



*The Venus Deal*, set in 1942

After Pearl Harbor, private investigator Tom Hickey opens a supper club that has begun to make him wealthy, when the singer who enraptures admirals, generals, and tycoons disappears.

"Mysticism, a journal full of poetic folklore, and the noir-like dialog push an especially complex plot from start to finish. Along with Gaylord Dold and Max Allan Collins, Kuhlken joins the ranks of P.I. authors presenting their character in a historical setting and pulling the deed off with skill and grace. Highly recommended." • Mystery Scene

"Awash in a sheen of slightly hallucinatory prose, THE VENUS DEAL never falters." • San Francisco Chronicle

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TEN DAYS AGO, before Cynthia Moon had run off on her mysterious errand, Clyde McGraw's orchestra blew like crusading angels. Now they sounded like they'd spent the weekend playing at a funeral and they were battling just to stay alive for the next one. The four-man horn section might've had lung disease; the two violins, string bass, electric guitar, and drummer looked arthritic. Clyde could barely lift his baton. The only one who appeared alive was the singer, Billy Martino. Dressed in a burgundy dinner jacket, slippers to match, black pin-striped trousers, his shiny hair poofed up high except for the spit curl that adorned his forehead, he crooned "White Christmas" as passionately as a French legionnaire condemned to an outpost in Tunisia.

Tom Hickey sat on a stool, leaning on the bar at the opposite end of the nightclub, across the dance floor under its flickering chandelier and beyond the dining room furnished with oak tables and leather-upholstered booths. Hickey was a big man, shoulders so broad he didn't use padding in his suit coats, or else he'd appear monstrous. He had a ruddy complexion and thin scraggly hair beginning to gray. His nose was long, his chin cleft, his eyes steady and quick, azure blue. He gazed around at the clientele.

In the half-empty dining room were a few couples, two small gangs of secretaries, a family with whiny kids. They ate and drank heartily, disregarding Martino. The only couple on the dance floor had stopped to gab. One fellow at the bar sat with his hands over his ears.

All through November, until ten days ago, every night the place had been jammed. At midnight the fine

outside used to run a short block down Fourth Street toward Broadway. Over the weeks since Clyde discovered Cynthia Moon, word had reached L.A. Carloads of men trekked a hundred miles to gawk at her.

By now the military brass, flyboys, enlisted fellows who'd been saving all month or won big at poker-the crowd that until last week made Rudy's Hacienda the hottest club in town-had found better action than Martino.

As "White Christmas" faded, Hickey admired the rich baritone, no matter if he made Billy for a vain weasel who wouldn't know an honest emotion if it tried to strangle him. He faked the passion as well as most crooners. But he wasn't fooling this crowd. They must've been saving their goodwill for Christmas, eleven days off.

Christmas and New Year's Eve were already booked full. If Cynthia didn't show by then, Hickey might pack up his wife and, daughter, flee up to Lake Arrowhead, and leave his business, partner to make the apologies. Castillo deserved the aggravation.

When the singer bowed, a few paws clapped dutifully. A kind secretary whistled. A man at the bar, three seats from Hickey, hollered, "Send the pansy back to Mars."

Hickey sighed, rose, and stepped in front of the loudmouth, a tipsy banker with jowls that quivered and a bow tie. Hickey'd seen him around, usually in the Playroom in the basement of the U. S. Grant Hotel. "Be nice," Hickey said. The banker held his smirk about a second, then gulped and wilted.

Returning to his stool, Hickey wondered if a host who owned the place ought to let himself act like the bouncer. His partner would've sent the doorman over. Castillo wouldn't risk getting his pointy nose busted-if the Cuban was going to fight a guy, he'd sneak behind him first.

On nights like this one, and the whole past week, when the best they could hope was to break even, Hickey wondered why he'd gone into business with a shark like Paul, as if he didn't find enough trouble in his day job, junior partner in Hickey and Weiss, investigations.

The musicians got livelier as they hopped off the stage, lighting cigarettes and heading outside for air or to a booth to charm a secretary and take her for a stroll around the block.

Clyde McGraw dragged his patent-leather shoes across the dance floor, his bead down, mumbling like a priest. Without looking up, he shuffled around the tables and booths, nudged the stool next to Hickey out of his way, and leaned both elbows on the bar, chin in his hands. "Double Manhattan."

Clyde had skin like milk chocolate, mahogany brown hair parted in the middle, a gray-flecked pinstripe mustache. He wore a beige cotton suit, his lime green silk shirt buttoned at the collar, jeweled rings on six of his long pianist's fingers. Finally he raised his bead and turned his bloodshot eyes on Hickey. "Mister Castillo comes back in the kitchen while I'm taking supper, says if the girl don't show by the weekend, we gonna be blowing on the corner with the Salvation quartet. Merry Christmas, no? I tell him, 'We got a contract tiff Valentine's Day, if you recall.' The cat winks, that's all. I jump on the phone, gripe to Arlo down at the union. He's got to check with somebody. When be rings me back, here's what I get. 'Somebody mess with Paul Castillo, somebody be hurting.' Looks like you got a mob behind you, Tom. That a fact?"

"Naw," Hickey said, and meant it, but a grain of doubt made him shiver. He'd checked as far as he could

on Paul Castillo, and the man came up clean. But that was a half year ago, and a dozen times since, Castillo had miraculously got what or whoever he wanted in spite of the wartime rationing. Creamery butter, lobsters still shivering from the waters off Maine, a quintet of Stan Kenton's musicians away from their booking at the Pacific Ballroom.

"You let him break the contract, Tom?"

"It's a tough business," Hickey said. "Guys'll pay a cover to see the girl. All you got now's Martino. Maybe we have to drop the cover charge, we don't make enough to pay a whole union orchestra, we got to find a three-, four-man combo instead."

"Girl wasn't specified in the contract, Tom."

"Maybe she was implied."

"Ah, you gonna step on me too."

"Not if I can help it," Hickey said. "You go find the girl, or get another one like her."

"Like her, yeah." Clyde turned to his drink, ate the cherry. "Where I'm gonna find one like her? No such thing. She's a crackerjack, Tom. I'm losing my wits, ringing up her landlady, fretting, you'd think I was her pop."

Hickey snatched his pipe and tobacco pouch out o a coat pocket, filled the pipe, tamped, and fired it up.

"Where's she live?"

McGraw's eyebrows lifted, his chin jiggled. "There we go, you find her. That's your game."

"Yeah," Hickey said. "For twenty a day, plus."

For the rest of the story . . .