was—*grateful* to me!"

"At Forty-Five Gardens Road," a voice said. "Apartment Five." It was Parnelli.

"You want some, too, Deek?" Max asked. He laughed: it was the nastiest sound I'd ever heard.

"Coo," Parnelli said. "The cold touch of the master."

I studied the man I'd loved for six years. He said, "She doesn't deny it," and I thought, this is the ax between the eyes for Davey. He'll never get up now. Never.

I grabbed Max's arm. He smiled. "I know how you like the kid," he said, "and believe me, I do, too. But it's better he found out now than later, isn't it? Don't you see—I had to do it, for his sake."

Some of the crowd was inching up to get a hear. I didn't care. "Dailey," I said, "listen good. I got an idea in me. If it turns out right, if it turns out that idea is right, I'm going to come back here and kill you. Dig?"

He was big, but I had wings. I shoved him out of the way, hard, ran outside and grabbed a taxi.

I sat in the back, praying to God she was home, wishing I had a horn to blow—*something!*

I skipped the elevator, took the stairs by threes.

I knocked on Apartment Five. No answer. I felt the ice on my hide and pounded again.

The chick opened up. Her eyes were red. "Hello, Deacon."

I kicked the door shut and stood there, trying to find the right words. Everything seemed urgent. Everything was right now. "I want the truth," I said. "I'm talking about the truth. If you lie, I'll know it." I took a breath. "Did you sleep with Max Dailey?"

She nodded yes. I grabbed her, swung her around. "The truth, goddammit!" My voice surprised me: it was a man talking. I dug my fingers hard into her skin. "Think about Davey. Put him in your mind. Then tell me that you and Max slept together, tell me that you took off all your clothes and let Max Dailey lay you! Tell me that!"

She tried to get away; then she started to cry. "I didn't," she said, and I let go. "I didn't ..."

"You love the kid?"

"Yes."

"Want to marry him?"

"Yes. But you don't understand. Mr. Dailey—"

"I'll understand in a hurry. There isn't any time now."

I let the tears bubble up good and hot.

"Come on."

She hesitated a beat, but there wasn't any fooling around and she knew it. She got a coat on and we got back into the taxi.

Neither of us said a word the whole trip to Birdland.

By now it was closing time; the joint was empty, dark. Some slow blues were rolling out from the stand.

First guy I saw was Parnelli. He was blowing his trombone. The rest of the boys—all but two—were there, jamming.

Parnelli quit and came over. He was shaking good now.

"Where's Davey?" I asked.

He looked at me, then at Lorraine.

"Where is he?"

"You're too late," Parnelli said. "It looks like the Big M pushed a mite too far. Just a mite."

Lorraine started to tremble, I could feel her arm; and somebody was slicing into my guts. The blues were

still rolling "Deep Shores." The kid's tune.

Parnelli shook his head. "I went out after him the minute you left," he said. "But I was too late, too."

"Where's Davey?" Lorraine said, like she was about to scream.

"In his room. Or maybe they've got him out by now—" Parnelli stared at me with those eyes. "He didn't have a gun so he used a razor. Good clean job. Fine job. Doubt if I'll be able to do any better myself ..."

Lorraine didn't say a word. She took it in, then she turned around slow and walked out. Her heels hit the dance floor like daggers.

"You figured it out now?" Parnelli said.

I nodded. I was hollow for a second, but it was all getting filled up with hate now. "Where is he?"

"In his room, I guess."

"You want to come along?"

"I might just do that," he said. He blew a sour note and the session stopped. Bud Parker came down, so did Hughie and Rollo and Sig.

"They know?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. But, Deek, knowin' isn't enough sometimes. We've been waiting for you."

"Let's go then."

We went upstairs. Max's door was open. He was sitting in a chair, his collar loose, a bottle in his hand.

"Et tu, Deek?"

I grabbed a handful of shirt. "Davey's dead," I said.

He said, "I've been told." He lifted the bottle and I slapped the left side of his face, praying to God he'd want to fight. He didn't.

"You did it," I said.

"Yes."

I wanted to put my hands around his neck and squeeze until his eyes ran down his face, I wanted to give him back the pain. But all of a sudden I couldn't. "Why?" I said.

Max tilted the bottle and let a lot of the stuff run down his throat. Then, very slowly, and in that soft voice, he said: "I wanted to make music. I wanted to make the best music that ever was."

"That's why you lied to Davey about the girl?"

"That's why," Max said.

Parnelli took away the bottle and killed it. He was shaking, scared. "See, Deek, you thought you were in a band," he said. "But you weren't. You were in a traveling morgue."

"Tell me more, Parnelli. Tell me how in the name of the sweet Lord this has anything to do with Davey and Lorraine."

"It had everything to do with it. Dailey went over to the chick's place and gave her one of his high-voltage snow jobs. Got her to go along with the lie and stay away from Green."

I tried to grab some light; it wouldn't come. My head was pounding. "Why?"

"Simple. She'd be taking the kid's talent and tossing it in the crud-heap. He'd be telling things to *her*, not to the box. And she didn't want to rob the world of a Great Genius, did she?"

Parnelli sucked a few more drops out of the bottle and tossed it in a corner.

"Here's the thing, Deek—our boss has quite a unique little approach to jazz. He believes you've got to be brought down before you can play. The worse off you are, and the longer you stay that way, the better the music is. Right, Max?"

Max had his face in his hands. He didn't answer.

"Look around you. You: ten years ago—it was ten, wasn't it, Deek?—you got drunk one night and got in a car and hit a little girl. Killed her. Rollo, over there—he's queer and doesn't like it. Hughie, what's your cross?"

Hughie stayed quiet.

"Oh, yeah: cancer. Hughie's gonna die one of these days soon. Bud Parker and Sig, poor babies: hooked. Main stream. And me—a bottle hound. Max picked me out of Bellevue. Shall I go on?"

"Go on," I said, I wanted to get it all straight.

"But for some reason Max couldn't find a real brought-down piano man. They pretended to be miserable, but hell, it turned out they only had a stomach ache or something. Then—he found David Green. Or you did, Deek. So we were complete, at last. Eight miserable bastards. See?" Parnelli patted Max's head, and hiccupped. "But you don't get bugged because you didn't catch on. Ol'Dailey's smart. You might have pulled out of your wing-ding years ago, only he kept the knife in. Every now and then he'd give it a twist—like winding us up, so we'd cry about it out loud, for the public."

Hughie Wilson said. "Bull. It's all bull. I can play just as good happy as—"

Max brought his hands down on the chair, and that was the last time he ever looked powerful and strong. "No," he said. He was trembling and red. "Look back, Deacon Jones. Who were the great pianos? I mean the great ones. I'll tell you. Jelly Roll—who they said belonged in a whorehouse. Lingle—a hermit. Tatum—a blind man. Who blew the horns that got under your skin and into your bones and wouldn't let you be? I'll tell you that, too. A rum-dum boozie named Biederbecke and a lonely old man named Johnson. And Buddy Bolden—he went mad in the middle of a parade. Look back, I'm telling you, find the great ones. Show them to me. And I'll show you the loneliest, most miserable, beat and gone-to-hell bastards who ever lived. But they're remembered, Deacon Jones. They're remembered."

Max glared at us with those steady eyes of his.

"Davey Green was a nice kid," he said. "But the world is full of nice kids. I made him a great piano—and that's something the world *isn't* full of. He made music that reached in and touched you. He made music that only God could hear. And it took the trouble out of the hearts of everybody who heard him and everybody who will hear him—"

His hands were fists now. The sweat was pouring off him.

"There never was a great band," he said, "until this one. Never a bunch of musicians who could play anything under the goddamn sun and play it right and true. And there won't be another one. You were all great and I kept you great."

He got to his feet unsteadily. "Okay, it's all ripped now. It's over. I've screwed up every life in this room and made you prisoners and cheated and lied to you—okay. Who hits me first?"

Nobody moved.

"Come on," he said, only not in the soft voice. "Come on, you chicken-hearted sons of bitches! Let's go! I just murdered a fine clean kid, didn't I? What about you, Parnelli? You've been on to me for a long time. Why don't you start things off?"

Parnelli met his eyes for a while; then he turned and picked up his horn and went to the door.

Sig Shulman followed him. One by one the others left, nobody looking back.

And they were gone, and Max Dailey and I were alone.

"You told me something early tonight," he said. "You told me you were going to come back and kill me. What's holding you up?" He went over to the bureau, opened a drawer, took out an old .38. He handed it to me. "Go on," he said. "Kill me."

"I just did," I said, and laid the gun down on the table where he could get at it.

Max looked at me. "Blow out of here, Deek," he said, whispering. "Be free."

I went outside and it was pretty cool. I started walking. But there wasn't any place to go.

The End