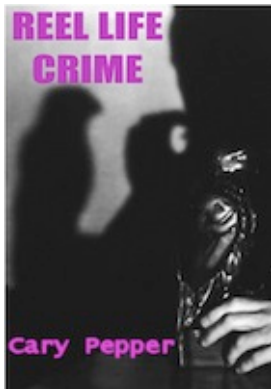


REEL LIFE CRIME



Cary Pepper



San Francisco detective Ed Sampas is sitting in his office when Thelonius Noble enters and says he wants to hire Sampas to recover a stolen item. It's a black statue of a bird, about a foot high, made of lead.

Reel Life Crime

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6001.html?s=pdf)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6001.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Your Free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

REEL LIFE CRIME

Cary Pepper

Copyright © 2011 by Cary Pepper

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

carypepper@aol.com

www.carypepper.com

=1=

The damn fool kid

Lillie Hitchcock Coit
1843-1929

Coit Tower was built as a monument thanks to the legacy of Lillie Coit, who bequeathed \$118,000, a third of her estate, to San Francisco for: “the purpose of adding beauty to the city which I have always loved.”

Lillie Hitchcock was seven when she came to San Francisco with her wealthy Kentucky parents in 1851. She was saved from a tragic fire by the volunteers of the Knickerbocker Engine Co. #5. Later seeing firemen struggling up Telegraph Hill, she dropped her school books and joined them. She became the Knickerbocker #5 mascot and rarely missed a blaze.

The damn fool kid. Was the car worth it? Did he really think his father was going to press charges? Or was he just trying to stick it to the old man, the way, he was so sure, the old man had been sticking it to him the entire 17 years of his angry young life. Maybe he was just being 17.

He'd taken the old man's Lamborghini. The 1972 Miura with the collector's plates and the drop-dead price tag.

“It's a P400 Miura SV,” Lathrop told Sampas, and waited for a reaction. When he got none, he continued. “Only 142 were made. Or 147, depending on who you talk to. Only 21 were approved for import into the United States.”

Sampas had never been wowed by cars, but clearly he was supposed to say something.

"Sounds like a very nice car," he mustered.

"Ferruccio Lamborghini called it his ideal sports car," Lathrop explained, his voice a nuanced blend of pride and condescension. "It's also been called the most beautiful sports car ever built. Frank Sinatra, Rod Stewart, the Shah of Iran, and the king of Saudi Arabia have all owned one. Yes, I'd say it's a very nice car."

"Worth a lot of money?"

"One has been appraised at \$350,000."

"That's a lot of money," Sampas conceded.

"Well, mine isn't worth quite that much."

"How much is it worth?"

"\$200,000. But this isn't just about that. I... He... I just want the car back."

"Why don't you go to the police?"

"Dwayne has two strikes against him. The value of the car makes it a felony. He'll go away for life."

Sampas understood. What parent could bring that down on his kid?

"So," Lathrop continued, "if he sees a police car, he'll take off. I know he will. And if he does that...there's no telling what will happen to the car."

So much for parental devotion. Sampas was beginning to understand why the kid took the Lamborghini.

"And Dwayne?"

"Right now, he's not... Right now, I have other priorities."

So much for Dwayne.

"Mr. Sampas, that car can do 180 miles an hour. Get it back undamaged, and I'll give you a bonus."

Maybe the old man shouldn't have been so hard-ass about it all. Odds were, Dwayne would return the car in a day or so. Lathrop had canceled his credit card. Without gas, where could he go? Or maybe Lathrop was afraid Dwayne would sell it out from under him. It had taken him years to find this car. Then, weeks of negotiations to buy it. But in the end he had it. He was mixing with stars. He was a star. Maybe that's what he was so bent on protecting.

Turned out, Lathrop was right. Sampas knew, five minutes after it all began out on the street, this kid should never have been allowed within 100 feet of that car.

San Francisco, all 46 square miles of it, isn't a big city. Traffic aside, you're always only 20 minutes from anywhere. Sampas had a feeling that he might be able to stumble across the Lamborghini just by driving around the streets. It was a dumb idea. But it was a warm August Wednesday, the kind the city doesn't see often. It'd be nice to be out there. When he didn't stumble across Dwayne, he'd come up with something better. What happened next never should have happened.

*

*

*

*

Sampas was in the Marina, heading east on Bay under an endless blue sky, when, pulling out of Fort Mason just ahead of him, was a P400 Miura SV. How many of those could there be in the city? Sampas didn't know if it was the most beautiful sports car he'd ever seen, but the Lamborghini had it all over the VW bug he was driving at 17.

Lathrop wanted the car, not the kid. Best thing for Sampas to do was just follow Dwayne until he parked. "Take the car. Leave the kid." It was almost a line out of *The Godfather*.

Sampas slipped in a couple of slots behind Dwayne.

Right on Webster, left on Bay. At Franklin, he let someone right-turn in front of him, putting him one car back.

Then it began to go wrong. Dwayne realized he was being followed. Or maybe he thought he was being followed. Or maybe he was just being 17.

He put on speed, began taking more rights and lefts. Sampas had no choice but to increase his own speed, making those same rights and lefts. Now Dwayne knew he was being followed. And Dwayne took off.

It didn't make sense. He was sure to get noticed by the cops. As a two-striker, what was he thinking? Or did he just want to see if the car could really do 180?

Now they were tearing up and down the streets of North Beach. It wasn't 180, and it wasn't *Bullitt*, but it was making Sampas nervous. He didn't want it to be him the cops pulled over.

Dwayne didn't seem to care. Maybe he wanted to see what the Lamborghini could do if pushed it hard enough. Maybe he thought he was Steve McQueen. Maybe he wasn't thinking at all. Or why would he have shot up Lombard (not the crookedest-street-in-the-world part — the stretch of Lombard to the east, that runs a straight line up Telegraph Hill), where the only place to go was Coit Tower?

Behind him (and very aware that he was putting himself at a disadvantage because, unlike Dwayne, he was stopping — if only for a quick second — at stop signs), Sampas began to think about how this was going to end. At Coit Tower, there was no place to go. The street ended in a circular parking lot crowded with tourists and tour buses. On some days you couldn't even get into the parking lot without waiting in line behind as many as a dozen cars. And the same road led in and out. If Sampas blocked it with his car, the Lamborghini wasn't going anywhere. Dwayne had just sealed himself in.

Turned out, Coit Tower wasn't the number-one tourist destination that day. The way up was empty as Dwayne curled the narrow road toward the tower. Watching the Lamborghini snake up Telegraph Hill, Sampas played out the coming end-game. In two minutes Dwayne would see that he was trapped, gun the engine a few times to make it look he was going to ram his way out, then jump out of the car and take off. Which was fine with Sampas. Let Lathrop deal with his moron kid at home.

Up around the almost-final turn they spun, the art-deco apartment building where Bacall gave Bogart refuge in *Dark Passage* a block away and down the Filbert Steps, on Montgomery. The stop sign that suddenly appeared at Filbert never registered on Dwayne.

The entrance to the parking lot (where there'd be no refuge for Dwayne) was just ahead. It'd all be over in a minute. Sampas couldn't have been more wrong.

Dwayne shot into the parking lot. At the entrance to the lot, the 210-foot concrete fire-hose tower on his left, Sampas screeched to a halt, cutting his wheels hard and putting his car on a diagonal across the road, blocking the lot's entrance and exit. Other drivers would go ballistic, but it'd be for only a few minutes. There was no way the Lamborghini was getting out of here.

Sampas got out of his car. The Miura was about 50 feet away, engine purring. Dwayne had made it about half-way around the oval, which left the car facing the tower and the lot's exit. Now he was nowhere in sight. With no way out, he'd booked, as Sampas knew he would.

Sampas approached the Lamborghini and walked around it. Ten feet away loomed a statue of Christopher Columbus, gazing across San Francisco Bay with a mixture of awe at the very sight of so much beauty, and determination to find yet more beauty in lands undiscovered. The only discovery Sampas wanted to make was that the Lamborghini was OK.

He circled the car, looking for dings, dents, anything that might send Lathrop into a tizzy that his precious jewel was no longer the pristine beauty it had been. The front was fine... The right side was flawless... The rear gleamed unscathed in the sunlight... Coming back around to the driver's side, Sampas stopped short. There was Dwayne, crouched low and breathing hard.

"Easy, son," Sampas tried to calm him. "You don't have to do this. You can just walk away."

Maybe Dwayne didn't want to walk away. More likely, it was calling him "son" that did it. Dwayne could not have had positive associations with that particular word. He launched himself at Sampas, a guttural roar spilling from his throat. Sampas didn't move until the whirl of furious motion was almost on top of him, then he side-stepped to his right. As Dwayne sailed past, Sampas pivoted left and his hands shot out, catching Dwayne broadside and sending him headlong into the nearest parked car. Dwayne went down hard.

"You OK?" Sampas asked. He wasn't surprised when Dwayne didn't answer. He was, however, impressed when Dwayne slowly rose to his knees. He'd expected the kid to be down for the count, and then some.

To his credit, Dwayne was soon standing. Shaky, but upright. He took a weak step in Sampas's direction, as if considering a second run.

"Don't do it," Sampas warned him. "This time, you won't get up."

Dwayne was barely up as it was, but didn't seem to know it. He swayed, now toward Sampas, now away. Sampas waited, wondering how badly he'd have to hurt the kid before this was over, hoping Dwayne would just get the hell out of there.

Then Dwayne lurched into action, turning and scrambling between two cars as he careened in the opposite direction. It was the smartest thing he'd done all day.

Sampas stood his ground until Dwayne was out of sight, then made one more circuit around the Lamborghini to make sure he hadn't missed anything. It was intact, every last dollar's worth. Lathrop would be glad. And Sampas would get his bonus.

Now all he had to do was call Lathrop and tell him he'd found the car. He'd offer to drive it over, but knew Lathrop would insist on coming and getting it himself.

He'd punched only three buttons on his cell phone when Dwayne took him from behind. Sampas never found out what Dwayne hit him with. But it was hard, Dwayne hit him hard, and he went down harder. Dwayne jumped back into the Lamborghini. The god-damned kid really wanted that car.

Sampas didn't want Dwayne. But Dwayne was now in the Lamborghini. And Sampas was pissed. Somehow he got back on his feet and closed the distance between him and the car. He reached into the driver's window, grabbed Dwayne by the shirt, and found himself staring into the endless black hole that led to Dwayne's soul. At the bottom of which, was...nothing. Not even pain. Dwayne was so high it was a wonder he could breathe without an oxygen mask. No wonder he'd been able to get up after hitting the car. He might have been dusted. It might have been crack. Or crank. Whatever it was had hold of Dwayne, and now it reached out and yanked Sampas in.

As he looked at Dwayne, from small inches away, Sampas knew...he could see it...feel it... Dwayne was seeing his father.

Then came the second-most-chilling moment since this madness started 20 lifetimes ago back on Bay Street. Dwayne smiled. No — it was more demonic glee. Then he gunned the Lamborghini. The car shot forward.

Sampas should have let go. Instead, he...he didn't know what, but he wound up on the hood of the car. There was no letting go now.

The car whipped around the lot, sending screaming tourists helter-skeltering out of the way, all their big-city nightmares coming true in one crazed instant. Dwayne circled the lot two, three, four times, building speed, all the while staring at Sampas with that god-damn grin. It was a moment out of *Psycho*.

The fourth time around, Dwayne jerked the wheel to the right. Now he was headed for the tower. More accurately, he was headed for the concrete wall that stood between the tower and the parking lot. Was he going to hop the curb and smash into the wall? Did he hate his father that much?

Inches from the curb, Dwayne stomped on the brake. The Lamborghini reacted as if it were aiming for a dime on the pavement. Dwayne, who was not wearing a seat belt, took a header through the windshield. Sampas went into orbit, past the wall, toward the tower. As he sailed over the steps that led up to the tower, he was profoundly aware of (and strangely calm about) the iron handrails directly below him, waiting to section him like an egg slicer. This wasn't going to be pretty.

Dwayne sailed past him, cackling broomstick witch to Sampas's tornado-driven Dorothy. Sampas had enough height and momentum to make it past the handrails. But beyond that was the tower itself. And that was what he hit. Not the actual tower — one of the columns that stood on either side of the entrance.

Dwayne's attack in the parking lot, and whatever Dwayne hit him with, was a love tap compared to hitting the column. Whatever Dwayne hit him with was mere wood or flimsy metal. The column was concrete. Just before impact, he somehow found the presence of mind and coordination to twist around so he hit with his shoulder blade instead of his face. It still hurt like hell. Sampas landed in a sloppy heap at the foot of the tower.

Where he found himself looking up at a bronze frame that held two sheets of white paper side by side. It was the one on the right that he stared at as he lay there. The one that explained it all to the tourists. (The tower, not Sampas lying in front of it. Or Dwayne, lying 25 feet away, indistinguishable from the Lamborghini's windshield.)

The last thing Sampas heard was the Telegraph Hill parakeets, screeching a metallic monotone rendition of what sounded like *that* music from *Psycho*. Then, he crumpled into seamless black.

=2=

Everything could change. Or not.

Lillie lived a flamboyant life in San Francisco, married Howard Coit of Telegraph Hill against her family's wishes, smoked cigars, and often dressed as a man to gamble in North Beach saloons. When an envious relative tried to shoot her and a friend who rushed to protect her was killed, Lillie fled to Paris.

In 1923, after years in Europe, where she was a favorite of the court of Napoleon III, she returned to her beloved San Francisco, where she died in 1929 at age 88.

Of all the facts and information that now resided in Sampas's besieged brain, the story of Lillie Coit (as told on the right sheet of white paper in the bronze frame at the entrance to the tower) — from her bequeathing \$118,000 (a third of her estate) to the city of San Francisco, to her death in 1929 at age 88 — was what rolled across his consciousness the most often. As the doctors said it might. Although they couldn't say why.

They did say it could stop at any time. And if it did, it could take all the other flash-card snapshots with it. Or not. When it comes to the brain, doctors don't know a hell of a lot, his had been careful to make sure he knew. Another knock on the head, another trauma of a similar — or perhaps different — nature, and everything could change. Or not. They couldn't tell him if it would change or, if it did, if it would change for the better. A lot of ifs.

Some people get smashed in the head and lose their memory. Not Sampas. Now, anything he read, he remembered. Word for word. That might sound like a good thing for someone in his line of work. And yes, it would often be handy. But with the good-thing part of it came the curse-of-the-trivial.

You read a movie schedule because you want to know when to show up at the theater. You read a restaurant menu to decide what to order for one meal. (Maybe more, if you're a regular or do a lot of take-out.) You don't want that information beyond your immediate need. You certainly don't want to carry it in your head for a week, which was the current average life-span the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life currently enjoyed in Sampas's brain. After a week, most vacated the premises. Some stayed longer. Some stayed a lot longer. Apparently Lillie Coit intended to remain until further notice.

The doctors suggested it was because that was the last thing Sampas saw before blacking out. In a way he was lucky — it was an abbreviated version of Lillie's story. There was much more to Lillie and her flamboyant life. Even so, the abbreviated version was much more about Lillie Coit than Sampas needed to know.

The last thing he saw before losing consciousness, it was the first thing he remembered when he woke up in the hospital the next day. Now it was a permanent part of the information stored in his brain. Along with whatever else he read that hit the same neural pathways.

Aside from his "condition," Sampas was fine, considering what his body had been through. He was banged up pretty badly, but that was mostly bruises and a hell of a lot of soreness. Nothing broken, twisted, or permanently bent.

The Lamborghini had also come through fine. It needed a new windshield (which cost Sampas his bonus), but if ever the concept "without a scratch" was appropriate, this was it.

Dwayne hadn't been nearly as fortunate. They were still picking glass out of him as they prepared the body. (So even if the windshield didn't have to be replaced, Sampas wouldn't have brought up the bonus.)

As for Sampas escaping with so little damage... The doctors couldn't explain that either. "You were lucky," one of them shrugged. And why go looking for more? It was like something out of a formula cop movie: The hero suffers bone-splitting trauma that would kill a horse, then gets up, shakes his head, tosses off a clever line, and goes back to work.

Sampas didn't have a clever line at the ready. Just a lot of information stacked up, circling his cerebrum and liable to come in for landing at any moment, while whoever was sitting at the console in his ideational flight tower was asleep at (or mischievously playing with) the controls. He didn't yet know if this was a good movie or a bad movie. But it was his movie. And it seemed to be shaping up as a dark comedy full of syrup-thick irony.

Lying on the couch the night he got home from the hospital, watching *Vertigo* (not the best choice, all things considered, but it was touches like this that made it a comedy), it hit him.

He couldn't help but wonder why it hadn't hit him sooner, but then he'd been hit with quite a lot in the last few days. This tidbit got here in its own good time.

Lillie's middle name... It was Hitchcock.

Do Lillie

Alleged mobster Sam Pasterelli beat yet another rap yesterday, when charges against him for dealing in stolen goods, loan sharking, and gambling were all thrown out for lack of evidence. Seems at the last minute, a key witness changed his mind about what happened — or didn't.

This is the fifth time Sammy Pass, as he's come to be known on the street for his ability to dodge jail, has been hauled into court, only to skate away clean.

And the prosecutor's office is getting a little tired of it. No one would talk to us on the record, but one very anonymous source in the D.A.'s office confided, "We know he's mixed up in a lot of things. And sooner or later he'll make a mistake. Someone like him always does. It's only a matter of time. And when he does, we'll be waiting."

As for Sammy, he was more than willing to talk to us. But all he had to say was, "I been sayin' all along I didn't do nothing, and now it's official. So make sure you say *alleged* when you write this up. Or there'll be hell to pay."

Yes, sir. First word of the column. Wouldn't want Sammy, of all people, miffed at us.

At least Jack Malloy's piece in the *Chronicle* was relevant. Sampas knew Pasterelli.

Not personally, but their paths had almost crossed more than once as they separately wandered their intersecting worlds of people in trouble and causing trouble. Sooner or later you always ran into someone who "knew Sammy." That included people Sampas knew,

personally and professionally. McNulty had worked several cases with links to Pasterelli, and (like every other city Inspector) thought about nailing Sammy with a fevered yearning on a par with winning the lottery. Even Hank, “a simple shopkeeper” (as he liked to call himself) presiding over the flow of traffic in his domain of rare objects, alluded to Sammy from time to time, always with a sly glint in his eye that said he knew he was alluding to Sammy, and wanted you to know. Now, if Sampas ran in to Sammy Pass in the next seven days or so, he could wow him by reciting Malloy’s column.

The doctors didn’t want Sampas to leave the hospital when he did. They said it was for his own good. He suspected they wanted him to stay because his case was so damned interesting. But he felt OK. And the novelty of remembering everything the doctors shoved in front of him (which was steadily growing more and more trivial) had worn thin.

The last straw had been the neurologist who put an Internet porn page in front of him, had him read it, and then recite it word for word. There was something hinkey about it from the start, but when you’re in a hospital you listen to anyone wearing a lab coat. No sooner did Sampas finish the last sleazy sentence, then McNulty and Shawn staggered into the room, falling down laughing. They should have been out making the city safer. What were they doing here? Sampas already knew.

“Had to see if it was true!” McNulty roared.

“These hot babes are waiting to make you feel right tonight!” Shawn quoted Sampas quoting the Web site.

“And which number should I call!??” McNulty asked Shawn between snorts of glee.

“I can’t remember! But he can!” Shawn guffawed.

The “neurologist,” a buddy of theirs from another district station, also thought it was funny as hell. But now Sampas’d have that crap in his head until something replaced it.

He walked out of the hospital the next day. A week later he was back in the office.

And sitting at his desk going through unopened mail when the door to the office opened.

“Couple of dudes to see you,” Ralph announced.

He’d given his 18-year-old nephew a job for the summer. School would start in a couple of weeks, Ralph would be gone, and Sampas would miss him. Only one year into college, Ralph was trying to figure out his “true essence.” In the meantime, Sampas wished he’d figure out true communication.

Ralph was as fascinated with his condition as the doctors had been. At least twice a day he’d ask Sampas to “Do Lillie.” If Sampas objected, he’d reply, “Just, like, lookin’ out for you Uncle Ed. Checkin’ to see that you’re not, like, y’know, worse or anything.” And Sampas would run through the litany of Lillie Coit, and Ralph would follow every word, ending what had become a ritual with his own ritualistic “Awesome!”

Sampas didn’t think it was awesome. He’d rather that Ralph, after “Lillie fled to Paris,” respond, “Damn! You can still do it!” Which was how Sampas felt. Instead, he always got Ralph’s standard reaction to everything.

“Do Lillie” notwithstanding, Ralph was a good kid. He might have sounded like he’d wiped out on one wave too many, but he was smart and Sampas liked him.

Sometimes he was too smart for his own good. A couple of months before “the Coit thing,” he was pulled over by a state trooper on a stretch of 280 as it unfurled next to Crystal Springs Reservoir. 280... “America’s Scenic Highway,” its road signs reminded you. The Bay Area’s own Indy 500, local evening news reports reminded local drivers every six months or so. Home to fast drivers and state police speed traps. And, like many drivers on 280, Ralph was going too fast.

It should have been no more than something as simple as a warning. Or as day-ruining as a citation. But Ralph had mouthed off. He wasn't looking for trouble. (That was the problem — he didn't think there'd be trouble. He'd forgotten about consequences.) Alone with the trooper, he'd somehow decided that since it was just the two of them, and he knew he didn't mean any harm, the rules were suspended, the usual protocols enormously relaxed. Sort of a really casual- traffic-stop-Friday. And, because it took him all of half a minute to realize he was smarter than the trooper, it became a game — using clever logic and witty wordplay to toy with authority. “No harm intended, officer, just having a little harmless fun” (he should have said, as soon as he started something he never should have started). But he didn't say it. And the trooper was playing a different game — show the young wise-ass who's boss.

By the time the badinage was over, Ralph was facing charges that included obstructing justice, resisting arrest, and creating a public nuisance. The trooper had decided to have a little fun of his own. Ralph probably still had no idea he could have thrown in assaulting a police officer. Just to do it.

Then, because he was facing charges, Ralph had to face a judge. Who, if he had the same sense of humor as the trooper, could decide to play havoc with the rest of Ralph's life. And greatly enhance his firsthand knowledge of just how fast the world can turn malevolent.

Sampas never asked McNulty to step in. When he told McNulty about it, he was just getting it off his chest. The next day, McNulty called the trooper, one cop to another.

Turned out, the trooper hadn't intended to push it. He just wanted to “teach the smart-mouth a lesson. Before someone else did.” He wasn't a bad guy. His last words to McNulty (who could hear the smile in his voice) were, “The kid got off a couple of good ones.”

Ralph still talked about his “brush with the Man.” And Sampas still hoped he'd make it through his 20s without too many similar lessons.

"Who are they?" Sampas asked Ralph.

"Don't have a clue."

"Do you know what they want?"

"Nope. But one of them is like, really humongous."

Sampas didn't see the connection, but he'd given up trying to track Ralph's thought processes.

"Send 'em in."

"Awesome."

Sampas didn't get why that was awesome, but never mind.

At the door, Ralph turned and addressed whoever was in the outer office. "It's cool.

Head on in."

Not exactly how Sampas would have worded it, but never mind that, too.

Ralph stepped to the side and two men entered the room. As Ralph closed the door, he pointed to the second man, opened his eyes wide, and mouthed "Wow!"

Not cool, Ralph. Not cool at all.

Though Sampas could hardly blame him. The guy was humongous. Easily 300 pounds. All muscle. Sampas made him for Samoan. Nice Hawaiian shirt. The jeans were off the rack.

Standing to greet them, Sampas turned his attention to the other man. About six feet, closely-cropped gray hair. Looked to be about 50. Very different taste in tailors. Nice three-piece suit. Sampas couldn't place the designer. But then he never could. He often wondered, when he read books featuring detectives who could, how they did it. He'd never known a detective or a cop with sartorial expertise. Most could barely dress themselves.

"Hi," he said, extending a hand. "I'm Ed Sampas."

"Thelonius Noble," the suit said in a quiet, cultured voice as he grasped Sampas's hand.

"And this," he added, gesturing toward the Shirt, "is Pago Mundy."

Pago was standing with his arms causally folded across his massive chest. He waved a hand in Sampas's direction.

"Please, make yourself comfortable," Sampas gestured to the chairs on the other side of the desk. Might have been his imagination, but he thought he heard Pago's chair crack softly as he settled into it. "How can I help you?"

He asked them both, but knew Noble was going to do all the talking. He had the feeling Pago had already said all he was going to.

"We're trying to recover something that was stolen from us," Noble began. "Do you do that sort of work?"

"I do."

"This would be one of those situations where confidentiality and discretion are top priorities. I must be satisfied about that at the outset."

"Once you're a client, no one knows anything you don't want them to know," Sampas assured them. "No one knows anything at all if you don't want them to." He said it to both of them, so Pago would feel included. He needn't have bothered. Pago gazed at him, blank, like he couldn't care less. Or no one knowing anything he didn't want them to was simply business as usual.

"And discretion?" Noble asked. "Aside from confidentiality. I mean, not drawing attention to this entire matter."

"Mr. Noble, the less attention I bring to myself, and my client, the better I'm doing my job."

"Yes...good."

"Is there anything else along those lines? Any other questions?"

He looked at them both again, tacitly inviting a question, anything, from Pago. Then decided he'd stop trying.

"There is one other consideration," said Noble. "We don't want the police involved."

"That's often why people consult people like me."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be sitting here. But you should be aware that people like me...good people like me...operate within the law."

"Of course."

"Some people come here with unrealistic expectations. They don't realize that... well, this isn't the movies."

"I understand. And I appreciate your candor."

"So... What is it we're looking for?"

"It's a statue of a bird. Black. Made of lead. About a foot high. It weighs about 50 pounds."

Sampas smiled. "Sounds like the Maltese falcon."

Noble looked at him levelly, eyes steady. "It is."

Sampas wasn't sure how he wanted to react. This thing had McNulty written all over it.

"A little something to welcome you back. And make sure your brain, which I never had much faith in to begin with, is still OK." He could hear McNulty struggling to get it out between fits of laughter.

He glanced at Pago. Nothing. He made a mental note to tell McNulty that this guy, wherever McNulty had found him, was never playing poker with them.

His first impulse was to throw them out of the office. Instead, he decided he'd find a way to turn this back on McNulty. He kept his face blank as he returned Noble's gaze. "It is."

Noble nodded. "I assure you, Mr. Sampas, this is not a joke."

"It's not."

"Where should I begin?... Ah, you do know the film, *The Maltese Falcon*?"

Sampas wasn't going to answer that.

"Yes, well, of course you do. In the film, the falcon was said to be a gold bird encrusted with jewels, and potentially worth \$1,000,000. Perhaps more. The bird used in the film wasn't gold, of course. It was a prop, made of lead. But this particular piece of lead has acquired significant value of its own. Are you familiar with the collectibles market, Mr. Sampas?"

"Somewhat." He wasn't very familiar with it at all, but he wanted to move this along.

"Then you know that collectors can be as enthusiastic, and as determined, about what they've chosen to collect, as art collectors. To them, these pieces *are* art. A coveted film poster. The ruby slippers. A dress worn by Marilyn Monroe. Props from *Star Wars*. The list for film memorabilia alone is endless.

"I own the Maltese falcon. I'm talking about the original prop, not a knock-off made as a novelty. I'm in town for the collectibles show at the Cow Palace, and I had the falcon with me. I plan to sell it, and I put it on display at the show. That's where it was stolen."

"Why not go the police?"

"Yes, well, that's part of the problem."

Of course it is. Can't go the police because McNulty'll get busted back to foot patrol.

"First of all, collectors are...shall we say, idiosyncratic. Under the best of circumstances. Often it goes beyond mere idiosyncrasy. Sometimes a great deal further than one might readily imagine. Several years ago, one collector hired someone to deliberately broadside the car of an individual who owned an item the collector had to have. He'd heard this individual was having financial difficulties. He'd learned, I have no idea how, that because of those financial troubles he'd let his insurance lapse. Replacing his car would add enormously to his financial pressures, and could induce him to sell the item in question. It worked, sir. The collector got the item in question.

“In a similar situation, a collector posed as an IRS agent and told a reluctant seller he was being audited, to bring about the same result. That, too, worked. Extreme cases, to be sure, but not as rare as one might think. And they illustrate the astounding things some people will do under certain circumstances.

“Collectors obsess on objects. We put enormous energy into acquiring them. Sometimes we do it openly, with great fanfare. Because that helps us get what we want. Sometimes we’re maniacally private about it. Because that way we have a better chance of getting what we want.

“Before I came to San Francisco, I lined up a buyer. He’s a very private individual who wants no attention drawn to this purchase. Going to the police would generate the exact kind of attention he’s so eager — insistent would be infinitely more accurate — to avoid.

“Second, I wish to sell the falcon quickly. Going to the police would not be conducive to achieving that. They’re not about to make the theft of a “mere statue” a priority. Who knows how long it would take them to begin working on it. And I understand. They do have murders to solve.”

“They do have an art recovery division.”

“Yes. But in the best of circumstances, if the police are involved, so is police bureaucracy. If they recovered the falcon, it would be evidence. My access to it would be restricted. My ability to sell it would be nonexistent until the case was resolved. I can’t wait that long.

“Someone like you can recover the falcon quickly, with a lack of protocol and official procedure. This way, I get it back, with the least delay and disruption, and... Life goes on.”

“How much is the falcon worth?” Sampas couldn’t believe he had said that.

“Allow me to share a little history. If you do a bit of research, you’ll read in some places that there are seven statues. Don’t believe it. Only two statues were made for the film.

“Now, sir, there are many others out there. Memorabilia companies churn out plaster statues by the dozens. Warner Brothers made several falcons during the 1970s, as publicity for the film *The Black Bird*. Those statues were made of resin, not lead. And, though from time to time some people try to pass one off as the real thing, I assure you they’re not. They’re...shall I say, lightweights, both figuratively and literally. They weigh only five pounds or so.

“There have been instances...and I dare say there will be others...of someone with a resin bird maintaining that it was used in the film. However, there is absolutely no evidence that a lightweight bird appears on screen in the movie. So, when we get down to facts...when we get down to cases, as I imagine people in your profession might be inclined to say... I repeat, there are only two statues that can be legitimately said to have been made for the film.

“Of those two, as far all evidence can determine, only one was used in the film and appears on screen. That statue has bent tail feathers. They became bent when the statue was dropped during filming. That statue has been in the possession of a Beverly Hills collector for many years, and its history is well-documented.

“As to the second statue... That one has deep cuts on its head and breast. If you recall the film, Sydney Greenstreet scratches the falcon with a knife, only to discover that the statue he’s just obtained is, as he puts it, ‘a fake, a phony.’ But he doesn’t cut the statue — he simply scratches it. Look at the film closely, and you’ll notice there are no deep cuts on the statue you see. So, as far as can be determined with surety, the statue with the deep cuts on its chest does not appear on screen. Common wisdom, among those who have such wisdom, holds that this statue was made as a back-up prop. And not used in the actual film. Why was it cut? Who knows. Probably during a rehearsal. At any rate, that, sir, is the statue I have.

“Though it does not appear on screen, it was, in fact, made for the film. And its value derives from that fact. It is one of the two — and there are only two — falcons that can be honestly said to have been made for the movie. I tell you all this so you’ll know I’m being candid about what I have — and don’t. So you’ll know exactly what you’re dealing with. And, I hope, appreciate its value. Both in terms of money and...much more.

“The statue I own disappeared from public view for many years, to finally surface in the estate of the actor William Conrad, in whose possession it had been all along. How did he get it? Who knows. He and Jack Warner were friends. It’s often said that after the film was completed and the statue no longer needed, Warner gave it to Conrad as a gift. After his death in 1994, it was sold at auction. For \$398,500. At the time, a record.”

“That’s a lot of money for a lead statue.”

“This isn’t any lead statue. It’s the Maltese falcon. The buyer was Ronald Winston, son of Harry Winston, ‘Jeweler to the Stars.’ In 1996, Winston sold the statue. No one knows to whom or for how much. The terms of the sale were secret, and Winston signed a contract stating he wouldn’t reveal the details. But he did say he sold it for more...his exact words were ‘much more’... than he’d paid for it. Does that give you some idea of the falcon’s worth?”

“At least \$398,500. And much more.”

“Let’s stay with ‘much more’ for the moment. A collectible is worth as much — or as little — as someone is willing to pay for it. Winston was willing to pay the amount I’ve mentioned. The person he sold it to was willing to pay more. I wasn’t willing to go quite that high. But the person I bought it from, who, by the way, was not Winston’s buyer, needed money. I picked up a bargain.

“My buyer is willing to pay much more. If the transaction goes smoothly. But every delay, every problem, could become a reason for my buyer to lower his price. Or, worse, change his mind altogether. Hence my desire to keep the theft from becoming this week’s media fodder. And recover the statue as quickly as possible.”

Sampas suddenly realized he’d been listening — really listening — to Noble for the last several minutes. Though he wasn’t aware of it until now, at some point he’d started treating this like a real case, Noble a legitimate client. Or maybe he’d just gotten caught up in the story of the falcon. When had that happened?

When Noble started going into detail. That wasn't McNulty's style. He went for immediate results, a quick pay-off, and a fast laugh. This was exactly the kind of thing McNulty would do — but all the details were just the kind of thing he wouldn't bother with. Not just for a joke.

And there was a collector's show at the Cow Palace. Sampas had seen an ad for it in this morning's paper. "Collectors Expo. September 20–25th. Admission \$5. \$4 with this ad."

Could Noble be real?

"Why hasn't the media already gotten hold of this?" Sampas asked. "The falcon's been in San Francisco before, and it's always in the paper. A thing like that gets stolen, it is news. I haven't seen a thing."

"As to your first point..." Noble responded, "there was no mention of the falcon's arrival in San Francisco because I didn't alert the media. As I said, my buyer doesn't want publicity. Therefore, I don't want it. As to your second point... The theft hasn't been in the news because I didn't report it. Not officially. We spoke to the manager of the show, of course. But we advocated for the entire incident being kept quiet. We explained our reasons. We made it worthwhile to do it our way."

"Expensive?"

"Cost of doing business. But not inexpensive. Under the circumstances, it couldn't be helped. And we were able to offer additional incentive to accede to our request."

Like continued good health, thought Sampas. That was probably where Pago fit in to Noble's idiosyncratic collector's world.

"How was it stolen?"

"There was a commotion on the floor. Someone in acute physical distress. Apparently suffering an epileptic fit of extreme proportions. It attracted our attention, and we stepped away for a moment. I realize now it was a carefully-planned diversion. When we returned, the falcon was gone."

“Something that valuable, and you left it alone? No guard? No security?”

“It was never my intention to leave the statue unprotected. It was my complete desire, as well as my explicit instructions...” Noble’s gaze stayed on Sampas but his voice shifted to Pago “...that under no circumstances was the falcon to be left unattended. My instructions were not followed.”

Pago rolled his eyes and found something fascinating to stare at out the window.

“That must have been some diversion,” Sampas said, mainly to see how Pago reacted.

“You had to be there,” Pago said flatly to whatever he was staring at outside. The underlying tension between Pago and Noble was real. Pago had been charged with guarding the falcon, and he’d screwed up.

“Extremely unfortunate. And immeasurably disappointing,” Noble added, still talking to Pago. Then he was back to Sampas. “But recriminations won’t get the falcon back. I’m hoping you will. Can you help us?”

“You haven’t asked my fee.”

“I’ll pay it.”

“It’ll have to be cash. And nonrefundable.”

“That doesn’t pose a problem. I must have the falcon back as soon as possible. Incentives for silence notwithstanding, the more time that goes by, the greater the chances that the media will learn what’s happened. I’m also concerned that whoever took the statue might try to sell it. I’m especially concerned that they might try to sell it on the Internet. That could prove disastrous in more ways than I want to think about and you want to hear.”

“Any idea who it might have been? Any witnesses? Anyone provide a description, or anything else that might be helpful?”

“I’m afraid not. We spoke to the people who had booths closest to ours. Like us, their attention was elsewhere.”

"I'll draw up a contract."

"I trust you."

"Thank you. I trust you, too." Sampas reached into a desk drawer and laid a thin sheaf of papers on the desk. "I'll draw up a contract."

"I wasn't trying to be difficult," Noble apologized. "I was merely asking, in my clumsy way, if that's really necessary."

"Sometimes it's necessary. It's always good business. Lays out what we expect from each other and what you're entitled to. Includes, by the way, a confidentiality clause."

"I was willing to take you at your word."

"It's also a good idea for you. Leaves a paper trail. Shows you engaged me to recover your property. Could come in handy in helping to prove you've got the real thing, not some knock-off made as a novelty."

Noble considered that. "Yes. I don't know why that didn't occur to me."

"Besides, it's the law. The state has its own reasons for liking a paper trail."

"Well, if it's the law..." Noble threw up his hands in complete acquiescence.

"Speaking of the real thing... You do have proof this is what you say it is? The real Maltese falcon?"

"You mean the real prop from the film."

"Yeah. And that you're the rightful owner."

Noble slid his hand into the inner breast pocket of his jacket and placed a white envelope on Sampas's desk. When Sampas opened it, he was looking at a letter from the Warner Brothers property department.

“Forgive me if you already know this...” Noble explained. “If we were discussing a painting or a sculpture, what you’re seeking, proof of authenticity, would be a provenance. With items like this, it’s often a letter from the studio, from someone who knows the item and can attest to its legitimacy and history. In this case, the property master.”

Sampas read the document, which was a straightforward business letter, Warner Brothers logo at the top, stating that the accompanying item was one of two lead statues created for the 1941 Warner Brothers film *The Maltese Falcon*. There were numbers on the bottom of the statue to identify the falcon, which weighed approximately 50 pounds, and was made of lead covered with black enamel.

“As for proof of ownership... My bill of sale.” Noble slid another sheet of paper across the desk. The bill of sale indicated that Noble had paid \$325,000 for the falcon.

“Everything seems to be in order.” Sampas slid the letter, bill of sale, and a blank contract back across the desk. “Here, you can look over the contract while I fill it out.”

Noble riffled the papers. “Only three pages?”

“It’s not very complicated. Mostly boilerplate. Who I am... Who you are... Our arrangement with each other. It also leaves plenty of room open to interpretation. For things like discretion, lack of protocol, and fast results.”

“Revisiting the issue of discretion for a moment...” Noble took one of Sampas’s cards from the holder on his desk. “Will your partner...Mr. Meir, is it... be involved?”

“Charles Meir died two years ago.”

“My condolences.”

“I’m a one-man operation now. I have a few old cards left.”

They were almost done. But from the beginning Sampas had intended to ask. “Mr. Noble, what made you pick my agency?”

"I looked in the phone book. Your listing caught my eye."

He'd been meaning to change the ad for "Meir and Sampas" since the coronary killed Charlie, but somehow never got around to it. "That's a basic, no-frills listing. What about all the big ads?"

"Yes, I saw those. The first had a big American flag. That was why I didn't call them. Yours was one column over."

"That's it?"

"I trust my instincts."

Last question. Because, in case McNulty was laughing from the shadows, he wanted them to know that he knew. "You're aware this office is in the Flood Building?"

"No!" Noble was delighted. "How exquisitely synchronistic! That proves you're the man for the job!"

Sampas glanced at Pago. Who sat there, impassive, content to let Sampas and Noble have their little joke. Whatever it was.

He was wrapping it up when Noble said, "Mr. Sampas, there's something you haven't asked. And I appreciate the fact that you haven't. Nevertheless, I'm going to volunteer the information because it might be important for you to know."

"Yes?"

"You haven't asked how much I'm selling the falcon for."

"I didn't think you'd want to tell me. But I am curious. And yes, it would be helpful to know."

"\$1,200,000."

"That's a lot of money for a lead statue."

"Does it give you a sense of how important this is?"

"Mr. Noble, anything important to my client is important to me."

"I assume that means I can anticipate a satisfying outcome."

"I never guarantee outcomes. But it does mean you'll get the best I can give you."

Minutes later the newly-signed contract was sitting on Sampas's desk and he was pocketing Noble's payment as he saw his new clients out.

Sampas opened the door to the outer office, where Ralph was riveted to his computer screen. Ralph punched a button, the contents of the screen changed, and he was immediately engrossed in whatever he was looking at now.

When they reached the door that led to the hall, Ralph called out. "Dude!"

Only Pago turned.

"Awesome shirt!" Ralph grinned.

Pago uttered a word that Sampas didn't understand (sounded like *marang*, might have been *hallnacious*), and gestured in Ralph's direction.

"Kewel!" Ralph returned the gesture.

Then they both said, "Later!"

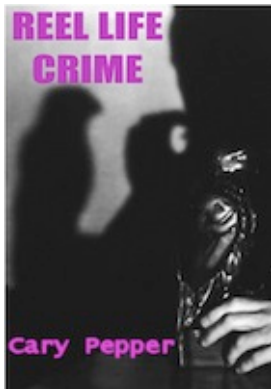
So, Sampas had been hired to find the Maltese falcon.

By now he'd decided it was real. Someone owned the Maltese falcon. Someone owns something, someone else can steal it. And the owner could hire someone like Sampas to get it back. Could happen.

Noble had signed the contract and paid Sampas's fee without a word. When Sampas reminded him that the contract had a no-refunds clause, Noble didn't miss a beat.

A case like this went anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000. Sampas brought it in on the high end as a final test — as soon as the figure was out there, the charade would stop. But it didn't. Normally, Sampas wouldn't have insisted on cash. It was insurance that Noble wasn't fronting for McNulty. If McNulty had gone to the trouble of setting this up, the whole thing would have ended the moment it was time for cash to change hands. McNulty didn't have that kind of money. Even if he did, he sure wouldn't spend it on this.

And Noble had genuinely appreciated the irony that Sampas's office was in the Flood Building. The same building where the Pinkerton Detective Agency used to have an office. Back when one of their operatives was Dashiell Hammett. Author of *The Maltese Falcon*.



San Francisco detective Ed Sampas is sitting in his office when Thelonius Noble enters and says he wants to hire Sampas to recover a stolen item. It's a black statue of a bird, about a foot high, made of lead.

Reel Life Crime

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6001.html?s=pdf)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6001.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**