

# L. RON HUBBARD



## Brass Keys to Murder

GALAXY  
PRESS

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Law Comes for Stephen Craig

LIEUTENANT Stephen Craig, attired in white duty belt and blue serge uniform, leaned against the rail of the USS *Burnham* and watched the shore boat come out toward him through the fog. The muffled stutter of its exhaust grew clearer.

Steve Craig, at present officer of the deck, was interested in the shore boat only because it alone was moving in this quiet harbor. The bluish landing light fell upon his features, showing them to be big and rugged. His jaw was as square as a clipper's mainsail and his eyes were the shade of an arctic sea. His white-topped cap was set over one ear, and its golden spread eagle was tarnished by the impacts of many seas and the dampness of countless fogs—fogs of the Thames, the Huangpu, Colón.

He was obviously a destroyer man, bearing the stamp of lurching, giddy decks, smashing waves and full speed ahead.

The shore boat, a chunky affair, rapped against the landing stage, bobbing in the gentle, greasy swell. A man dressed in dirty dungarees held the lines and tried to aid the person who stepped out.

Steve Craig's brows lifted in surprise. A girl had bridged the gap and her high-heeled slippers were pounding up the

spotless ladder toward the deck. She glanced up, displaying a small, well-set face presided over by a pair of great dark eyes which were deep and liquid and troubled.

"Sally!" Steve cried. "What's the idea of coming out here this time of night?"

She clattered on up and the shore boat swung away, heading back to the docks. Sally's small hand fastened on a stanchion.

"I know you've got the duty, Steve, and that I shouldn't be here, but . . . but this is serious. You've got to get away from here. I've brought some money and you can run before they come."

"Run! Before who comes? Quiet down, child, and tell me—"

"Steve, your father died tonight. He . . . he was murdered!"

"Murdered! My father? But . . . why, I've got to get ashore right away! I can get somebody to relieve me. I'll call for a boat and we'll—"

"No, Steve. They're coming up here—the police, I mean. And they . . . they're going to arrest you for the murder!"

"*Me!*" Steve's eyes widened with amazement. "But why should I want to kill Dad?"

"They know that you and your father didn't get along, Steve, and that—"

"But, Sally! We patched that all up weeks ago, just before he sailed for Panama on his last trip. He was coming out here tonight to see me. Just got in this afternoon, and I've had the watch all day—all afternoon, I mean."

"Have you any letters from him or anything like that to show that you patched everything up?"

"No . . . he never wrote to anybody. Sally, they can't pin this thing on me. Why, I've been right here on this deck since noon!"

"But who's been with you since five o'clock?"

"Nobody much. Billy Reynolds came up and talked for a while and then went ashore. Most of the crew is on liberty, and it's been too foggy to stay up on deck tonight for movies. The quartermaster isn't feeling so good, and I let him go down to the sick bay an hour or so ago."

"Can't you get someone to say . . . look, Steve! Here comes the police launch! You haven't time to do anything. They'll make you—"

The harbor patrol boat, its stern crowded with men, shoved out of the black mist and banged hard against the landing stage, making the platform creak. Men began to get out. Each time one reached the stage, he looked up at the deck, cautiously, before he clambered up the ladder. There were four in all. Haggarty, Detective-Sergeant Green and two officers. The boat swung away to circle and wait.

Green stepped down to the curving steel deck and looked around, mouthing a cigar. His overcoat collar was turned up and his small eyes were set far back in the folds of his face.

"Hello, Craig," he said. "I'm afraid you'll have to come along with us. There's a little matter—oh, beg pardon, Miss Randolph," he said, tipping his hard hat. "I see you got here with the news before we did. Know all about it, do you, Craig? How we found the body, I mean."



*“ . . . look, Steve! Here comes the police launch!  
You haven’t time to do anything.”*

"I only know that my father is dead."

"Of course I expected you to claim ignorance of the works—they always do. You'd better come along with us right now. We'll put you in out of this fog where you won't catch cold."

"You can belay the wisecracks, Green. Let's hear some more about this affair."

Green looked at Steve's arctic eyes and shrugged. "All right. But you're just wasting time, that's all. We found Jeremiah Craig's body about an hour and a half ago, floating near the docks. He got it with a knife in his side. German clasp knife. We pulled him out, and I got busy. I used to have this beat about ten years ago, before they made a sergeant out of me and put me in the homicide squad. And I know all about the fuss you kicked up by running away to the Naval Academy instead of going to a merchant marine school. And you knew all the time how much old Craig hated the Navy."

"You can skip that," said Steve. "How do you figure I killed him? I've been officer of the deck since noon, because we're short of officers. And you know that I haven't left this ship. Look at the log over there if you don't believe me."

Green stepped to the tilted desk and glanced at the huge book which lay open upon it. Coming back to Craig, he worked his cigar over into the corner of his mouth.

"That hasn't anything to do with it," he said. "When old Craig docked this afternoon he heard you were in port. And he decided it was about time he came over and gave you a lacing. And so when you were alone on deck he came up the gangplank swearing at you. And you grabbed out your knife

and shoved it into his ribs. It was foggy and it was dark and nobody saw it at all."

"Go on," said Steve grimly.

"I figure it that way because the body was found south from this boat. And the tide was ebbing in that direction three or four hours ago."

"Green," said Steve, "you ought to have been a sailor. As a cop, you're a dud."

"Look here, young fellow—"

"While I'm standing on this deck you'll address me as lieutenant. As to your dumbness—"

Sally Randolph stepped between them. "Don't fight, please."

Steve pushed her gently to one side, without looking at her. "As to your dumbness, Jeremiah Craig and I made up that old quarrel weeks ago. And he wanted to see me this trip to have dinner with me. I saw him on his last cruise."

"Were there any witnesses to that?" barked Green.

"No. We met on the dock late one night."

"Why didn't you knife him that time? Wasn't your alibi good enough?"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, Green," Steve snapped. "You may think you can come aboard this ship with two armed policemen and a fathead detective and tell me where to head in, but you're half-seas over, get me!" He patted his duty belt and the holstered .45 which dangled from the webbing. The two policemen stepped back, glancing hurriedly down the gangway to make certain that it was clear.

Green laughed. "Making a show, aren't you? I talked with your brother Jim tonight before I came up here. He's in on an

Insular boat. And he didn't know anything about this patched up business."

"Jim's been around the Horn," said Steve. "I haven't seen him for six months."

"And," smiled Green, "I talked with old Andries up on Ship Street, and *he* didn't know anything about it."

"I haven't seen Andries this cruise."

"Maybe not. But he's seen you ashore. Tells me he's been trying to get in touch with you. Old friend of your father's, isn't he?"

"Yes. Mate with him on the *Mary Anne* in the China Sea in 1912. Why bring him into it?"

"And I saw Hawkins—Brant Hawkins." Green took out his cigar, admired its tattered length and replaced it. "He's after your hide. After all, your dad used to captain for Hawkins."

"Maybe he did," snapped Steve. "But Hawkins and Dad have been on the outs for the last year and a half. Why do you think Dad went over to the Insular Line and left Hawkins' ships?"

"I'm not worrying about that," said Green. "You better come along, young fellow. We'll give you a fair enough trial."

"I suppose you would," replied Steve, his gaze level—"and then hang me at the end of it!"

"Naw," said Haggarty. "We'd hang you at the end of a rope."

Steve's raking eyes stopped the laugh before it had begun.

"Come along," said Green. "I've had enough of this."

"I'm not going anywhere," rapped Steve. "And I'll thank you to get off this ship immediately."

"Take the gun away from him, boys!" Green ordered.

"You mean you're demanding my sidearms?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Because I cannot surrender my sidearms to anyone but a superior officer. Green, I'll remind you that you're standing on the deck of a warship of the United States Navy."

"What does that make me?"

Steve's set jaw jutted out. "I do not happen to be liable to civil arrest so long as I stand on this deck. If you want to take me, you'll have to see the Judge Advocate General down in Washington, and he'll have to investigate this matter before anything can be done about it."

"Yeah?" said Green.

"Yes. And I'll give you three to get into that canoe of yours and beat it!"

Green made a motion to the police. The two bluecoats stepped forward, gingerly, hands wrapped tight about their nightsticks.

Steve did not seem to move, but the first officer rocketed through the air and slammed into a steel bulkhead. The second lurched into the rail, hung perilously for a moment and then crashed through, taking a stanchion with him. The dull splash of his body came up to them through the fog, followed immediately by his frantic cries to the patrol boat.

The launch swept in, boathook ready, bent on rescue work. Haggarty backed up, spun about, and ran down the ladder. Green glared at Steve who shrugged his coat into position across his broad shoulders.

"This boat sails in three days," snarled Green. "It would take your Judge Advocate General that long to make up his

mind about this case. We'll have you off here in forty-eight hours, and we'll have your shiny little stripes. And after that we'll have the pleasure of hanging you for murder."

Green walked down the ladder to the waiting boat. The drenched policeman sat shivering in the amidship section.

From the stern of the launch, Green looked up and shook his fist. "And don't you try to get ashore either. Navy or no Navy, if you set foot on land we can arrest you in two seconds and make it stick!"

"Can they?" said Sally in a small voice.

Steve watched the launch speed away and then turned his attention to a bruised set of knuckles.

"Sure they can," he said. "But that isn't going to stop me from settling this case on my own."