

HINKY JENKS

CHRIS MIKESELL

Hinky Jenks, Madelyn Argent, and me, we could've changed the world. Now I'm here alone with the envelope from Maddy's father, and the priest with a *click-clack* heel on one of his shoes is walking the cellblock toward me.

Damn you, Jenks.

My death warrant expires in nine hours. No chance of a reprieve.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.



ARGENT SAID HE won Hiram Jenkins in a poker game against Primo DeAnza, head of the upstart gang cross-town. Said he won the hand legit and Primo was worming out of his marker. My crew, we didn't care. When it came to laying into those flatheads, reasons weren't needed—like Queensberry Rules at a knife fight, they just get in the way and turn the fun into a piece of work.

So we grabbed one of Primo's boys outside a little mom-n-pop by the train station and beat him 'til he told us this guy Jenkins was a driver for one of DeAnza's heavy guns, Diego Marquez. Then we beat him some more for being a snitch.

One night while Marquez was paying a call on a skirt, we went in and removed Jenkins from behind the wheel of his Sixty Special. Left a couple sticks of TNT wired to the Caddy's ignition just to square things. When DeAnza realized we not only collected on the debt, but extracted interest too, Santa Rosa got her introduction to the art of mob warfare.

HINKY JENKS

To look at the town, you'd never expect it would have its criminal element professionally run. *Hell, what criminal element?* you'd think. Then again, you'd never expect our sleepy little place an hour north of San Francisco to grab Hollywood's interest, either—but it did. The mob war and the movie biz and Jenks and Maddy and me. You wouldn't believe any of it if it wasn't true.

Hiram Jenkins—Hinky Jenks, we started calling him—came to us a driver. A good driver, maybe even as good as Benny Pullman down state. Up until we lifted him from behind the wheel of Marquez's Caddy he'd never slipped up. Never let a man get pinched. Always managed to get his boys away before the heat showed up. Of course his goof getting boosted and then DeAnza's vendetta against us meant he wasn't safe out on the street. Which meant he spent a lot of time at the Wexler Granary, playing cards in the back room and learning what ropes there were to learn.

Which meant real quick we knew half of why DeAnza kept him out in a car: the boy was just wrong.

Most troubling was his habit of eating everything with gelatin. Not as a side dish or salad, but everything he ate had to be covered in the stuff. Peas and carrots, that we didn't mind too much. Kinda looked like the stuff you might serve a kid with cut up pears inside. Vienna sausages, though—or worse, sardines. Most of us went down the road to Agostino's Bakery & Meats whenever Hinky Jenks brought out his lunch pail.

The other troubling thing was the way Jenks watched you. Always had his eyes on the door when you'd come in. Always had his hand out to take something from you, sometimes even before you'd half a mind to hand it to him. Hell, even if you were coming up from behind him he'd see you somehow and step aside.

Then one day—the day Jenks rushed us all out of the back room right before a grenade flew through a window—somebody, Fingers maybe, or his brother Shank, figured out the real reason DeAnza kept Jenks behind the wheel. Kid was clairvoyant or somnambulant or some other word that ain't even English—whatever, he could see the future. Near as we could time it, about ten seconds before of the rest of us caught up. So anytime the cops swooped in when Jenks had been driving for DeAnza, he gave the word ten seconds early and whoever could piled into his Caddy, and whoever couldn't faded out the back. When the police finally came they wouldn't find nothing but a couple stripes of rubber smoking by the curb.

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Ten seconds doesn't seem like much, I know, but take your thumb and put it in a vise grip. Spin the crank a quarter turn past conversational, and you'll discover just how long ten *Allegheny's* can be.

Jenks said DeAnza never figured it out for sure, and stupid flathead he is, that makes sense. Just trusted the kid's intuition, which built into reputation, which while it never advanced him past wheelman, meant a comfortable life for a gringo in DeAnza's outfit. Said he almost drove off when we came to collect, but figured being among his own he might do better for himself. Plus, Marquez was a prick.

So we discovered this and were thinking how we could use it to our advantage—a trip to one of the Long Beach casino ships, for instance—when Jenks looked up at the door and the sappiest smile melted across his face. Eight seconds later Madelyn walked in. The boss's daughter. My girl. And Jenks was grinning at her like a kid at the bijou before the Hays Commission set up shop. Would've pasted him one right there, but by the time I turned back from gawping at the girl myself, he was out of his chair and hiding behind Pinky Magrew, big hulk of a guy.

I forgave him for not being able to help himself. Easier than walking all the way around Magrew.

Madelyn came over and whispered her dad wanted me up at their house on Park Street. I said so long to the boys who didn't hear me over the sound of them making plans to score big with Jenks's secret talent.

Salvatore Argent had always been like a father to me. In a town of izzes and ain'ts, my neighborhood was one of those with bad grammar. Argent changed things around for me, though. Like a father. Like a father-in-law, we'd hoped at one time, too. That was before he announced "the plan" and everything started going to hell, though not even Hinky Jenks could've foreseen the disaster then.

Argent's idea was to take care of DeAnza for good: frame the bastard and run him out of town, maybe even get him lynched. The West Coast premiere of Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* was a couple weeks away and would do fine. The movie was filmed locally, about the biggest thing to ever happen in quiet Santa Rosa—second only, maybe, to what we had planned. When I told Argent about Hinky Jenks and his seeing the future business, he re-evaluated the plan, added a couple touches, made it foolproof.

HINKY JENKS

And so far as we could see, it was: Jenks lifts one of DeAnza's cars and takes me to the premiere before the stars arrive; then we get out—skin darkened and hair flat—and rob the looky-loos; finally, Madelyn plays her part and DeAnza gets scandalized in the process. No way the cops can turn a blind eye to that. And Santa Rosa returns to the well-managed town it used to be, with yours truly running DeAnza's operation.

While we waited for the big night, Jenks went to work with Fingers Patelli cracking safes. First night they went out Fingers showed him how to listen with a stethoscope to the tumblers falling into place. After the next job, Fingers—pale as a celery stick in gelatin—told the story that Jenks had no sooner fitted the earpieces and the safe was open. Hearing the tumblers click ten seconds before it actually happened, Jenks had spun the dial left, around once to the right, back to the left, and *zip-zing-zoom!* five grand and a pile of Santa Rosa-Sonoma Rail stock certificates.

The Tuesday before the movie premiere Jenks accompanied Argent to his usual poker game. Stood behind the boss with me and Magrew, tapping the back legs of Argent's chair once for bluff, twice for get out while you're ahead. Magrew spent the night shoveling pistachio after pistachio into his yap, dropping the red shells on the floor. Me, I just glared across the table as if I didn't know better. DeAnza was none too happy to see his former driver, but kept his mouth shut. He wound up losing five or six hundred, though he stopped short of sinking any more of his boys in the pot. The boss walked away even, let the mayor and chief of police go home winners. "Next time," he said, clapping the mayor's shoulder as they got up from the table. DeAnza left thinking there would be a next time. Hell, even we thought there'd be a next time, too.

The action that Saturday went down like clockwork. Magrew drove Jenks and me across the railroad tracks west of town. DeAnza territory. If he'd been more reasonable he'd have been welcome to it. Bars and the odd cathouse and cardroom for the migrant fruit pickers from Petaluma to Sebastopol. Business Argent didn't need, but of necessity expected a cut from. DeAnza, he had expectations of his own. Like he's equal, a rival maybe. You don't have to be no mindreader to know that push is gonna come to shove, and shove is gonna come to a shallow grave sooner or later.

Jenks knew of a fence behind a certain garage that slides open on oiled skids. Said DeAnza's boys used it when the cops were on their tails. Drive

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down the alley, honk as you speed past, and someone slides the fence out of the way after the cops go by. Around the block once and through the alley again, cutting your lights before you reach the gap, which disappears once you're through. Jenks figured it worked for getting a car in, it'll work for getting one out. He wasn't wrong. Axle grease on our faces, hair styled so we looked like goons out of Dick Tracy, and no one inside the garage came out to ask who we were or why we were taking the Lincoln-Zephyr.

We reached the place, the California Theatre, right on time. The chief of police gave up the schedule for the night's events during the poker game. When exactly Hitchcock and Teresa Wright and Joseph Cotten and the mayor were set to leave the train station—recreating some scene from the movie for a *Life* magazine photographer—and then drive with police escort over to the theater. With the chief and his men across town, waiting for their little parade, it was a sure thing there'd be no cops at our end. Again, things ticked along perfectly.

"Nobody panic!" I shouted, stepping out from the rear of the Lincoln. "Nobody fights and nobody gets hurt." Jenks got out from behind the wheel and made a show of his Thompson M3.

There were a hundred, maybe a hundred-fifty, fretful peacocks in their Sunday best and sparkliest, but nobody squawked. Jenks handed me the grease gun and began collecting plumage. Madelyn stood a third of the way toward the gilt-edged double doors. I don't know how good Teresa Wright looked in the picture, but she had nothing on Maddy. Low-cut black dress with ruby accents, fur coat, high heels, blah, blah, blah. Could've been in the movie, for sure, if her mother hadn't disapproved of motion pictures not being dignified. I dragged my eyes away and made another heavily accented threat.

Jenks was doing fine. Nobody talked back and the bag filled up. He had gone up one side of the crowd and was coming back the other when he reached Madelyn and she dropped her earrings and ruby choker in the bag. Behind us a car rumbled by, dragging its tailpipe. Magrew's signal that the police escort had started. Two minutes.

"Okay, everybody, we're done here. Nobody be a hero, okay?"

Jenks passed by me, toward the car. I glanced at Madelyn.

The Lincoln driving off was her cue. She stepped out of the crowd, stood in the middle of the mosaic entryway. "You cowardly bastards, how dare you—"

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I brought down the muzzle of the submachine gun. Surprisingly easy. Pulled the trigger. And all the gears fell out of our little clock.

Somebody ran up from the street, jumped in front of Madelyn. Hinky Jenks. The bullets meant for her shredded his coat black and red. Jenks staggered, spun, fired a shot from his waistband revolver that clipped my leg. Then he fell backward into Madelyn's arms. She collapsed beneath him and cradled his shoulders.

I swept the nose of my gun across the crowd to keep them back. They disappeared into a gray, cotton-muffled world as I turned back to Jenks. "What the hell, Hinky?"

His eyes opened, looked at me and then up at Madelyn. The two of them—Jenks stretched across Maddy's kneeling lap, his head lolling behind the crook of her elbow—looked like a china thingummy my Aunt Olivia kept on a shelf above her fireplace.

Maddy opened her mouth, but Jenks spoke first. "Can—?" Blood bubbled over his lips from the coughed question.

Madelyn swallowed, whispered the words Jenks already knew. "The doctors say the cancer, there's no cure."

"It was this or a slow, painful...miserable..." My words dropped off as he nodded. "I'm sorry, Hinky." Jenks nodded again and smiled before his eyes rolled up white.

Madelyn and I remained frozen as Chief McHenry's far-off demand broke through the silence. Statues. Our fates sealed as certainly as Hinky Jenks's.

From that point on time sped up. While I got dragged off to the back of a police car and Jenks to a useless ambulance, the bag from our car was retrieved. After the jewelry, wallets, and watches were returned to their owners, the movie premiere—take two—went ahead as planned.

I was on my way to the gas chamber at San Quentin before the trial even started. No way the district attorney was going to let the case slip through his well-manicured fingers. Even if Argent had been inclined to overlook my failure—Primo DeAnza became even more powerful in the wake of our fiasco—the situation was beyond his control.



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THE PRIEST STOPS his click-clacking outside my cell. A guard leaves a wooden chair and retreats to his post at the end of the hall.

I sit on my bunk, arms draped over my legs, eyes fixed on the floor. From the knees down, the priest steps into my field of vision. He sits in the chair, puts a boxy black case on the floor. After crossing his legs, the priest picks at something on his right heel and flicks it through the bars.

A woman's fingernail, painted red.

I blink.

A pistachio shell.

I look at the priest's hand still resting on his shoe. The fingertips are stained pink.

"How's life treating you, Johnny?" The voice goes with the fingers. Pinky Magrew.

I look up at him. His face is faintly plum colored from the tightness of the shirt collar. There had been no anger in his voice.

"Not who I was expecting, Pinky."

"Weren't gonna squeal on your family, were ya?"

Was I? Had I been? When the letter from Argent came that morning, the morning of my execution day, the letter with Maddy's obituary and a photograph of her wasted body in a hospital gown, thin and fragile as a scattering of winter sticks, I had been—what? Angry. Afraid. Alone. I'd wanted revenge, absolution. Just someone to talk to.

"Tell me about it," Pinky says. "Your old father confessor."

I look into his eyes. Hard. Cold. Nothing like the pain and sadness of Madelyn's in the photograph. In Jenks's, lying in Maddy's arms.

I'm sorry, Hinky. He had nodded before I'd had the words out.

"I ain't got nothin' to say to nobody."

"Ahh, I'm just hassling you, Johnny. Let's do this communion thing so I can get out of here." He tugs at his collar, so whether he means out of prison or out of the disguise, I'm not sure.

Magrew opens his left hand and starts reading the words he's written there.

Agnus Dei, qui tolis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

He stops and unlatches the box at his feet. Something gray and wet falls from beneath the lid. After uncrossing his legs, he smears it into the concrete floor with his right toe. The lid peels away slowly from the sticky, dark maroon-stained interior.

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Magrew continues reading from his cribbed notes. *Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi...*

He removes a silver plate with several white wafers on it and a small red bottle. When the stopper is removed I catch a whiff of almonds. Amaretto ...or did the wafers come from Agostino's Bakery?

"*Domine, non sum dignus et intres sub tectum meum,*" I respond from childhood memory. "*Sed tantum dic verbo, et anabitur anima mea.*"

I receive a wafer on my tongue. Bitter. Probably not from Agostino's. When I take the cup, it's bitter too.

The ritual that used to offer comfort, offers only sadness now. A farewell communion. Family, together—not anymore.

Magrew finishes. Assures me that a real priest will be around to do last rites later that night. That it's been good to see me one last time. That the boss don't hold no grudges any more. He makes the sign of the cross and drags the chair away.

I lay back on my bunk, thinking of Madelyn. The angel, not the blasphemy in the photograph. Did she find redemption in the end?

A stiletto of pain twists in my gut. I bend over the edge of the bed, panting, and then stumble to the steel toilet. The scent of almonds comes mixed with the stench of bile.

I fall on my knees, shuddering, as the knife turns again. Hail Maddy—Mary. Oh, hail...*oh, hell.* The second mouthful of vomit burns more than the first.

No more grudges, Magrew? Maybe being delivered to hell by the damned will count in my favor when the scales are balanced. The sound of my laughter comes weakly from somewhere and the cold cement floor caresses my cheek.

Me and Mary and Jesus, we were gonna change the world.

My head doesn't bother to lift itself the next time my throat heaves. My eyes sting, but they're focused in the past.

Jenks, he nodded that second time, smiled just before—less than ten seconds before... Is there hope?

My hands roam around my body, trying to stop the pain. My throat. My belly. They rake across my heart.

Is there anything else?

I lie on the floor gasping for air. Then I just lie there.

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Madelyn smiles down on me before the world goes gray and quiet. And then silent. And finally black.

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