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ALL-STORY



OCT.

# DETECTIVE

ALL-STORY DETECTIVE



**A CORPSE  
IN TIME...**

by **ROBERT  
MARTIN**

— ALSO —

**T. W. FORD**  
AND MANY OTHERS

OCT. 1949



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# STOP Straining to Hear!



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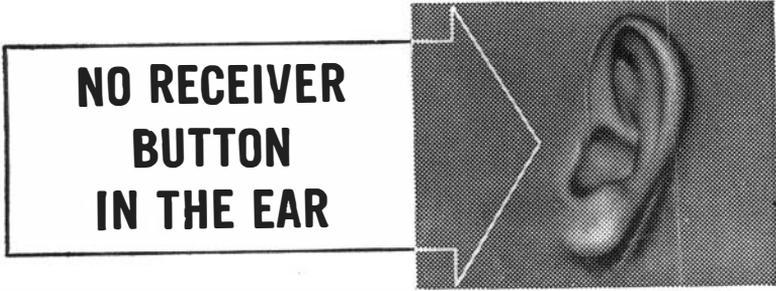
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# BERT OUTSMARTS RIVER PIRATES WHEN...

A SWEET HAUL. NOW I'LL TIE YOU UP AND WE'LL SCRAM

NIX, THE COPS WOULD GIVE ME THE THIRD DEGREE. I'M GOIN' WITH YOU

WITH THE HELP OF A "BRIBED" PIER GUARD, THE RIVER PIRATES PREPARE TO MAKE OFF WITH A PRIZE HAUL...

NEAT, EH? WE HIDE IT UNDER THE COAL, SINK OUR BOAT, AND TOMORROW WE'RE THERE

NEAT? YOU SAID IT!

THAT'S BERT'S SIGNAL!

I'LL RADIO THE LAUNCH TO INTERCEPT THEM AT KINGS POINT

POLICE

COME ON, TRY THESE FOR SIZE!

SO YOU'RE A COPPER!

BIG STUFF, BERT. THE OLD MAN HIMSELF IS ON THE WAY UP

WOW! I'D BETTER GET RID OF MY COAL DUST AND WHISKERS

BLADE? TRY A THIN GILLETTE

SAY! THIS IS THE BLADE I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR. WHAT A SWELL, SMOOTH SHAVE!

OUR BOYS GO FOR THIN GILLETES. THEY'RE EXTRA KEEN

YOU'VE SAVED MR. ELKTON'S FIRM A LOT OF MONEY, WALDEN...

— AND EARNED YOURSELF A FAT REWARD

HANDSOME AND ALERT, I CAN USE A MAN LIKE THAT

ENJOY GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AND SAVE MONEY, TOO. USE THIN GILLETES... THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. THIN GILLETES PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM NICKS, AND IRRITATION AS WELL, FOR THEY'RE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. ASK FOR THIN GILLETES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE

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# ALL-STORY DETECTIVE



Volume 2

October, 1949

Number 1

## ONE SUSPENSE-FILLED NOVEL

- |||| A CORPSE IN TIME.....Robert Martin 66  
While his widowed wives argued about Walter's burial, the remains started roving.

## FOUR ACTION-PACKED NOVELETTES

- |||| REDHEADS ARE MURDER!.....T. W. Ford 10  
Max Lamb's client walked right into his two-timing mate's murder nest.
- |||| SWAN-SONG FOR A SUCKER.....Frank Ward 40  
I was going to keep my pact with luscious Verna—to needle her husband into the grave.
- |||| BODIES BY NIGHT.....Robert P. Toombs 94  
Milt Clark, garage-mechanic, wouldn't swallow the story of the homicidal ape.
- |||| VULTURE IN A GILDED CAGE.....William Groppenbacher, Jr. 110  
Barnaby Jones invaded an aerie—to give a killer the bird.

## THREE GRIPPING SHORT STORIES

- |||| KILLED BY THE CLOCK.....Charles Yerkow 31  
Detective Denam had personal reasons—for letting a rat jump the trap.
- |||| THIS GUN IS LOADED.....Henry Guth 59  
Reform-school punk Waite thought he was tough enough to beat the law.
- |||| AFRAID TO LIVE.....Charles Beckman, Jr. 86  
Dan figured to snatch his honey from the sizzle seat.

## TWO FEATURES

- |||| POPULAR FILMS.....Ted Palmer 8  
Good movie-going for fiction fans.
- |||| SCARRED ANGEL.....The Editor 39  
A preview of Bruce Cassidy's "Dream Doll of Nightmare City."

Next Issue Published—October 28th

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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# LONG ARM OF THE LAW

A Washington, D. C., man was arrested for setting fire to his house because his wife made him do all the household chores.

\* \* \*

A Los Angeles market operator was haled into court for packing big luscious strawberries on top of the box and little teeny ones underneath.

\* \* \*

A Turin, Italy, lady was arrested for disrobing in front of her neighbors in order to display her displeasure of a housing commission ruling.

\* \* \*

A Michigan City dentist was taken to jail on the charge that he pulled 12 teeth from a housewife without her permission.

\* \* \*

A Los Angeles man was seized by police for driving a car without a steering wheel, using a pair of pliers instead.

\* \* \*

A San Antonio man was arrested for selling chickens which he had "fattened" up by injecting water into them via a hypodermic needle.

\* \* \*

A Chillicothe, O., farmer was brought to court for riding a horse on the left side of the road.

\* \* \*

Five Palo Alto, Calif., policemen were suspended from the force for taking a lot of candy from a confectionery store while waiting in ambush in the store.

—Harold Helfer.

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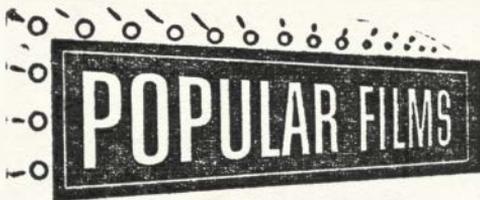
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# POPULAR FILMS

## Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

### Ted Palmer Picks:

**For Mystery**—"The Big Steal" with Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer and William Bendix (RKO).



When a \$300,000 Army payroll is stolen, Lt. Duke Halliday (Robert Mitchum) and Joan Grahame (Jane Greer) start across Mexico by car in pursuit of the thief. They, in turn, are pursued by Captain Vincent Blake (William Bendix) who has accused Duke of taking the money. As the chase progresses, the tension continues to mount until the swift, surprise ending. *The plot of the picture gets jumbled, but the thrill-a-minute pace will hold you in your seat.*



**For Comedy-Romance**—"The Lady Takes A Sailor" with Jane Wyman, Dennis Morgan, Eve Arden, Robert Douglas and Allyn Joslyn (Warner Bros.).



The lady (Jane Wyman) is president of a national research institute, impeccable, honest and engaged to a stuffy Harvard lawyer (Allyn Joslyn). People begin to doubt her integrity, however, when she returns from a sailboat trip and says that she has ridden with "Davey Jones" in a strange, underwater craft which was stalled by an octopus. Trying to straighten it out by proving that real-life Bill Craig (Dennis Morgan) was the mysterious "Davey" and that his craft was a new Navy underwater tank, is an hilarious task. *This is a daffy picture that will give you a full evening of laughter.*



**For Drama**—"The Great Gatsby" with Alan Ladd, Betty Field, MacDonald Carey, Ruth Hussey, Barry Sullivan, Howard Da Silva and Shelley Winters (Paramount).



Based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic about the roaring '20s, this film tells the tragic story of Jay Gatsby (Alan Ladd), who

became a bootlegger because he thought money could buy everything—even a rich man's wife. In the course of the story, Gatsby tries to crash Long Island society but finds it as false in its way of life as he is in his. In the end, awake at last to his empty daydreams, Gatsby is murdered for a crime he didn't commit. *Spottily played, this film claims its chief interest as a portrait of a wild and dizzy by-gone era.*



**For Adventure**—"Slattery's Hurricane" with



Richard Widmark, Linda Darnell, Veronica Lake and John Russell (20th Century-Fox).

Ex-Navy pilot, Will Slattery (Richard Widmark), now a

chauffeur pilot for an importer, meets his wartime buddy, Felix Hobson (John Russell), who is hunting hurricanes for the Navy. He discovers that his one-time sweetheart, Aggie (Linda Darnell), is now Mrs. Hobson. The importer's secretary, Dolores (Veronica Lake), who is in love with Slattery, realizes that he is still interested in Aggie and disappears. While looking for Dolores and straightening out the situation between Aggie, Hobson and himself, Slattery finds that he is unwittingly involved in a narcotics smuggling ring. He finally makes amends by taking Hobson's place on a dangerous mission to locate a particularly vicious storm. *This is an exciting look into the lives of U. S. Navy hurricane hunters.*



**For A Western**—"Calamity Jane and Sam



Bass" with Yvonne De Carlo and Howard Duff (Universal-International). Technicolor.

Sam Bass (Howard Duff) had never fired a gun before he came to Denton, Texas. He learns fast, though, when the town banker has his horse poisoned prior to the big race of the year. Turned outlaw to recover money from the banker which is rightfully his, Bass takes to the hills with the assistance of Calamity Jane (Yvonne De Carlo). Sam's true love, Kathy Egan, convinces Sam that he should give himself up. When it looks like the jury for his trial will be packed against him by the banker, Sam escapes again with Calamity Jane's help. There's a showdown battle and Sam is fatally wounded. When he asks to be taken to Kathy, Calamity Jane realizes that Sam Bass was never for her. *There's enough action, color and different twists to make this a show that Western fans will want to see.*

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***Novelette of a  
Shrewd Private Eye  
in Action***

**By T. W. FORD**



**CHAPTER ONE**

**Cooler-Bound Client**

**A** COPPER'S prowling car came sliding down the hill before the Duchess Arms. Furtive-looking little Max Lamb turned and began to admire the shrubbery the back of his shiny black suit to the road. He heard the car slip on by without halting, and breathed a sigh of relief.

His monkeylike little body relaxed. The sharp-chinned face, with the eyes sadder than a sick bloodhound's, came around slowly. He caught a glimpse of the bullish neck and the close-cropped skull of the man beside the uniformed driver. Lieutenant Detective Gorner of Homicide. A little tremor ran through Max Lamb's shrunken body despite himself.

He swore under his breath. Gorner was one of those coppers who believed that just because a private eye only maintained a little cubby-hole of a one-girl office, he must be an underhanded sneak and operating a racket on the side. And Max Lamb was well aware Gorner despised him as a nasty little rat. Gorner had told him so once. Only his language hadn't been as clean.

For a moment, Max wondered what Gorner was doing riding a patrol car in plain clothes in this particular vicinity. Then he checked his wrist watch. George Coster, his client, had been upstairs in that apartment in the Duchess Arms just over thirty-five minutes now. And Coster



**The big guy said, "Don't let  
the creep scare you, honey."**

Max Lamb, ferret-faced private op, needed a fox's cunning when his big, love-sick client blundered into his two-timing wife's murder nest.



**REDHEADS  
ARE MURDER!**

had promised to come back down inside of half an hour.

*For the fee that Joe is paying me, he shouldn't keep me waiting,* Lamb thought. He jerked at the brim of his sweat-stained gray snapbrim and headed up the walk to the entrance.

It was a second-rate joint with glass double doors covered by iron scrollwork. It was unlocked and there was no houseman inside at the desk. There never was. Lamb walked rearward toward the glass doors that gave onto a scrawny garden in a rear courtyard, turned left to the self service elevators. One was waiting and he pressed the button numbered 5.

He checked the dope as it inched upward, putting the pieces together. This Coster had breezed into Burnon City looking for a wife who'd deserted him a couple of months ago. The sucker wanted to patch things up and take her home to a little New York suburb. Lamb had tailed her down, found her living under her maiden name of Lucille Corwin here at the Duchess. Found, too, that she was running around with Lou Fustin, king of the slot-machine racket in Burnon.

"Lucille wouldn't do that. I know her," big, yellow-haired Coster had blurted. "She wouldn't see him if she knew what he was!"

He'd insisted on coming right over. But he'd wanted to see her alone first.

Max Lamb was worried. Lou Fustin might have been up there when Coster arrived. He thumbed the bell button of 5-D, and could hear the buzzer humming like a big insect inside the panel. He waited, then made it *zzzz* twice more. Nothing happened in large chunks.

Max Lamb got sore. Just because the big cluck, Coster, had found his not-so-ever-loving again didn't mean he didn't have to answer the door to him. Lamb's lip curled and his nose wrinkled up like it did when he got mad. He started to belabor the door with his small fists.

ON THE second blow, it began to swivel back inward slowly. The door had been only on the catch. Lamb took a step in and snorted: "Coster! Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Silence as complete as a vacuum answered him. There was a certain dead feeling about the place. Lamb draped a clawlike hand over the Police Positive in a back pants pocket and soft-footed it down the foyer hall toward the living room. With the venetian blinds lowered on the late afternoon, it was as dim as a cave.

Then he saw that Lou Fustin was there, all right. Only he was never going to leave under his own power. He sat slouched in a big over-stuffed chair over by the casement windows, head resting awkwardly over on the left shoulder. He might have passed for drunk, except for those two gory blossoms a-bloom on his shirt inside his unbuttoned coat. Somebody had obviously helped Mr. Lou Fustin toward a premature grave. His heavy sensual features were already taking on that waxy look.

"Tsk, tsk," Max clucked. He turned and saw George Coster. Lamb galvanized. "That Joe still owes me twenty smackers! If he's been blasted too—"

He moved over fast to the big yellow-headed body stretched out flat near the narrow little hall that led off to the kitchen and the bedroom. Bent on one knee, he saw the lump on the side of George Coster's head, the tiny thread of blood that ran down his neck to stain his plaid sports jacket. But Coster had only been sapped hard, not shot. The worried look left Max Lamb's face.

He made several swift moves. He scooted down the foyer hall and closed the front door so that the snap lock was on. Then he brought out the Police Positive, came back, stepped over Coster's body into the little hall. He flipped on the kitchen switch to his right. There was

nobody in there unless you could count a dead scotch bottle standing on the table. And—what Lamb was looking for—there was no exit onto any service stairway.

The bedroom was next. He flicked on the overhead lights. It was a typical woman's room. A dressing table fronted by a kidney-shaped bench, a studio-couch-type bed with a Burgundy brocaded coverlet. A pair of nylons and lace-trimmed black silk pajamas slung over a chair. A pair of high-heeled backless slippers in front of the chair. Lamb pulled open the closet door, standing half behind it. Nothing there but a handful of frocks. His sad eyes switched back to the dressing table. Somebody had slapped on makeup in a hurry.

There was a lipstick-splotched tissue crumpled beside one of the blue-shaded table lamps and a dusky shade of powder spilled in a trail halfway across the dressing table. An uncapped lipstick, as if hastily flung down, lay across the powder track. And a blonde vanity comb lay half propped up against the base of one of the twin lamps. Some female had put on a new face in a hurry before scampering.

Lamb walked through the open door of the bathroom whose interior had been revealed to him the moment he stepped into the bedroom. He soaked a towel in cold water, then went back to the living room to work on George Coster. In a few minutes he had him groaning into consciousness, then pushing himself up on one elbow, blinking stupidly.

Lamb went back to the kitchen, jerked open cupboards, and located a fresh bottle of scotch. He got it open and poured a stiff hooker into a water glass. Back in the living room, he worked it down the mumbling, glassy-eyed Coster's throat. It got results in about ten seconds.

Coster worked up to his knees. "Get the guy, get the guy," he mumbled as Lamb aided him to his feet. "He killed that fellow in the chair!"

MAX LAMB regarded him coldly while he steadied the swaying form. "Look, cluck, why the hell did you have to kill him here?"

Coster twisted his eyes to him. They began to focus and then he recognized him. "Max, you got to help me," the big naive guy gulped out, sanity returning. "I rang the bell. Coupla times. Nothing happened."

"Yeah?" Lamb's attitude was that of an adult taking in a phony sales talk. And not being sold.

"Then I heard a click on the other side of the door, like the latch being taken off. Honest. After a few moments, I tried the knob and the door opened. I called for Lucille. There wasn't any answer."

"Do tell," Lamb put in cynically.

Coster missed the sarcasm. He was still too shocked by being on the scene of a murder. He kept staring at the dead man in the chair.

"I walked in—and saw him." He nodded jerkily toward Fustin. "I didn't know what to do. He'd been shot. I—I could see that. All I could think was that it would be hung on Lucille, him being found here dead."

Max Lamb gave with a mild Bronx cheer. "You don't think she could have done it? Hell, man, it doesn't take any strength to pull a trigger. Even a dame can do that."

Coster had regained full consciousness now. He seized little Max Lamb by the lapel of his cheap suit and almost lifted him off his feet. "Lucille isn't that kind of a girl, I tell you! Lucille isn't—"

"Leave go of the burlap!" Lamb told him sharply. When he was released and standing on the soles of his feet again, he asked, "Well, then, lover boy, who the hell tried to give you a new part in your hair?"

George Coster, a great, big, healthy animal with a haunted look in his eyes,

shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I was just going over to see if maybe I could help that guy in the chair."

"Lou Fustin, the king of the one-armed bandit racket!"

Coster was pale. But somehow he got a shade paler at that. He dug his voice out of his body again. "Well, I was going over and then somebody in that little hall I hadn't seen leaned out and slugged me."

"What did he look like, Coster?"

Coster shook his head. He hadn't seen the man's face at all. He was going to be a great help, Lamb could tell.

Coster said, "But I've got to find Lucille, Lamb. I've got to find her!"

"We've got to find the gun," Lamb broke in coldly.

"What gun, Lamb?"

"The gun that was used to send Lou Fustin bye-bye, sucker," Max Lamb told him. He was already in action, lifting chair cushions, peering behind a row of books on an end table. "You don't think the killer—or killers," he added significantly, "wouldn't use a handy out-cold cluck like you, do you?"

"They didn't put the gun in my hand, Lamb."

"No, they were smart. You might have come to sooner, then ditched it after wiping off prints. But hiding it's smart. When the coppers hit this joint, they'll give it the curry-comb treatment. And they'll find a heater stashed somewhere around with your prints on it." He was over at the modern divan, lifting seat cushions.

"We gotta get that body out of here for Lucille's sake."

Lamb shook his head. "Let baby take care of her own cadavers. Max Lamb never tries to cheat the morgue out of a little business. If she wasn't here when it happened, she'll undoubtedly have a good alibi. The police will accept a bartender's word if he's got a clean record." He probed under the last cushion of the

divan trying to locate the killer's gun.

"But she couldn't have been here, Lamb! You don't think, if she was here, she'd have let that guy slug me?"

Max Lamb was down on his knees, flicking the beam of a pencil pocket flashlight under the couch. He turned his sad, red-cornered eyes on George Coster. "Yes, I do. Now get busy and make like you're playing 'Button, button, who's got the button.' We got to find that heater, wipe it clean, then quit the premises fast. Come on!"

He barked that last, and didn't hear the click of the key in the front door.

A NEW voice said, "Is that so, Lamb? Geez, any place there's a bad smell, it's a good two-to-one shot you'll be close by."

It was Lieutenant Detective Gerner of Homicide anklng into the foyer hall.

Gerner dropped something into his lefthand coat pocket as he advanced. "These skeleton keys sure come in handy. Help you catch folks with their hair down." In his right hand he gripped a nice big heater. Behind him came a uniformed officer, his cannon drawn too.

Gerner came into the living room, a big thick-limbed man moving unhurriedly. The head with the baby features swivelled slowly on the bull neck. He appeared to notice Fustin belatedly. His bulging eyes betrayed as much feeling as if he'd come on some crumb trying to pick a slot machine.

"Oh-oh! So somebody slipped Lou a hot chunk. . . . Feeley, keep these drips covered." He went over to the body, eyed the two blood blots where the bullets had gone in, then went through the hot chunk. . . . Feeley, keep these drips empty pretense of trying to find a pulse.

He looked around at Lamb as if he were something that had come in under a closed door. "Blackmail, double-cross, a little larceny—maybe a frame-up in a

small-time way. Yes, that could be you. But murder—no. That takes a certain kind of nerve." He chucked a thick thumb in Coster's direction. "What's that?"

Surprisingly, Coster answered for himself, belligerently too. He told who he was and how he'd come to this apartment to get Lucille Corwin, his wife, to come back home. "She always was just a child, impulsive and quick-tempered. I knew it was just her pride that kept her from coming back."

"And you pranced in here and found Fustin with your wife." Gorder took over crushingly, "And there was a fight. He cracked you one with something. And then you shot him, Coster. That's the way it was, wasn't it?"

"Good gosh, no! I didn't kill him. I never carry a gun. When I walked in, he was dead and—"

"After you cooled him, you collapsed," Gorder went on, inexorable and heavy-voiced, beating down Coster. "And your poor wife was so scared she ran out. Probably it was she who called headquarters and reported hearing shots in Apartment 5-D. Good thing I happened to pick up a ride with Officer Feeley in this precinct so that I was in the car when the radio alarm came over. Now give me your gun, Coster, and let's get this over with."

"But my wife *wasn't* here! And I don't have a—"

Gorner lumbered onto him, agates of eyes blank with that stupid look. He gave Coster a quick frisk, finding nothing, of course. "Sure, you're smart enough to play dumb good. Smart enough to hide the heater before you flopped. Let's see." He went over to the nearest chair and yanked the cushion onto the floor, found nothing, then turned on Max Lamb, scowling. "How do you fit into the picture, dandruff?"

Lamb spoke softly in his thin voice from

the corner to which he'd retired. "Mr. Coster is my client. I located his wife for him. I came in here about five minutes ago. Fustin was dead, and Coster was out stiff."

Gorner sniffed. "That last statement will cost him a sweet chunk of bucks on the bill, I bet." He moved over to the divan through which Lamb had searched. Gorner's back was to the room. He lifted a cushion, ran a big meaty hand down into the crevice of the upholstery.

"Yah! Knew I was right!" He turned, holding out a small snub-nosed .32 automatic by the trigger guard.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Murder-Bait on the Hoof

WITHOUT taking it by the butt grip, he rode the carriage in and out, squinting close. "Serial number's been filed off. But the ballistics expert will find that the slugs in Fustin's carcass were shot out of this baby cannon all right, Coster."

"But that's not my gun. I never owned a gun in my life," Coster squeaked out.

Max Lamb kept his sad eyes on Gorner. For a ponderous-moving man, Gorner could use his hands awfully fast. Lamb had found that out upon occasion. "It didn't take you long to find that heater, Gorner," he said mildly.

Gorner made with a bland smile completely devoid of any humor. "I'm a smart boy, Creep. . . . Coster, we'll be taking a little trip down to headquarters. But first, I want to make arrangements to pick up the doll." He went over and picked up the phone by its little ivory stand. When he got Homicide, he gave a description of Coster's wife, and gave instructions to have the airport, the rail station and the bus station watched. Then he told about Lou Fustin being dead and said he was bringing in a suspect.

"Come on, Coster. You might as well make it a foursome, dummy," he added to Max Lamb.

Pale and tight-lipped, Coster gushed hotly, "You sure had a perfect description of my wife, Gorner! Just like you knew her."

Gorner gave him a weary look. He drawled, "The department always makes it a point of knowing all about any frail seen around with Lou Fustin."

He snapped a bracelet on Coster's left wrist, gripping the other handcuff in his meaty hand. "Stay on guard here, Feeley. They're sending another car over."

It swung up before the Duchess just as they got down to the end of the walk, a black sedan loaded with plainclothes men. They piled out except for the driver. Gorner herded Coster and Max Lamb in. Ten minutes later they were walking into the office of the Chief of Homicide.

"The Big Boy wants to handle this one himself," the latter told Gorner. He led the way back out to the elevator and they went up two floors.

Burnon City was distinctly on the small side. But you'd never have guessed it by Chief of Police W. Macklin Elson. He was a huge pear-shaped lump of pompousness and exaggerated dignity who exuded the impression that he was carrying the world on his shoulders.

"We're going to break this case wide open fast," he triumphed. "But fast! I swore to keep Burnon City clean! I did! This is murder!" He brandished a fat puffy lard-colored fist. "And Burnon City isn't going to have them. No sir!"

"Fustin was a dirty racketeer the cops-ve been trying to get something on for years," Lamb put in his small voice from the back of the room.

"I didn't ask you any questions, Max Lamb!" Elson snorted. "And being loused up in this affair might make it tough for you when your license comes up for renewal. Give me the story,

Gorner, with all the minute details."

Gorner gave it, leaning on a corner of the chief's desk. He put a sneer in every phrase. When he finished, he threw a thumb in Coster's direction without looking his way. "From where I sit, this is our chump, Chief."

It was too rough for Coster to swallow. A uniformed officer held the mate of the cuff still around Coster's wrist. But Coster lunged, tore the cuff from the other man's grip, and launched himself at Gorner, both hands swinging when he was still several feet away.

Thick-limbed Gorner never even got off the corner of the desk. The chief sputtered something. Gorner didn't even seem to look. His right hand simply came around in a backhand blow, the hand flat, the side of the palm catching Coster flush across the bridge of the nose. There was a cracking, a bone-cracking sound that was sickening.

Coster slumped back into the cops arms, half out, temporarily sightless. His eye-balls rolled upward.

Gorner said: "He's our monkey, Chief. He had the motive. Here's the gun I found there, hidden. Fustin never carried a little heater like that now. Coster was on the scene. And the creep over there, Lamb, he was talking about clearing out fast when I walked in. We got everything but a picture of him doing it. Lamb could be held as an accessory."

**T**HE interoffice communication box on the chief's desk buzzed. He swung a lever, listened, then grunted, "Bring her in. They picked up Mrs. Coster at the airport, ready to leave. Had a bag with her."

The door opened and Lucille Corwin Coster came in, accompanied by a plainclothes man.

She was walking arson. She was tall, statuesque, bearing herself with a regal, standoffish air. But Lamb didn't notice

that at first. All he saw was that she was loaded with what it takes to make a man drool. She had a chassis a la Hollywood dream-girl, an undersized waist, and a deep-plunging blouse. But a babyish, half-pouting face and auburn hair in a long bob over that, and you've got the picture.

"Murder-bait on the hoof if I ever saw it," Max Lamb muttered under his breath. "The Joe that wouldn't blast somebody for her would have to have buttermilk in his veins."

Chief Elson came out of his chair with all the grace of a rhino surfacing. "Mrs. Coster, sit down, please." He signalled the police stenographer to draw up a chair for her. "A—well—a most unpleasant thing has happened. And we do need your testimony, unfortunately." He was making a production of it.

Gorner alone appeared unaffected by the female bombshell that had hit the premises. He'd given her one glance, then gone on cleaning a thick thumbnail with a matchstick. The cop holding Coster was sag-jawed. And George Coster's own eyeballs were practically hanging out of his head.

"Lucille," he got out as if he were just learning how to talk.

She ignored him as she calmly broke in on the windy Elson and settled into the armchair. Male blood pressure skyrocketed when she crossed her legs, exposing plenty of gorgeously filled nylon. "I know what happened. I heard it on the news broadcast over the taxi radio as we came back from the airport." The husky low voice went with the frame. It made Max Lamb think of sandalwood and blood-red hibiscus blossoms.

She said, "Lou Fustin was found dead—shot—in my apartment." For the first time she looked at her husband, the oversized dark eyes completely impersonal. "George, you always were a fool! Why did you have to do it in my place?"

Coster choked up with a sick, hurt look.

She turned to the chief. "I don't know anything about it, Chief Elson." She gave him the full battery of the big eyes plus a helpless look. "I was going away. I wasn't in the apartment when Lou arrived. I spent an hour at the Fallen Angel Bar, several blocks away, then went directly to the airport. I wasn't at the apartment."

Gorner slid off the desk corner. "Charlie the bartender there, lives in the same block I do. I know him. I'll check." He went into the outer office.

Elson was still leaning toward Lucille Coster and telling her how sorry he was to cause her all this inconvenience when Gorner returned. He nodded.

"Charlie says she was there all right. She drank a couple of Bourbon Old-Fashioneds, stalling over them. He says she seemed worried and was depressed, didn't talk with him the way she usually does."

"That seems to clear Mrs. Coster pretty thoroughly," Elson said with a big smirk for the redhead. He took her hand as he rose, patting it gently. "But we will have to ask you to remain in town two days or so, my dear, until we have all evidence lined up. I know we can rely upon your word to comply with this request."

She moved closer to the big stuffed elephant, practically paralyzing him with one of those smiles. "But of course, Chief Elson. I will cooperate in every way. And you've been so kind." She swept toward the door with her stately prance.

"Lucille, I want—" Coster croaked.

She might as well have had tin ears for all the attention she paid him. The door was shut after her.

"Isn't much question she wasn't in the picture," Gorner said, as if already tired of the whole thing. "Like I said before, Chief, there's our monkey." He gave

Coster the offhanded thumb treatment again.

Elson was beginning to nod when Max Lamb's thin voice came in. "He couldn't have done it. I'd have heard the shots."

**I**T WAS like pricking a balloon with a pin, a very sharp pin. Elson began to snort hard through his nose. Gorner's under lip pushed out.

Gorner said, "You'd have heard the shots, creep? Where the hell were you?"

"Outside the apartment, smoking a cigarette as I walked up and down the hall," Lamb came back, eyes sadder than ever. He was stretching a point, but he figured it sounded better.

"Why?" Gorner made a bludgeon of the word.

"I not only try to protect a client's interests—I always try to protect him too." Max Lamb made the statement without emotion or accentuation. "I wanted to be on hand if Fustin showed."

"You little insect, you sure are big-hearted." Gorner came off the corner of the desk again. "And if you were walking around out in the hall, how the hell did the guy who slugged your beloved client, Coster, get out of the apartment without you spotting him?"

Coster just stood with his lips thinned to white lines with tension and watched little Max Lamb.

Lamb said: "He could have gotten out when I was down at the far end of the hall, walking the other way, my back to him. You see, Chief," he was addressing all his remarks to Elson, "the stairway is just across the hall from 5-D. It would have only taken him a couple of seconds to tiptoe to it, then drop down out of sight."

Elson rumbled something deep in his chest with a sound like an elephant inhaling hay. He looked at Gorner.

"Chief," the latter said disgustedly, "his jabber don't mean nothing. He admits he was hired by Coster. So he's a

biased witness to the murder of Fustin."

"What's Gorner got as evidence, Elson?" Max Lamb put in in that small but insistent voice. "Mr. Coster was found knocked out on the scene where Lou Fustin was dead. There's that bump on the side of his head to prove somebody hit him—that somebody being Fustin's murderer. Gorner's got a gun he found. But he had no proof it belonged to Mr. Coster. There's nothing to connect Mr. Coster with the gun. And that is exactly all that Gorner's got."

Gorner said harshly, "Chief, I want to make a charge against the cluck here—" he made the thumbing gesture toward Coster again—"then throw his pants in a cell."

"Chief," Lamb picked it up persistently, "he hasn't a witness. He hasn't one real piece of evidence. Go ahead. Lock up my client. And I'll have a smart shyster down here inside of half an hour with a writ of habeas corpus. And in the meantime, you'll be giving the killer every break to slip away. . . . You remember the Honey Scanlon affair, I think."

Elson winced. That one had almost broken him. The big boys across the street in city hall had had him on the carpet and charred the hide off him. He had had one Honey Scanlon, a cheap little showgirl, charged and locked up for the killing of her boyfriend. Forty odd hours later, a mug mortally wounded in the attempted holdup of a gas station out on the State highway had confessed to the killing before he died. Miss Honey Scanlon had started a fat suit against the city for false arrest. And the newspapers had put Elson on the grill and roasted him to a frazzle.

Gorner started to say something. But Elson held up a fat hand, licking his lips nervously. "We could hold Mr. Coster as a material witness, of course. But—"

"He saw nothing," Lamb edged in. "Let him walk around loose and the killer

might try for him again. The killer doesn't know how much Coster saw of him, you know. The very fact you don't hold Coster will make the killer wonder, make him nervous."

"FOR cripes sakes!" Gorner burst out hotly, betraying emotion for the first time. "If that isn't the biggest load of—"

"I'll handle this matter, Gorner," Elson put in sternly. "I happen to be head of the department, if you've forgotten." He nodded to Lamb. "That's a good idea you've got there, Lamb. We'll release Mr. Coster—for now. But I'll have to warn Mr. Coster we'll consider it an admission of criminal guilt if he tries to leave town without permission of the police." He rose.

Gorner showed a cigar between his teeth, said an ugly word, and stalked out. Coster thanked the chief and he and Max Lamb followed out the door.

Before he closed it, Lamb mumbled, "Just a minute," and went back inside, reclosing the door after him. He came over to Elson's desk obsequiously.

"Chief, in my small way, I'd like to do all I can to help the police solve this thing. Could you tell me who the woman was who called in to report the gunshots in that apartment?"

Elson hesitated, then picked up the phone, got the switchboard, asked for the officer who'd taken the call on the Fustin killing. Elson rumbled, lips glued to the phone mouthpiece. When he hung up, he shook his head.

"Wasn't a woman, they tell me," he told Lamb. "Some man with a heavy voice. But muffled. And he hung up when they asked him who he was. Fraid that won't be much help, Lamb. Just leave it to the force, anyway."

"Maybe it is some help," Max Lamb said vaguely and left.

He and Coster got out on the street.

It was early evening by now, dusk.

Coster clutched his arm. "Mr. Lamb," he said in a half scared voice, "you lied back upstairs about being out in the hall while I was in the apartment."

Lamb made a grimace of weary disgust. "Shall I go back and tell the chief I did? How long do you think it would take them to chuck you into the booby hatch and throw away the key?"

Coster shivered a little inside the plaid sports jacket. "I got to go over to the apartment. I got to have a talk with Lucille. I got to!" He breathed hard. "It's just Lucille's pride that's keeping her away from me now. And maybe the man who killed Fustin will try to get her."

Lamb locked his arm. For an undersized man, he had incredible strength in his clawlike hands. Coster winced.

"I don't think she's in any danger from the killer, dopey. And you'll just be framing yourself by going over there."

"How?"

"Gorner isn't the kind who gives up easy once he's put his finger on a man, Coster. Get wise! He'll hound you till he digs up the clincher—or something he can *make* the clincher."

"But I didn't do it, Lamb!"

"Gorner don't care about that. He said you did. He won't rest till he's got you all wrapped up for the rap. You'll have had a tail on you from the time you were half a block from headquarters. Gorner's got to get somebody, see?"

## CHAPTER THREE

### Target Practice

THEY had dinner in a side street chophouse, Lamb pitching into a steak half as big as himself with French-fried onions and broccoli au gratin on the side. He topped it all off with a second coffee and a B and B as Coster merely picked at a hamburger.

Something occurred to Coster. "Lamb, what you said up in the chief's offices! About how if they let me loose the killer might make another try at me!"

"Well?" Lamb inhaled the bouquet of the B and B.

"Well—uh—that sorta makes me like a clay pigeon." He laughed with a little wild note behind it. "All right. I'm not afraid to take the chance if it will get Lucille's skirts clear of the whole thing. Poor kid, it's rotten for her."

"Will you please stop cackling and let me think?" Lamb said viciously.

Coster bowed his neck that time. "I told you I'd pay you to break this thing, Lamb. I said when they let me go back to New York I'd get more money from my savings account and pay you."

"Quiet, please!" Lamb bit off, frowning in thought.

There were two things. The fact that it had been no woman who had called in about hearing shots in 5-D. And how Gerner had come up with the .32 automatic from the depths of the divan Lamb himself had searched.

The check came. Lamb immediately dived a hand into an inside breast pocket of his shabby suit. "Oh-oh! Must have left my wallet at the office."

"It's all right," said Coster. "I'll take care of it."

Lamb tucked the wallet down deeper, and took another stealthy look at the big splayed-nosed guy up at the bar. He'd come in right after them. But he hadn't drunk much; he was still nibbling on his second highball. And Lamb had noted he had never once so much as glanced down at the booths. They got up and left the place.

Lamb steered Coster up to the right toward the main drag. Then he mumbled something, made an about-face and they moved in the other direction, passing the chophouse again. Broken Nose was gone from the bar.

"The tail is on, all right. I'll see you to your hotel." What he meant was he was going to spend the night with Coster if he had to sleep in a chair. Just to make damn sure the love-sick cluck didn't slip over to that red-headed bombshell's murder nest.

They went a block, found no cabs at the hack stand there, headed on into the next block in the warm, pulsating, summer night. There was less traffic there. Then a green convertible's rubber shrieked as the brakes were thrown on hard when the big sedan cut in sharply ahead of it. The sedan careened toward the curb. Lamb's sad eyes suddenly became contracted pin-points. He flung big Coster behind a thick-boled tree inside the curbing—just as the first slugs slobbered in a stream from the nose of a sub-machine gun poked out the window of the sedan.

"What the hell's this?" gulped Coster.

"Somebody's using you for target practise, Romeo!" Lamb yelled into his ear over the crackling din. "Here—this way!"

He pulled Coster backward, keeping the tree between them and the sedan. Then he jerked him out over the curb between the front of one car and the back of another parked there. They darted across the street and heard the bang of a car door being reclosed.

"There they go!" Another gun began to spray from the street side of the sedan. Bullets bounced off the pavement behind their heels.

But they made it to the other side just as two men with tommy guns jumped out of the car on the street side. Lamb dropped into a crouch behind the hood of a parked car. The Police Positive had appeared miraculously in his hand. He fired twice with it. One of the trio dropped on a knee, hit in the leg. Lamb got a look at his pain-twisted face with the hug beak of a nose and recognized him as Big Angie, the late Lou Fustin's first lieutenant.

The other two pulled up momentarily, spreading out. The one on the right blasted with the sub-machine job again. Jagged holes appeared in the top of the hood of the car behind which little Lamb crouched. He flashed a look over his shoulder. Down to the right ran an alley between a darkened loft building and a still-open hardware store.

“GET in there—I’ll follow!” he snapped at Coster. He saw the big man take off like a sprinter, running low. Lamb turned back and threw a shot at the figure sliding down to the left, toward the glittering marquee of the motion picture house down that way. And in the same double take, he spotted the plain black car standing down in the glow of the marquee lights. Hunched down by its inside forward fender was the heavy form of Gerner, his gun out. It wasn’t doing any talking yet, though.

Lamb slammed a shot at the guy out there on his right, then broke for the alley himself. He got into it as slugs punched a series of perforations in the edge of the hardware store window. Halfway down it, Coster waited.

Coster said angrily, “Dammit, if I had a gun, I’d—”

“It’s Fustin’s gang! And you don’t argue against sub-machine guns with pea shooters. Come on, Don Juan.” He ran on back. The alley angled around a small ell of the warehouse where the rear of the hardware store narrowed. They were in the paved backyard of the store with the wan noon beating down on strewn packing cases. Lamb took in the high back fence.

“Over!” he yelled, pocketing his heater.

Coster raced hard and launched himself for the top of the fence. He got a half grip, then dropped back. Max Lamb went in a sort of mincing run past him,

# Country Doctor



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leaped up so that his feet hit the fence, then scrambled up it like a cat. Perched on the top, he extended a hand. Coster came running again, leaped once more. Lamb caught his hand and gave him enough of a lift so the big man could get his elbows hooked over the top. They dropped into an areaway on the other side that was the delivery entrance for a cheap apartment house.

They went up the walk beside the building and emerged on a dim-lighted side street. A cab that had delivered a fare to the apartment was just pulling away. Lamb whistled shrilly. Nine blocks on, after the cab had made a U turn away from the business section, they got out at the edge of the Municipal Park. Lamb waited till the cab had pulled away, then took another on the hack line there, and gave an address.

Coster was pale and wiping sweat from his face. "Where are we going?"

"My office. Your hotel wouldn't be safe," Lamb told him. "Relax. They missed you."

Coster pried a finger around inside his shirt collar. "I got 'em all after me now. The police. And now that racketeer's gang!"

"Thank your ever-loving babe for that," Lamb told him.

Downtown in the cheaper business section of the town, the poorly-lighted streets were deserted. Lamb rang the night bell of a rundown office building. A nightman with asthma unlocked one of the doors.

Lamb extracted a bill from his wallet. "Dinny, you never saw me around here tonight, huh?"

Dinny's gnarled old hand absorbed the bill as if possessed of some kind of suction action. "Wouldn't even know you if I did see you, Mr. Lamb. Don't even know your name." He took them up to the third in an oversized cage of a creaking elevator.

A LITTLE way down the hall, light glowed behind a frosted-glass panel labeled, *M. Lamb, Private Investigations*. Lamb went "Tsk, tsk" and eased out the Police Positive.

"You go in, Coster. I'll be covering things from the rear. If there's nobody there but Lulu, my office girl, just whistle a bar or two from some song. Got it?"

"Sure. Might be some of that Fustin bunch waiting to give me the treatment." Coster's usually affable face was scowling. "I'm getting sore about how everybody's treating me." He turned the knob of the door as Lamb plastered himself against the wall beside it. Coster went in. He left the door slightly ajar on the latch.

Lamb heard the mumble of voices inside, picking out Lulu's. Then he caught Coster's whistling. It was *There's Nothing Like a Dame* that he whistled.

Lamb pocketed his heater and pushed open the door.

"Mis-ter Lamb," Lulu cooed, fluttering around inside the railing of the two-by-four reception room. She was on the petite side, with coal-black hair in a chignon, and stacked up generously in the proper places. She was beautiful—when you couldn't see her face. It was the kind of a face that would halt traffic—homely, long-jawed, slightly pock-marked, and with a profile of a ragged hatchet blade.

"Mis-ter Lamb, it's terrible," she cooed on in that little-girl voice. "Just terrible. The police were here earlier. A lieutenant Gorner. He doesn't like you, Mis-ter Lamb."

"Don't break my heart, dreamboat. What'd he say?"

"He said, Mis-ter Lamb, that you ought to pull your stupid nose out of this case. He said somebody is liable to get hurt." She shook her head and made flutter motions with her lifted hands to stress her point. You shouldn't get mixed up in it. The lieutenant said the Fustin gang was

sitting in now. They're dangerous, Mister Lamb."

"We met 'em," Lamb said succinctly as he moved into the shabbily furnished cubbyhole that was his private sanatorium. He went over and dragged down the cracked shade over the broad window before turning on the desk light. "Glad Gorner's already paid his call. Now he won't be back. Drag your cute little self homeward, baby girl. And stop worrying."

When Lulu had departed, with the night lock snapping on the door, Coster wiped sweat from his forehead and asked, "What're we going to do, Mr. Lamb?"

Lamb sighed. "About myself, I don't know what *my* next move is yet." He rubbed fingers across his furrowed little forehead. He was thinking of Gorner crouched by the fender of the Homicide Squad sedan, of how he had held his fire. And he was remembering how Gorner had gotten into Lucille Coster's apartment so easily, so quickly, claiming he'd used a skeleton key.

"As for you," Lamb went on, musing aloud, "you're getting out of town first thing in the morning. You can grab a cab, ride down to West Burnon—about six miles—then pick up a bus there. They can't watch every cab—even Gorner. It's too hot for you here."

Coster looked aghast. "But the police warned me not to leave town. They'll send out a tri-state alarm when they find I'm missing."

"Sure." Lamb began to remove his shoes. "We'll spend the night here, by the way. Safer. You can have the couch." He indicated the ancient leather couch with some of its stuffing poking through. "I'll take the desk."

"But about me quitting town?" Coster persisted.

"Sure. There'll be an alarm out for you. You'll just have to keep moving fast and shifty. Or would you rather stay

here and have Gorner grab you again when he fakes up enough of a new case against you? Gorner's the kind of copper who always gets his man in a killing—any man he can manage to hang it on."

Coster's jaw went up and down hesitantly. "Yes, but—"

"But—nuts!" Lamb had removed his coat, stripped off his necktie. Next came the pants, revealing heliotrope-striped shorts. "Or maybe you'd rather stay and have the cops pick you up with a skinful of the Fustin mob's lead, huh? Take your choice, Romeo!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Redhead's Darling

LAMB was being taken in by Gorner and Gorner was shaking the entrails out of him with every step as he shoved him up the steps of headquarters. Then Max pushed up sleep-laden eyelids and saw it was Coster rocking him by a shoulder as he lay atop his desk. He checked with his wristwatch and saw it was eight-thirty. Coster had kept the word he had given last night before going to sleep, namely to wake Lamb when he got up himself. Lamb noticed Coster was already fully dressed. In the swivel chair Lamb began to pull on his socks.

Coster said from across the flat-topped desk, "You know, Mr. Lamb, I've decided to act on your advice. I will slip out of town."

"Good. Fustin's gang think you did the boom-boom act on him. So you'd only be like a duck on a rock, waiting to be picked off, if you hung around." He reached for a shoe.

Coster said, "Think I'll get a drink of water. Mouth full of cotton." He went into the outside office where the water cooler was.

Max Lamb got on his second shoe,

double knotted the lace. He found himself frowning. There was a feeling of something not quite cricket in the atmosphere. Then he realized it was strangely quiet in the outer office. He went to the door of the cubbyhole in his heliotrope shorts and looked out at emptiness. The outer main door of the office was just settling shut on the plunger contraption that prevented it from slamming. Lamb yanked it open in time to see Coster's broad back disappearing down the stairway.

"Hey, you stupid cluck, wait!"

The back vanished.

"Lamb took a stride in pursuit, then remembered his costume. He went back inside his hutch confidently. He'd pick up that Joe easily enough. Coster would be going to see his ever-loving before he jumped the burg. He reached for his pants on the swivel chair across the back of which hung the coat of his suit. Only there weren't any pants to pick up. Lover Boy hadn't been so dumb that time.

After a brief search, Lamb saw the cuff of one sticking out of the closed drawer of a filing cabinet. Each pant leg was tightly knotted at the knee. Grimly he settled down to the task of unknitting them.

"This little peccadillo is going to cost Lover Boy an extra twenty smackers on his final bill," he assured himself. He bucked the first tide of arriving office workers as he went out and got a cab. He went uptown, then over to the semi-residential section where the Duchess Arms was. On a hunch, he had the driver go up the street behind it. Gornier would probably have some poor harness bull acquiring fallen arches out front.

The hunch was good. There was no other building behind the Arms. And a path led up to a solid white gate in the back wall that Lamb had noted yesterday. Lamb ankled up the path, found the gate locked, bellied over the top of it to drop onto the gravel path on the other side.

When he landed he saw fresh footprints, big ones, in the still dew-moist gravel. Coster had come the same way. The big glass doors giving onto the rear of the lobby were unlocked. He went up to the fifth in one of the selfservice elevators, opening the door cautiously.

Down at 5-D, big-shouldered Coster was stabbing the buzzer and rattling the knob and calling "Lucille, Lucille" in a guarded voice. He put haunted eyes on Lamb as the latter came up. "Something must have happened to her," he husked. "She doesn't answer. Maybe they kidnapped her."

As he produced a woman's wire hairpin, Lamb shook his head wearily. "Babes like that can always take care of themselves." He began to go to work on the lock with the hairpin.

**I**T TOOK a couple of minutes. Then there was a slight click. Lamb turned the knob, and they walked into the murder apartment.

The venetian blind was lowered over the windows at the end of the living room so that it was like night in there. Heater out, Lamb went through the place as quickly and silently as a cat. There was nobody there. The unopened bed was rumped as if somebody had caught a brief nap on it. That was all.

"Our little love-bird flew the coop," he said.

Coster, mouth working with emotion, snapped on a table lamp. Lamb saw the note caught under the base of the lamp. Coster was on top of it. But Max Lamb skidded in there like a guy stealing second and snatched it right out from under Coster's digits.

It was written on a piece of notepaper in the fat blurred lettering of a lipstick. It ran:

*G. darling,  
Can't stand this mess any more. Leaving  
for New York. Will wait for you Tuesday*

at the hotel you know I stay at there. Come soon, darling. Then—the Coast.

L.

"This is Tuesday," said Coster, reading over Max Lamb's shoulder. Added triumphantly, "I knew she really wanted me all the time. But that Coast stuff. . . 'Course, she was always talking about going to Hollywood."

Lamb was about to speak. "G. darling" didn't have to mean George.

"Well," he began—but the rest was muffled in the cushions of the nearby divan onto which Coster had pitched him from behind. Then there was no more talk from Max Lamb for a number of seconds after that sharp rabbit punch clipped him at the base of the brain. He heard Coster running.

When he pushed himself off the divan, he reeled as he headed for the open door. He got there just in time to see an elevator disappearing downward. He was about to try to beat it down via the stairs when the door of the elevator be-

side it swung open and Gorner barged out. He saw Lamb.

"You sure get around, creep!" He came down the hall in long, heavy strides. "Where's that love-sick client of yours? He never returned to his hotel last night."

Lamb said, "I wish I knew where he was, Gorner. I know he didn't go back to his hotel. Too dangerous. He didn't tell me where he was going to sleep—in case they grabbed me and tried to make me talk." He didn't try to hide the note because he knew blue-eyed Gorner would have already seen it.

"In case *who* grabbed you, crumb?"

"The Fustin gang. They tried to blast Coster last night on Mills Avenue."

"Yeah, we got a report there was some shooting over on Mills Avenue last evening," Gorner admitted as he came closer. "By the time we got there, everybody had scrambled. Why didn't you report it to us?"

Mr. Lamb made a face like he was laughing. "I can imagine how much pro-



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tection you guys would have given me.”

Gorner ignored the crack. “What’s the little note in your hand?”

Lamb said almost apologetically, “You’ve just saved me a trip down to headquarters. Here. I found it inside.”

Gorner took it in those thick-boned hands that could clip a man with the impact of a blackjack. He read it with his forehead creased up like a washboard. His bug eyes flicked to Lamb, and for a moment there was something like the shadow of fear in them. Then he snorted.

“Ha. So when Lucille’s boy friend gets rubbed out, she decides to go back to the lovesick sap. Yeah, that’s it. Coming in, I got tipped he was seen around here earlier. Let’s go down and say “good morning” to the chief, donkey. He likes company over his second cup of coffee.”

**W.** MACKLIN ELSON was having his second cup of coffee on his big desk when they walked in. Gorner gave the story to him succinctly:

“It’s plain enough, Chief. We can’t locate Coster anywhere. He’s taken out after her to keep the rendezvous. They’d planned it—you can see that by her remark about hitting out for the Coast. So he’s practically admitting his guilt.”

The chief dunked a doughnut in the coffee, made a sound like a sea pump sucking air. He swallowed the sodden chunk of doughnut, lips pursed in a fair facsimile of a man meditating.

Gorner went on, “I can nab him easy. I’ll grab the next train to New York and nail him like a clay pigeon when he walks in on her.”

Elson absorbed more damp doughnut, probed at a loose lower plate, then said, “But how’ll you know which hotel she meant in that note, Gorner?”

“I’ll contact the New York police before I leave and have them check all new arrivals at the hotels. By the time I get there, they’ll have her ear-marked all

right. It’ll be a lead-pipe cinch.” He jerked his hat forward from the back of his head as he rose. At the door, he paused to chuck a thumb in Lamb’s direction.

“Better dump the monkey into the cooler, Chief. He’ll be safer there. Hold him as a material witness. Or for unlawful entry. Anything. I think he knew his client was going to take a trip.”

“Goo’ idea,” Elson said through a large hunk of coffee-logged doughnut.

Gorner slammed the door carelessly behind him. Max Lamb shrugged his little shoulders. “Well, I guess there’s nothing I can do, Chief. I’m just a small-time private-eye against your police department. No contest, eh? He drew on the fragment of cigarette butt that was practically scorching his fingers. “One thing puzzled me last night though—when that shooting started on Mills Avenue.”

“What?” said Elson. “What’s that?”

“Well, during the shooting, there was a police car parked double just down in front of the movie house. And whoever was in that car did nothing. Of course, there is a bar and grill right next door. But if the papers ever get hold of that little fact—”

Elson dredged his nose out of the coffee container. “You know, Lamb, you’ve been doing business in this city for some years. I feel—and I’m a keen judge of human nature—that we can trust you. That you’ll come in any time we ask you to. So I’m just going to let you run along now, Lamb.”

Twenty-odd minutes later, Gorner crossed the station platform and climbed aboard a pullman of the New York-bound train. Watching from behind the end of a baggage cart, Max Lamb thought it strange that Gorner found it necessary to take an extra-large-sized suitcase. Also strange that the copper could get it packed so quickly. The train started to move, couplings clanking. Lamb skipped from

cover and hopped onto the steps of a day coach. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Big-Moment Maxie

IT WAS late afternoon when the train eased into the Grand Central Terminal. Lamb was off it, legs twinkling, even before it had stopped. He scooted along the platform until he came opposite Car 982, the pullman he had seen Gorner board.

Gorner was the third one off. He snubbed a porter, and headed up the ramp to the gate without looking to either right or left. It was a cinch for Lamb to trail him up to the taxi half-circle. Gorner never even started toward the phone booths to check with the N. Y. police.

Lamb sort of slithered into the cab behind the one Gorner took. He said to the driver: "You got yourself double the fare if you can stick fairly close to that first hackie's tail-light, pal."

They went across town on 42nd Street, turned north on Sixth Avenue, now labelled the Avenue of something or other, went west on 45th. The Homicide detective's cab drew up before a third-rate hotel, one step removed from a scratch house. Lamb ordered his cab to halt on the other side of the street. He idled over, ignoring traffic, as Gorner entered the joint. It had a big plate glass window on one side. Lamb quickly fished a discarded newspaper from a handy Sanitation Department train basket so he could mask his face the while he watched the proceedings over the top of it.

A passing elderly woman said, "Here, my man, get yourself a cup of coffee," and pressed a dime into his hand.

Lamb started to sputter wrathfully, then saw that Gorner, inside, had left the desk where he'd spoken to the clerk, and was over at the elevator. The private eye

drifted inside. But before the car put in an appearance, two more people were there waiting for it. The door closed and it ascended. He saw the big hand stop at four. But that could mean any one of the three passengers alighting there. Max Lamb blinked once, then ran over to the cracked marble desk counter, making himself sound breathless.

"Did my friend just come in?" He pantingly described Gorner to the room clerk. "What room did he go to?"

"We can't give out that kind of—" the clerk began.

Lamb clutched at the man's coat lapel. "Look, chum, he's gone up to visit a girl. And his wife is wise. She's liable to lam in here any moment. I gotta warn him and get him out. What room?"

The clerk's eyes widened. "We don't want no lousy trouble here. . . . It was Room 601."

On the sixth floor, he found 601 around a turn in the dim, frayed-carpeted hall. He glued his ear to the thin door.

Gorner's voice penetrated it. Lamb heard him say: "And a couple of double scotch and sodas with those steak sandwiches." He was talking to room service on the phone. "All right, so you're rushed. But make it as soon as you can."

Lamb backed down the hall and watched the second hand of his wrist watch make two complete revolutions. Two minutes. Then he slid out the Police Positive, walked back and applied knuckles to 601. Gorner's voice came guardedly after a moment, asking who was there.

Lamb pinched his nostrils closed and mouthed, "Room Service, sir." He heard heavy steps and Gorner saying, "Gosh, they're fast."

The door opened, and little Max Lamb poked a dent in the middle of Gorner's thick torso with the nose of the Positive.

"Okay, killer," he said in his thin little voice. "One little misstep by you or the

girl friend, and you win the ticket for a free ride to the morgue. Back up, pal. Slow and easy, too."

"Why, you dirty little rat! Where did you get the nerve?" He backed into the dingy living room, but he didn't seem scared. "You know what happens to any punk who drills a cop!"

"They'll pin a medal on me if I do it this time, Gorner." Lamb came back, spitting out the words. "They don't care what kind of a monkey suit a Joe wears when he's a murderer. Back off another yard. Baby, how come you always gotta get yourself tied in with guys with dirty hands?" That last was addressed to Lucille Coster standing over by the window.

**T**HE redhead's ruby lipstick was smudged around her mouth to give her a hoydenish look. She threw up her hand before the messed-up lips as if to hold back a scream.

"Don't let the creep scare you, honey," Gorner said. "Probably trying to work the shakedown racket, just from force of habit."

Lamb snapped out, "It takes more than you'll ever have, crumb-bun, to make a man keep hush-hush about murder."

"Murder? Why you half-witted—"

But one of Lamb's darting hands had dipped into a side coat pocket of Gorner's. Lamb got the brass ring on the first try. It was a brass key with 5-D, the number of the apartment in the Duchess Arms, stamped on it.

"I thought that skeleton gag was a phony the day you walked in when Fustin was dead," Lamb said softly. "You got in too fast. Nice piece of evidence, you having the key to the babe's apartment."

Gorner chewed a lip and played it with the arrogant touch. "What the hell—that don't prove I gave Fustin a helping hand to the grave, Lamb."

"And your finding the .32 automatic so

conveniently tucked in beneath the cushions of that divan. I'd just finished searching that same divan for the murder weapon before you came in."

"I don't carry that kind of a peashooter, you fool!"

"You're a ripe candidate for the hot-squat, Gorner. Now, here's how I figure it went. You were two-timing Fustin with this babe. You dropped in that day without warning—and Lou Fustin was there. There was a row. He pulled that little heater on you. You got it away from him, slugged him into that chair, and then gave him the pop-pop treatment."

"I tell you, any fool would know Fustin wouldn't carry a little gat like that, Lamb."

"He might just have it tucked away in case of mad dogs or something—maybe a dumb copper like you. The department can pick up Big Angie, Fustin's right-hand man. I'll bet he identifies that automatic. Then maybe you'll claim Fustin did the Dutch, I suppose."

Shiny white beads of sweat grew on the Homicide man's forehead. The blood went out of his face as if he were giving a couple of gallons of blood in a fast transfusion.

Lamb's ratlike little face framed a small, sad smile. "The rest is easy. You got her out of the apartment, down to the Fallen Angel Bar where you knew you could get the barkeep to parrot anything you told him. Then you got out and phoned in, disguising your voice, reporting hearing shots in 5-D. You picked up a ride in Feeley's prowl car so you'd be on deck when the radio alarm went out. And then you got the big break when you bounced in and found the husband on the scene just waiting to be framed like a sitting duck. Yes?"

"You oughta be a writer, Lamb."

"Thanks, stupid. I am going to tell you a story about you crouching by the fender of that Homicide squad sedan during that shooting on Mills Avenue last night—and

not so much as making a peep with your own heater. If Coster had been blasted down, it would about have clinched your case, putting you in the clear like a Derby winner leading by ten lengths."

Gorner sucked air. "I—"

"You are going to be turned over to the New York coppers to be held on suspicion. Then I'm going home and leak my little take into good old Chiefy Elson's ear. He'll bust a gut having you brought back in record time, meathead!"

**G**ORNER'S tongue wobbled like a red sponge over his lips. And then he turned, figuratively, like a coyote. He threw his thumb at the girl behind him. "She wrote that note to Coster. You saw it. Maybe they were hooked up to—"

Lamb made a scornful sound. "That note—hell! 'G. darling' can just as well mean Gorner as George."

Lamb nodded to the auburn-haired girl. "And, cutie pie, you'll be hooked in too—as an accessory to the crime. Know that?"

She gave a little squeak. "Like hell I will!" she barked out. "Gorny, you dirty double-crossing dumb slob! I'm taking no rap for any dopey flatfoot! I'll turn State's evidence!"

That was the moment George Coster

chose to arrive. He toppled out of the foyer with a vague, dumb look on his face. He could see nobody but Lucille. Coster gulped out:

"Angel, in the note you said you were going to your regular hotel. I went there. . . Then I got your call at the house and rushed right in here. But why—?" Then he became aware of Lamb and Gorner and the gun. "Wh-what are they doing here, angel baby?"

Angel Baby sniffed, "You stick your dumb puss in at the silliest times, you cluck!"

Gorner played a sneak ace then. "Mr. Coster, the creep here is going to arrest your beautiful wife as an accessory to the murder."

"Wh-what? My gosh, Lamb, you can't do this!" He grabbed at Max Lamb's gun arm.

And Gorner promptly belted Lamb a honey to the side of the face.

Lamb's body bounced off the wall like a ricochet shot. Gorner tried for Lamb's stomach with his knee. He missed but chopped it up hard to the side of the rib. He had already grabbed the barrel of Lamb's gun to bend it harmlessly downward.

Now, as Lamb sagged, Gorner ripped

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the weapon from his grip. He swung the butt into the palm of his hand and pulled off the safety as he pointed the muzzle toward Lamb.

"Say, you can't do that!" Coster cried. He threw his big body at Gorner. "You can't go around knocking people all over the place."

The thud of the gun barrel over Coster's skull abbreviated his monologue. He folded up awkwardly on the floor. But the brief moments of respite were a big help to little Max Lamb. He lashed out with a terrific kick to the shin. Gorner screamed a curse, hopping on one leg. Lamb darted in like a pint-sized terrier, got a grip on the gun barrel, the other hand on Gorner's powerful forearm. The next moment he was sinking his sharp teeth into the murderer's wrist.

Another pain-frighted screech of pain from Gorner. He clubbed down with his other ham-sized hunk of hand against the side of Max Lamb's skull, then brought up the hand with the bleeding wrist in a stiff uppercut. Lamb made a non-stop flight through the air to the faded couch eight feet away.

Growling like a berserk animal, the Homicide man leaped for the prone private eye, knees bunched. But Lamb rolled away at the last moment. With the side of one of his thin hands, Lamb precisely clipped the big man across the side of the neck near the ear—a judo blow and very effective.

Gorner groaned like a man undergoing the tortures of the damned. But he managed to slam a knee over and deep into Lamb's guts. The little man made a strangling sound, rat-sharp face going ashen.

But he staggered from the couch before Gorner could clamp on him. He sort of fumbled out to the middle of the room, went to his knees to claw up the Police Positive. And when Gorner rocked

himself off the couch and came on, maddened by rage and fear, Max Lamb worked the trigger twice, aiming straight for Gorner.

The second bullet smashed into Gorner's right shoulder, smashing the collar bone. The impact slapped him back down on the couch. He lay there groaning, all the fight gone out of him.

Coster was sitting up on the floor. "I don't understand all this," he mumbled. "Angel baby, I just don't understand this. . . ."

There was no need to call the New York police. They piled in seconds later. And Angel Baby, raking her auburn tresses dramatically, began to sing her song at the sight of uniforms.

"Gorner killed Lou Fustin back at my place in Burnon City. Then he—"

"Cut the fortissimo and croon it, babe!" snapped Max Lamb from over by the phone. "Yeah, operator. I want to call Burnon City. . . ."

"Hello, Lulu, beautiful. This's Maxie, your big moment. Take this down. Call Chief Elson. Tell him the New York coppers are holding Gorner on suspicion of murder and waiting for word from him. Tell him I got the dope on Gorner. Tell him I'm bringing Mrs. Coster back with me and she's dying to talk. Tell him to pick up that bartender from the Fallen Angel. Yeah. And tell him to wait in his office till I get back some time tonight. Got it?"

Lulu's voice fluttered from the other end.

"What's that?" Lamb said. "The water cooler is broken and you can't get a drink and it's very hot there? Listen, you wavy frame of a dame. Know what papa's going to do? He's going to catch the very next train back home and come right up there and fix up that water cooler for you, you dizzy-brained female. You just wait and see, Angel Baby."

# • • KILLED BY THE CLOCK

"Don't shoot, Connie," Rand was pleading.



By **CHARLES  
YERKOW**

Detective Nick Denam tried his best to blow up the case of his ex-sweetheart's new boyfriend.

**D**ETEKTIVE Nick Denam felt ill at ease. The bizarre trap was set for that night, and his would be the central role. He stood before the inspector's desk and listened to the monotone of names. Though the inspector hadn't spok-

en it, only one name touched Denam's senses. Connie Clair. She was incongruous in the gloomy light of the office, but he couldn't get her out of his mind. This was Special Branch of Homicide, he told himself over and over. Push your personal feelings aside tonight, Denam. The trap is set to nail Bob Rand. These are the inspector's last minute instructions.

"You've a couple of hours before we start," the inspector was saying. "Watch your step."

The inspector took a cigar and busied himself lighting it. "Now that we're alone, I don't know what to say, Denam."

"I'm listening." He was listening, and he was thinking.

The trap that night. On South Street—the whole area blocked off and guarded—the room on the first floor from which he and his partner Hartman would have a view of the street. Hartman's contact by radio to the parked cars and detectives. The tip-off said Bob Rand would kill Steve Nomara. And he, Detective Denam, would arrest Bob Rand.

All of it was routine, was racing through his mind, and at the same moment he was wondering what the inspector wanted to say.

"You know how important tonight is, Denam. I wouldn't want anything to go wrong."

"If that tip-off is right, we'll have no trouble."

"Glad you think so, Denam. We're playing with murder. You know that. It's the only way we can nail these two killers." The inspector shrugged. "These jobs always fall on us. We've got to see it through, no matter what happens."

Important—but he was thinking about Connie Clair. *Important. Murder. Connie. Killers. See it through, no matter what happens. But what about Connie Clair?*

Detective Denam tried to fight off his muddled thinking. He couldn't get Connie out of his mind. Damn—he just couldn't.

She'd say "But you knew about it, Nick. You knew about it. Sure you're a detective, but you could've warned Bob. Why didn't you? Nick, you knew how much Bob meant to me. It would have been easy for you, Nick—just to tell him not to go near South Street." He'd have to hear that, and he'd not be able to tell her that he was still in love with her, still wanted her.

The inspector's voice reached him.

"You want to say something, Denam?"

"About what?"

For a moment the inspector was silent. "About the girl," he said dryly. He didn't take his eyes off the young detective.

Denam wanted to ask "What girl?" but in the same instant the realization struck him that the inspector knew. Special Branch of Homicide was a top outfit; thorough file system; check on everything and everybody.

"Connie Clair," the inspector was saying. "When you were on that Broadway case four years ago, you met her. You fell for her, which is easy to understand. Beautiful showgirl, glamorous setting, everything different from what you'd been used to. Let me finish, Denam; you tell me your side of it later. Four years ago I said to myself that a man like you isn't the right kind for Connie. She started with you, all right. But then she switched. To Bob Rand, the racketeer." Tipping his swivel chair back, the inspector said, "I figure, Denam, that you're still soft on her. Want to say something now?"

Denam walked over to the coat tree and took his hat. Turning down the brim, he faced the desk. "What do you expect me to say?" he asked. He experienced a peculiar satisfaction in watching the inspector frown.

"The situation is awkward," he said.

"So what? Our tip-off is good."

"I'm talking about the girl."

"The Haywagon' is playing on 47th Street. That's where she works."

"I know all that." the inspector said.

Denam pursed his lips. "Bob Rand is supposed to shoot Steve Nomara on South Street at ten o'clock. I don't get what you're driving at."

"I want to grab Bob Rand. Tonight. I don't want any slip-up."

**D**ENAM felt his face grow warm. "I'm the guy who arrests Rand after he shoots Nomara. Right? Now, inspector—you tell me what's on your mind about the girl."

"Damn it. Are you still sweet on her?"

"That might be."

"Look, Denam. I'm only trying to—"

He waved his hand. "The others don't know about you and Connie Clair. Your partner Hartman doesn't know it either, so you needn't mention it to him. You're on this case because you know Bob Rand, you know how he's liable to react in a tight corner, and because you can handle yourself."

"Fine," Denam cut in. "Let's leave it at that."

"Wait a minute. I want you to—well, I'd like to have your word."

"My word? On what?"

"Promise you'll—"

"Keep away from Connie? Promise I'll not warn her man we're out to nail him?" Denam knew his anger was crowding his voice, but he didn't care. "That stuff don't go with me. What do you take me for?"

Connie Clair means nothing to me! Same goes for Bob Rand."

The inspector raised one brow. "He's the man she loves, and you had been in love with her. That's reason enough for me to talk this over."

"Well, we've talked it. Are you through with me?" Denam started for the door.

The inspector stood up and thoughtfully paced away from the desk. He paused at the window and glanced at the street lights below. His tone was quieter now, as if he had made a decision. "I'm sorry if I've said the wrong things, Denam, but you know how it is. Just don't go near the girl."

"Did I ever mess up a job?" Denam asked quietly.

"Of course not, but this is—"

"This is no different, inspector. I'll see you later." He stepped out into the hallway and took the stairs down to the street. . . .

Denam walked cross-town on 42nd Street, his thoughts on the trap set for Bob Rand. It was crazy, it was all crazy, but it was the only way special branch could get their man. They were sure Rand couldn't get out of this on any minor technicality, as he had done in the past. This time—a clear-cut murder.

Two years ago Steve Nomara's men had killed Rand's brother Rory. Bob Rand had never talked about it, but those who knew him said he was making his

## MAN FROM MISSOURI ASKED TO BE SHOWN!



**And He Was!  
Carl W. Rau Has  
Now Switched to  
Calvert Because  
it Tastes Better.**

ST. LOUIS, MO.—Carl W. Rau, Missouri chemical engineer, is no longer a skeptic about the big switch to Calvert. "Friends showed me," he said. "Calvert really does taste better, really is smoother any way you drink it."

plans. He gambled and he lost to Nomara—but it was all part of his plan. Now he was ready to pay off. The tip-off said he had got Nomara to meet him on South Street, at ten sharp that night, but instead of paying with cash Bob Rand would use a .38 automatic.

Detective Denam started to cross Broadway against the traffic. He stepped back on the curb, waited. "The Haywagon" was playing only a few blocks away—he was so near her, and yet too far to even think of looking her up. It would do no good to see her now—all these years he had kept himself out of her life—he had no right to see her.

But a strange excitement welled inside him, and a crazy indecision pressed against his brain. The Bob Rand story will be in the morning papers. Connie will read about it. He didn't want her to think the wrong way—he wanted her to know how—

He must not see her, he half-whispered as he watched the flashing lights. It was pleasant thinking about her, but everything had been so long ago. After-show get-togethers—the rainy morning when they drove to Long Island to look at a house—Connie's warm laughter when he pointed at a clearing and said he'd make a children's playground out of it. All that was done with. Bob Rand, suave, immaculate, with cash to throw around and name-friends to use to get Connie better parts. A damned racketeer who—

The sudden blare of a taxi horn brought Denam out of his thoughts. He glanced at his wrist watch. Eight ten. Had to be on South Street before ten. Get something to eat now, he told himself crossly, and get back to the office and meet Hartman.

The show started at eight-thirty. Why couldn't he just see Connie before the show? Maybe explain a little of what was eating his mind? He had time—a few minutes wouldn't harm. He hadn't seen her in so long—

At the side entrance Denam pushed through the stage door crowd and went up the iron stairs. Pop Ziggie recognized him and nodded a greeting.

**W**HEN Connie opened the door to her dressing room Denam expected the same flush of colors to greet him. There wasn't any. Connie's smile was the kind that had long tired of smiling. She wore a bright yellow ribbon in her golden hair and her face was painted a faint blue. Her pink pinafore rustled in the awkward silence. Her eyes looked deep—they recognized him and a trace of shame showed in them.

"Hello, Nick," she exclaimed. "What have you been doing with yourself? It's good to see you again.

He felt the suppression in her tone. The dressing room light fell softly on the girl's hair, but it didn't help any. He had expected to see Connie Clair the way he remembered her. She had changed. She was hard, bitter, and she was Bob Rand's girl. Even the sudden warmth that seemed to come to her voice after the first surprise wore off didn't help any.

"Come on in, Nick," she invited loudly. She turned quickly and walked to the low chair in front of the lighted mirror. "Leave the door open. Orders to all the girls." Her laugh was hard.

Denam took off his hat and kept turning it around and around by the brim, all the while trying to think of something to say. He knew he had made a mistake in coming here. What had he expected? Connie throwing her arms around him? Kissing him? He felt his face pull taut.

"Sit down, Nick."

He didn't sit down. He kept watching her in the mirror, waited for her to finish with that lipstick. He still didn't know what to say, and he realized that the meeting was as awkward for her as it was for him.

"Are you looking for Bob?" she asked.

Denam looked down at the hat in his big hands. "Why would I be looking for him? Just came to say hello to you, Connie. Find out how you've been."

She turned around. "You're not kidding me, Nick. Nobody's kidding me." She sat erect, her deep troubled eyes staring at him, her long thin fingers clasped tightly.

Was something on her mind, he asked himself.

He had the urge to offer to help her—if she really needed it. But that was a childish thought on his part, he told himself irritably—it was like a movie scene. Connie didn't need him. Bob Rand was her man.

He didn't know why now of all times he should think of the inspector and his partner Hartman. But he did. A feeling of guilt shot through him.

Denam heard the hallway sounds around him, saw long-legged showgirls in color-mad costumes. He reached the street, walked through the crowd.

He tried to concentrate. *South Street. Get something to eat—get back to the office—forget about Connie—*

Connie was still close to him. He had to admit it to himself. He walked on, hurried, told himself he was a damned fool to think about her. He could never again enter her life. He could do nothing for her. At ten, he'd grab the man she loved. *Murder.*

He turned in at the cafeteria and again checked the time. Eight thirty. He got a cup of coffee and a piece of cake, sat down at a table where a man was eating a hot meal.

Denam got up and walked to the phone. He fingered the pages of the phone book, then dialed the theatre; Pop Ziggie said he'd try to get Connie, if she wasn't on stage.

Connie's voice sounded high-pitched. "Hello? Who's this?"

Denam spoke slowly. "Get in touch with

Bob," he said. "Tell him not to go to South Street tonight."

"Who's this?" Connie shouted. "Hey! who are you?"

"Tell Bob Rand not to go to South Street tonight."

He hung up.

Outside the air was heavy and damp.

THE trap for Bob Rand was closely timed, had to go off as special branch planned it. At exactly nine-thirty detective Hartman sauntered down South Street and entered the shabby hallway of the house. Five minutes later Denam went in. The room faced the street. The tip-off had informed Special Branch that Steve Nomara would drive down from his Scarsdale home and would park in front of 84.

Denam paced the dark room, paused every now and then at the window to glance down at the street, went on pacing.

Hartman seemed in good humor though the tension showed in his constant checking of the time. He sat next to the radio equipment which would keep him in touch with the inspector, and the other cars blocking off the area, when the fireworks began.

"You think anything could go wrong?" Hartman asked in a low tone.

Denam took a deep breath, squinted at the illuminated dial of his watch. "Don't ask me," he snapped.

"Take it easy, fella. This job's no cinch, but if you're too jumpy—"

"It's three after ten," Hartman said. "If that tip-off was a phony we'll—"

"We'll just have to wait," Denam cut him off.

He wondered what Hartman and the others would say to him if they knew there had been another tip-off—his, to Connie. If they knew she had surely warned Bob Rand. He wondered if that had made her happy? And did she know Nick Denam's was the voice on the phone?

A yellow roadster, with its top down, turned into the street, flashed brightly as it passed under the light. Denam watched the man behind the wheel lean forward and pull up the hand brake.

A little surprised to see Steve Nomara, Denam sighed heavily. "He's here," he said. His own thoughts now raced in circles. Hadn't Connie warned Bob? Hadn't he phoned Nomara, hadn't he called off the meeting? What did it matter? He had tried to do one more thing for Connie, and it hadn't worked out.

"Take care of yourself, fella," Hartman was saying.

"Yeah," Denam drawled absently as he started out the door. Steve Nomara would get his brains blown out by Bob Rand. He, Nick Denam, would arrest Rand. Cut and dried. As for Connie, she was no good.

He pulled the .38 revolver from his armpit holster, dropped open the cylinder and ran his fingers over the cartridge backs. Loaded full. He snapped in the cylinder, holstered the gun, and went on down the stairs to the hallway. He stood there, screened by the open door, and waited for the sound of Rand's car. He watched Steve Nomara smoking leisurely.

His thoughts jumped to Connie. Would he have a chance with her—after Bob Rand was—

Denam shook his head, peered into the night at the streamlined car and the man waiting for the pay-off. Damn! He was crazy to be thinking of Connie—

The scraping footsteps behind him came unexpectedly. He turned half around to see a hunched old man coming toward him from the open backyard door. The man carried a bundle of newspapers under his left arm, the right was in his pocket.

Denam had a strange feeling of incongruity. He thought of the record sheet in the office: No one lived on the ground floor.

The move for his gun was instinctive. The old man seemed to crouch as he

let the newspapers slide to the floor. Then he brightened.

He said: "Drop it." He wasn't old. "Drop it or I'll blow your face in."

Denam froze awkwardly in his move to get his gun out. In the faint yellow hallway light Bob Rand's face scowled at him and the automatic gleamed as it leveled for his chest.

"Unbutton your coat, copper!" Rand ordered. "And don't try any fancy stuff."

Denam cursed silently as he obeyed. He felt the revolver tugged out of the holster.

"Start up the stairs. Quietly."

Sweat broke out on Denam's face as he put his weight on the first step. He was confused, didn't know what to do. He felt hot, choked. He hoped the stairs would creak a warning to Hartman, but they didn't. He had only four more steps to go.

His mind tried to figure Rand's clever trick. Nothing clever about it. Rand had been brought up in the slums of East Side—he knew every block, had come into the next street north, had crossed the backyards. Did Rand figure Nomara might try a double-cross, or—or was there more to this reversal of traps?

Certainly. Bob Rand wanted him, Nick Denam out of the running. Wanted him out of the way. Maybe Connie had mentioned his name when she warned him not to go to South Street. To impress Rand that it was not just a blind guess, she had mentioned his name.

Denam paused on the last step. He realized how helpless he was. He was in the middle—he'd get it in the face from Hartman and in the back from Rand. What a fool. What a mess he had made of the night's work. All because he didn't have sense enough to forget a girl.

Rand's gun jabbed his back. In that instant he wanted to wheel around and try a break, but then the gun no longer touched him and he knew he'd miss his

timing. You can fight back only when you know where the gun is, otherwise you're blind.

Rand was whispering to him.

"Go in and stand next to your pal."

Denam went in. Rand, he thought, must've been watching him and Hartman enter the house, must've known the room they were in. Rand was now ordering Hartman to get his arms up—cautiously approaching, tossing the gun into the dark corner of the room.

Rand's plan was evident now. A bold move. From the window here, he'd shoot down Steve Nomara. Then he'd shoot down both of them, and make his get-away across the backyards, before the others had a chance to close in on him.

Denam felt his temples pounding. In the diffuse light filtering into the room from the street lamp, he could see Rand clearly. Why didn't he jump at him? Don't let the rat get away. Don't let him—

How could he reach Rand's automatic? He was by the window—too far. Rand was aiming at Nomara down there in the car. If you jump for him, the darkness of the room might cause you to miss him—

"Stand still, copper!"

**D**ENAM tensed his muscles. How much of this was known to Connie! To keep her quiet, had Rand hurt her? Denham shook his head, not daring to imagine Connie hurt. Yet the vision re-

turned—her golden hair spread over the floor in a pool of drying blood. Maybe Rand had killed her—he couldn't take chances on her talking to the police, telling them that she had known about the South Street trap.

The gun in Rand's hand exploded once, then again. Two shots into Nomara.

Denam watched Rand's face, the expression that told the score was settled.

Denam cursed. He heard Hartman cursing next to him.

"Shut up!" Rand hissed at them. He came closer, his bulk framed clearly in the window. "First you, Nick Denam," he said loudly. "I want this to be—" The noises in the street caught his attention. He paused, turned his head to the side to listen.

Men shouting. Cars screeching to a stop.

It gave Denam time to shift his weight, to balance himself on his right foot and to crouch just a little forward. But the pause didn't give him time to lunge.

Rand was facing him again.

In that same instant a shape moved by the open door. Denam turned. His first thought was that one of the detectives had come up, but then he saw golden hair in the diffuse light, and heard the rustle of the pink pinafore under Connie's raincoat. He heard Rand say "Connie. What're you—"

Every sound seemed to vanish, but he

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saw Connie's hand come up, the revolver held at Bob Rand.

"Connie," Rand called, "Don't be a fool."

Denam heard Connie sobbing. Hartman was saying something—"Damn. A woman—"

"Don't shoot, Connie," Rand was pleading. His shoulders, framed in the window, turned slightly, and Denam realized the automatic was being levelled at the girl.

When he jumped, the darkness in the room exploded with yellow flashes and the heat of one ripped his arm. Denam knew Rand was shooting. He knew he had fallen against Connie—that the wall hit the side of his face. Somewhere in the room Hartman was cursing as he pawed the floor for his gun.

Denam kept his eyes on the bulk before him. He jumped forward, tried to use his right hand, tried to pound it into Rand's face. The arm hung limply, refused to lift, refused to grab. He struck with his left, once. Rand's gun hand came up to silhouette itself in the window light. Denam grabbed the wrist, turned around and snapped the arm over his shoulder.

A splash of yellow again exploded before his eyes as Rand squeezed the trigger.

Denam let go the wrist, then crashed a quick left uppercut to Rand's jaw and stepped back to watch the man stagger like a toy figure on Times Square's sidewalk.

"Stand clear, Nick," Hartman shouted. "I got my gun."

Denam bent down and wrenched Rand's automatic away. He thought he saw him shake his head—the punch hadn't been hard enough. Rand was fumbling for his belt.

"Stand clear." Hartman shouted again. "He's got your gun."

Denam stepped back. He let Rand struggle to his feet, then he fired twice.

A dull thud sounded as the revolver

dropped from Rand's hand to the floor. The man put both hands to his stomach and slowly sank to his knees. His voice was a moan. "Connie—"

Denam looked at her standing by the wall. She held out her hand, and he took the small gun from her.

Heavy footsteps came up the stairs.

Connie had time only for a few words.

"He said he'd get you, Nick." She fought back her sobbing. "I begged him. He wasn't kidding anybody—I should never have—"

The inspector and three men pushed into the room.

"Switch on the lights."

Everything was loud, confusing. The inspector was shouting orders. Denam fought his reeling senses, told what happened downstairs when Rand entered the hallway through the backyard. Then Hartman was talking. A man came in and said Steve Nomara was dead. The inspector shouted at him to make out a report—"Everybody get back to the office and make out a report." He stepped over to Connie. "We'll have to hold you, Miss."

The detective led Connie down the stairs and Denam watched until he couldn't see her any longer.

"Let's go. You too, Denam."

"He's hurt." Hartman said.

"How bad? Damn! You're bleeding. Harris, get him to a hospital."

Out in the street, Denam waited for them to bring up a car. The inspector edged toward him.

"How bad is that arm?"

Denam shook his head. "Not bad. Look, inspector; I didn't—"

"I'm sorry about the girl," the other cut him off. "Can't forget her?" he asked.

"Can't," Denam said. He looked at the cars driving away, at the uniformed policemen trying to scatter the gathering crowd.

Would he have a chance with Connie now?

# SCARRED ANGEL

**Y**OU detective-story readers will want to follow the thrill-shot adventures of a likable vet who found, in a brand-new American city, the same sinister police and methods he had fought to crush overseas. . . . And here, for your suspense, is an exciting scene from this action-packed novel:

The big man poked the gun in William Rye's back and said "Inside, pal." He opened the door of the sedan, and Rye got in. Someone in the back seat was smoking a cigarette. Rye could see nothing but darkness and the glow of the ash that kept flaring up and then dying. Rye crawled into the front seat. The big man kept the gun hooked to his back bone like an extra rib.

"Turn around," said the big man, "and meet the boss."

Rye could make out nothing when he turned around. Only the cigarette. Then his eyes began to accommodate themselves to the darkness, and he made out the outline of the face. The glow deepened around the cigarette and William Rye made out the soft and feminine outlines of a girl's face. There was a big wad of golden hair on top the slender face, and the eyes were glistening and green in the cigarette's glow. The mouth was wide and red and soft. The chin was round and gentle.

Rye cleared his throat. "Well," he said finally, "you're a mighty tasty greeting committee."

Her voice was soft and calm. "I'm no greeting committee. I'm the farewell committee."

She took the cigarette away from her mouth and he could see her smile. She smiled with her mouth, and her teeth showed and her eyes sparkled. But she

wasn't really smiling inside. She said:

"So you got Ed Kane, didn't you, sharp-shooter? They sent you to do that. Now you've done it, and you're waiting for your money."

Rye opened his mouth, but there was nothing to say. He had been armed with a gun. They had found him with the dead body. He shrugged. "Even if I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me."

The girl laughed mirthlessly. "You and I are going to take a nice long ride out of the hills here, and we're going to have fun. Don't you think so?"

"Why not?" William Rye shrugged.

She looked up at him and there was hell in her eyes. She snapped the order to the big man beside him. "Go ahead." Her tongue was like poison in her mouth.

The big man gunned the motor and dug out. The rain beat down on the car roof. They turned around in the highway and headed away from White City. The car gained momentum, and slogged along in the water and mud. Soon they were in the hills again, and the road twisted and turned.

The girl's eyes were hard and icy like bottle glass. Her lip curled as she said: "Now!"

The big man leaned over, opened the door beside Rye, and before Rye could twist from him, a hard Colt barrel struck his skull from behind. Rye reeled down into a mass of blood and mud and rain and rock and shale and jarring, bone-cracking oblivion. . . .

The complete story will be told in the next issue in Bruce Cassiday's novel—"Dream Doll of Nightmare City"—published October 28, 1949.

The Editor.

# SWAN-SONG FOR

*Dramatic Novelette  
of a  
Not-So-Perfect Crime*



*"I'd said I'd gladly  
kill a man for her...."*

I thought luscious Verna was delightfully worth the trouble of needling her fat little husband into the casket—until I woke to my first bright new day as a murderer.

# A SUCKER

## CHAPTER ONE

Double-Cross for the Boss



By **FRANK**  
**WARD**

SHE was waiting for me on a bench at the end of a narrow graveled path, splashed with noon sunlight and looking as cool as a rose on a mountain stream. The magazine in her lap stirred under the restless probing of her gloved fingers.

I stopped and lighted a cigarette, as casually as a young advertising executive taking a stroll through the park would light it if he had anything on his mind but murder. The match arced away through the cool March air and hissed out in a patch of melting snow near her feet. I walked over to the bench and put the briefcase down on the seat. "I hope you don't mind if I sit down here for a few minutes?"

She looked at me coolly, without any interest but the casual widening of her cat-green eyes, and smiled a faint, indifferent smile. She said softly, "Of course not." A page in the magazine fluttered and flattened under the pressure of her hand. She went on reading.

I sat down and cleared my throat and unfolded the morning paper I had under my arm. The headlines concerned war in China, but they didn't concern me. I turned to the stock-market quotations and began scanning down the columns. They would make as much sense as anything else I read while I was anywhere near her. The briefcase lay between us.

After awhile I threw my cigarette end away and lighted another, sliding the paper over the briefcase. From one corner of my eye I could see her hand sliding under the paper. I looked at her profile then, as if I'd never seen it before, as if I

hadn't looked at it in every possible light.

Her mouth, too wide to be beautiful until you touched it, moved just enough for me to pick up the words. "For heaven's sake, darling, don't look at me that way."

"All right," I said, too loudly. "So I won't look at you that way. It's been two long lousy weeks since I've seen you. What am I supposed to look like, a pacified camel?"

She rose to her feet, smoothed the suit over her hips and let a smile touch her lips. . . .

That was the way it started for me. Not very neat, not very clean, and in the end, not very smart. But it was moving even then, going downhill and dragging me with it, and if it hadn't dragged me I'd probably have broken a leg running after it.

I don't know how it started for her, I didn't know anything much about her at all, when I stopped to think about it, except that she was the wife of the man I worked for and that I had once said, in one of those moments when you'll say anything, that I'd gladly kill a man for her. And now here I was, doing it.

I spat the cigarette at the patch of snow and reached for the paper. I could feel the flatness of the briefcase under it, and I knew she had the new syringe in her shoulder-strap purse. I stared after her, catching only a flirting whip of her forest-green skirt as she rounded a corner near the center of the park, and then I looked down at the paper in my hands and began, very slowly, to tear it into shreds.

When she had been long gone I got to my feet and walked the other way. I felt like a sick old man, sick enough to go home and wrap my troubles around a bottle of bourbon—but not sick enough to risk the comment my absence might make at the office. The days of taking chances were all over. I walked to a bar on Bailey street and broke the promise I had made

her when the idea began to jell in our minds.

We were funny that way. We'd look up at each other and the same thought would be there, in our eyes and in our minds, and it would be as if our lips had touched. Only this time we were thinking of murder.

I had my drink, and I had another, thinking about the murder, thinking about the trifling little details that always worked the switch on the chair or dropped the cyanide in the acid bucket. Then I had one for the road, just another short one to speed the cyanide on its way, to take care of the little things, to put the taste of seeing her again out of my mind, and went back to my office.

**F**RANK DILLIO was sitting in my office chair, a big, paunchy man with shirts that set off his ties the way white flesh sets off blood. His eyes, peering up at me, were hard and wise and faintly amused, as if he carried his own keyhole around with him and were always peering through it. He wiped a veined, fleshy hand across his mouth and grinned knowingly. "Since when you only taking an hour off for lunch, Jerry? I'm the only guy you got to impress around this hole, and I don't impress easy."

I threw my briefcase on my desk and chucked my hat at the rack in the corner and went into the washroom adjoining the office to bathe my face in cold water. Dillio got to his feet with grunting effort and came over to the door, leaning his bulk up against the frame.

He said, "If I were you I'd hang my breath out the window to dry, chum. Old Brent Harrison might not think you were so much of a white-haired boy when he comes in this afternoon."

His voice had a raw, worrying edge to it. He put a crumbling cigarette between his flabby lips and began patting his pockets absently for his lighter.

"Go peddle your gossip someplace else, will you, Dillio?" I said wearily. "Harrison isn't due in here until Monday."

"You got a nerve," he said slurringly. "Who the hell you think you are, telling me where to go? I don't hear anybody talking about giving me the old royal boost, sonny, and that's more than I can say for you. They got a good use for me around here."

"As long as they've got office girls who like to be kept amused you'll be around," I growled. I wanted him out. I wanted time to think about what was going to happen this afternoon, and about how it would be after it happened.

I could see Dillio's reflection in the mirror. A nerve twitched in his cheek.

"The hell with you," he said. I couldn't hear him very well above the sound of the running water, but I could still hear him enough to turn around and put out my hand. I laid it against his chest and pushed on it.

"Get out," I told him quietly. "Get the hell out and leave me alone. You make me sick."

His hand closed tight around my wrist, hot and damp. "Take it off me, Cobb." He flung my arm aside and turned and walked out into the office, slamming his heels on the floor. By the door he paused to fling over his shoulder, "You aren't so pure the driven snow wouldn't melt on you, sonny. You don't fool me."

I was still staring after him numbly when the office door swooshed shut under the pressure of the automatic closer, and I was all alone with the crazy whirling in front of my eyes. I leaned on the edge of the sink. After awhile I opened my eyes and looked at my hands and wiped them on my coat.

It was then two-fifteen. I ran a comb through my hair and went briskly out through the receptionist's office and out through her door and down the hall to the elevators. There were banks of phone booths in the lobby, pay phones with no operator to listen in and no way of checking calls.

I put a nickel in the slot and dialed her number. When the line clicked I held my breath and let it out slowly and said, impersonally, "Mrs. Verna Harrison, please. Dr. Redding's office calling." Redding was her physician, a doddering old fool who made a cushy living by managing to look far worse than any of his wealth-laden patients.

I hung on the other end of the line, crowded into the heat of the booth until my face was hot and prickly. She was taking her time.

When I heard her voice, I crowded my lips around the mouthpiece of the phone and said huskily, "It's me—Jerry. We're in trouble."

"How nice of you to call, doctor," she said, almost gaily, and I knew she had



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company. "I'm feeling much better, thanks, but Brent isn't too well. I've been trying to talk him out of going down to the office this afternoon, but you know how these businessmen are."

"I know how one business man is," I said hoarsely. "Why in hell didn't you find out the old fool was coming down today? I nearly passed out when I heard he was due in."

"I know what you mean," she purred softly. "But I don't think there's any need to worry, doctor. I think I can take care of the whole business myself."

"There'll be no taking care of anything, anytime," I said tightly. "Not now. Not the way things are going. We'll have to wait. And for heaven's sake, don't start thinking for yourself, by yourself. That's my department."

I paused. "I don't know how long we'll wait, but we're not sticking our necks out now. I can't tell you about it here, or I would. I'll have to see you. It's Dillio, that big fat slob who works in the art department here, and I think he's got something under that oily finish of his that's just about to bubble over."

There was a short humming pause. Sweat came down into my eyes like acid. I sounded like a bullfrog with his mouth full of swamp water.

"I think that's a mistake," she said finally. "I think something should have been done about that. I really do. You can never tell what a growth like that can turn into. Sometimes those things are very serious."

"So it's a mistake." I said. "There's nothing can be done about that now. You've got to get that syringe back to me, fast, or else you've got to talk him out of coming down here today."

A movement outside the booth dragged my head around. A fat, middle-aged woman with her life history stamped on her face was staring at me, tapping a nickel against the edge of the booth, peering in

at me through the glass of the window.

I wiped one hand over my face and crowded nearer the phone. "Look," I said. "Look, Verna, there's no sense in talking about it now. What are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing," she said airily. She was the cat with the canary. "I'm not going to tell you about it now. I'm going to let you wait. Perhaps I'll tell you afterward, after it's happened." She paused and chuckled teasingly. "I've been wanting to see you for some time now, doctor. I have symptoms I think you might be able to do something about. Your treatment's been so successful in the past. I'll drop in at your office."

The line clicked. I was standing there with the rattle of the fat woman's nickel drumming in my ears. I put the phone back on its cradle and opened the door and crowded past her, ignoring the look and the glare and the muttered words, and went back upstairs to my office to wait for Brent Harrison, and trouble.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Patsy-Boy*

THE room was short, rectangular, polluted with heat from the ventilation system, crowded with bodies on chairs rimmed around the edge of the room, growing rapidly foggier and more unbreathable with the roll and echo of words, cigar ash, smoke, subdued chuckles. In the middle of the room, under an overhanging light that gave off a glaring artificial sunlight was another rectangle, thickly carpeted, studded with a single chair, a table, a water pitcher, a box of cigars. No one sat there now. No one would until Brent Harrison arrived.

All the crowned heads of Harrison Advertising were there, trying their best to look relaxed. Their legs were stuck out ridiculously like a field of slowly quiver-

ing antennae. I sat hunched over in one corner, staring at the rows of neatly polished shoes that capped the neat conservative socks and nicely pressed, conservative trouser cuffs. I was cooler now, almost as if I'd never had the idea to give Brent Harrison the big nudge and move in, almost as if I'd seen the whole thing in a movie and had dreamt about it afterward.

I took a deep, long breath and looked up through sick eyes. The door had opened and he was almost into the room now, his head tossed back, the soft, round face impassive and almost childlike. His china-blue eyes swept the room quickly, as if he were afraid to meet other glances.

An army of chairs slapped back against four walls. An army of feet hit the floor. The sound went up, beating against my eardrums. I watched my feet move, felt my body go up, slowly, politely; heard my chair hit the wall. It seemed to make more noise than all the other chairs put together. I saw Harrison's eyes on my face, felt his attention, and I smiled.

He had a briefcase in his hand, bulky at one end, and for that reason shockingly familiar. It looked just as my briefcase had looked when I met Verna in the park that noon. He tossed it on the small table by the chair, chuckled briefly. Then he sat down, nodding to the higher brass, and we all sat down.

Harrison said, "Look here, you men." They all looked. He reached out a hand and tapped the case with one short finger, and let his hand fall upon the bulge under the leather. His fingers ran over the smooth brown cowhide, caressing it gently.

"I say look here, because right here I have something I've been wanting to show you all for some time. One of you has already seen it. One of my best young men, I might add." His chuckle flowed smooth and strong and his smile danced around the room and focused itself on me. "Yes,

one of my most promising young men. You all know how I choose you, why I choose you, what I can and do offer you. And I choose well. This proves it."

His fingers closed on the zipper of the case and pulled it open. His hand fished inside the case and he withdrew the syringe, holding it delicately. It looked like nothing more than a squat plastic flashlight with no lens. He laid it on the table, placed a small vial of colorless liquid beside it and rubbed his hands together expansively.

"As I say, one of my best young men brought this gadget to my attention. Did, in fact, some very neat high-pressure work securing a contract to push this little item." He leaned forward, bracing his gross carcass on both hands, and the pressure of the effort brought the veins out hard and purple on his forehead.

I looked at him and I wanted to kill him then more than I had ever wanted to kill him before in my life. I wanted to kill him for himself; for his fat, hammy theatricals; for his soft, beautiful voice; for the crooked, decayed teeth and the unctuous perfection of his mind. I wanted to kill him with my bare hands, and to hell with all the gadgets and involved plans.

Chairs creaked as the men leaned forward. The gadget was simply a new type of hypodermic syringe we were going to advertise. You could give yourself an injection with it as simply as you could shine a flash on a blank wall. All you did was load it up, cock the spring-operating mechanism, hold it against your arm and press the release. You wouldn't feel a thing. You'd never know it had touched you, except for the click of the release, and there were no marks to show afterward. It simply blew the drug in through your skin, into the blood stream, and that was that.

"Only Cobb here knows much about this," Harrison was saying. "It is, briefly, a new form of hypodermic, completely

painless in that no actual injection is necessary. There is no sudden sting of the needle, because there is no needle. I point that one fact out to your attention as a possible lever. People hate pain. They hate inconvenience. They don't like to suffer. You got that, all of you?" He stood up and hooked one thumb into a lower vest pocket, rocking a little like one of those fat dummies with weighted bottoms you can hit but never knock completely over. They always come right back at you.

"Now," he said slowly, weightily, "will you gentlemen just consider some of the virtues of such a medical tool? It leaves no disfiguring mark. That's another hook to hang this campaign on. Got it straight? It can be administered without waking the patient. It can be used in accident cases where it is impossible to reach bare skin without laborious cutting and suffering on the part of the injured party. Got that too?"

The voice rolled on, meeting objections and gliding smoothly over them. I didn't listen any longer. I knew what it would do. I had known what it would do from the first moment I held it in my hand. It would kill, without leaving any trace, without your man feeling any discomfort or prick, without him suspecting anything at all.

That was the crux of it—that was the Idea. That and the insulin I had given Verna that noon. That was all we needed. Fifty units of insulin blown into Brent Harrison's doughy system; perhaps three or four hours of waiting before the first effects of the insulin shock hit him. And then the long procession and the soft little words while the candles flickered. I looked up at Harrison through a haze, from killer to victim, and felt the jabbing shock of remembrance, of what Dillio had said to me an hour before.

I swung my gaze around the room, seeking him out, and saw him almost di-

rectly opposite me. He was staring down at his hands, twisting his fingers together. As I watched him he looked up and his eyes glistened strangely in the light. A faint shadow of a grin tagged at his mouth. He winked at me and looked down at his hands again.

The perfect murder. No chance of any post mortem giving me away, because the insulin would be absorbed into his system as he was dying from it. He was known to have a faulty ticker, if anybody got around to asking the questions. Old Redding with his annual fee in his pocket would give the death certificate without question. As simple as that.

And sitting there, thinking about it, thinking about Verna, breathing in the dirty hot air and listening to the flowing lines of Harrison's voice, I wondered if I'd have the guts to go through with it when the time came if it ever did now.

I didn't have to have the guts. I didn't have to do anything about it. I listened to his words and waited wearily for him to pull off the inevitable demonstration, the old "if it's good enough for our clients it's good enough for me" routine, without actually thinking about what he was going to do. I saw him loading the syringe from the small vial, heard him explaining the action of the gadget; saw him cock the device and hold it against his arm and heard, more loudly than his words, the click as the syringe rammed home its charge.

He died six hours later, on a country road forty miles outside town, but even his chauffeur didn't know about it until he pulled the big car up to the front door of Harrison's Stillwood Heights home and opened the back door.

**S**HE didn't phone me that night. After waiting until the approaching dusk had shadowed the sun down over the rim of the horizon, I got out a topcoat and put my pipe in my pocket and went for a

walk by the lagoon in the park. I wasn't surprised anymore, nor even shocked. I knew how it had happened.

I had to hand it to her. Harrison was dead of heart failure, and we were out in the clear now unless one of us broke. And she wasn't breaking. Nor was I, even though the thought of it sickened me now and I didn't give a damn if I ever saw her again. She had switched fluids on him in the demonstration vial, and he had killed himself. She had taken a chance; she had bet on a long shot that had paid off. In spades, in trumps, in coffins. She was a wealthy widow now.

I sat on a bench in the gathering darkness, watching the blurred white forms of the swans gliding peacefully out on the light-reflecting water. When I got sick of that I went back to the apartment, took the elevator up to my floor and walked down the hall to my door.

He was standing with his back against the wall, one of those long, lean, lantern-jawed specimens with the angular face and sleepy blue eyes they call dangerous. Sometimes they are. This one had a nondescript gray fedora at a nondescript angle over one eye, and his hands were in the pockets of a pepper-and-salt coat. His shoes were scuffed and he was blocking the doorway to my apartment. He wasn't there to collect the rent.

I walked toward him, taking my key from my pocket. I put one hand on his

arm and said coolly, "Do you mind if I get in here?"

He looked faintly surprised. "No," he said. "Why should I? You mind if I go in with you?"

"You're damned right I do," I said.

"I'm sorry about that," he said. The blue eyes lazed over me speculatively. He took one hand out of his pocket and held up a leather shield-folder where I could see it. "D.A.'s office, Mr. Cobb. Do those objections still stand?"

I keyed open the door, looked at him, shrugged and went in with his gentle tread at my heels. I went on through into the living room, aching for a drink but afraid to get one immediately. I knew how those minds worked. If you wanted a drink as soon as you hit the pantry, you were nervous or upset. If you were either of those things, they wanted to know why.

The lean man coughed politely and looked around the room and said, in his soft, colorless voice, "My name's Logan." He glanced at me, almost shyly, and sat down without taking off his coat. He balanced his hat on the crown of one knee and stared at it for awhile, as if he were wondering why he had ever bought the thing. His hair was stiff, wiry and black, and he would always have trouble with it.

"You look pretty upset, Mr. Cobb," he said. "You must have thought pretty highly of your boss. Or have you heard about that yet?"

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I said I had heard about it, and I told him what I had thought of Harrison, right down to the last gutter word, and waited. You don't say things like that about the dead if you're really guilty, if you're trying to hide the blood-stained cuff. That was how his mind would work. I saw him lift his head, but there was no surprise in his eyes. They drifted over the room, without haste, before coming back to me.

"I heard he was that kind of a guy," Logan murmured thoughtfully. "I wasn't certain about it." He leaned forward and his hat fell off his knee and rolled under the chair. He left it there, his hands dangling long and bony out into space. I watched him and my nerves at the same time. I was so scared of the guy sweat boiled hot out of my system and froze on my skin.

"Look here, Logan," I said abruptly. "There's no use pretending this hasn't upset me. It has. I've had a very hard day. I'm worn out even before I heard of Brent's death. And I can't see that I've got anything you would want, informative or otherwise. Why don't we get down to brass tacks?"

"Sure," Logan said softly. "Somebody, maybe a crank, phones in about an hour ago and says maybe we should take a quick look at Brent Harrison before we put him under the ground. The voice was muffled. It could have been either a man or a woman, and we couldn't hear too well what this party was talking about. We did get one part of it." He stared down at his wrists, flexed the right one. "This party said something about murder, Mr. Cobb." His gaze flicked up fast and nailed itself on my face. "What do you think about that?"

I looked at him for a long time. Finally I said, "All I know is, he's dead. All I know is what the radio commentator said on the six o'clock broadcast. There's no reason why I should know any more, is there? They said a competent physician

had diagnosed heart failure. Isn't that clear enough?"

He shrugged. "You put a slug through a guy's head, Mr. Cobb, and he still dies of heart failure. Look," he went on, "the chief reason I'm here taking up your time is this. We probed around and heard he underwent some kind of an experiment this afternoon, something to do with a new item your firm was playing up big. That's why I dropped around. I understood from what I was told you took the syringe from the consultation room to your office. That right?"

"That's right," I said quietly. "Who told you this?"

He fished in his pocket and pulled out a dog-eared notebook and thumbed through it. "Guy named Dillio," he said. "A Frank Dillio. Does art work. I think. You probably know him."

"I know him," I said dully.

"Seems there was a little bottle of some colorless stuff, supposed to be water and probably was, that Harrison used for his demonstration. We looked, but we couldn't find it. You remember what he did with it after he used it?"

"No," I said. "I don't. I wasn't paying too much attention. He may have left it on the table, or he may have put it in his pocket. If he left it on the table, it was probably thrown out by the charwomen."

"That could have happened," he said.

His voice was a faraway thing. I was faltering now, stunned by what I was thinking and by what his implications were. I was on the block; I was the goose hung high. I was the sucker who took the rap, the patsy-boy. I met Logan's thoughtful blue gaze directly.

"You have quite a theory there," I told him carefully. "And you don't know whether this informant of yours was a man or a woman?"

"No," he said. The word hung flatly on the quiet air.

He reached under the chair and found

his hat and brushed at it critically with the sleeve of his coat. He stood up. "I was wondering if you'd mind lending me the key to your office safe, or wherever it is you put the syringe. We'd like to have a look at it. Probably his insurance company will, too. Not that there's anything much in this idea, but you know how these things are."

I knew how they were. I took the key off my ring with stiff fingers that were surprisingly steady. I watched him walk down the hall, his feet padding gently and quietly on the thick rug. I closed the door on the picture of him smiling back at me, his finger leaning into the elevator button, the hat on the back of his head.

When the elevator had hummed down out of sound, I pushed myself away from the door and walked unsteadily into the kitchen and poured myself a drink that slopped around in the glass three fingers high. I drank to the double-cross, to the girl of my dreams. When I was through I hurled the glass against the far wall and stood staring down at the shattered pieces.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *Jezebel's Kiss*

I WOKE up the next morning with half the Mohave desert in my mouth, feeling the way a dead snake looks, and not really caring if I ever saw the sun come up again. I rolled over on my stomach and began chewing on one end of the pillow, while my mind staggered sickly down memory lane. The memories weren't pretty. They got me out of bed in a hurry. I'd had mornings like that before, but never on the same scale. It was my first bright new day as a murderer.

The phone opened up while I was standing under the cold shower, and I let it ring. It was too early for the morning run of social calls, even from Verna. After awhile the phone quit and didn't start

again until the coffee was bubbling up through the filter. I went into the living room and picked the set off the stand.

Logan's voice was as soft, drawling and professionally weary as it had been the night before. He said, "Mr. Cobb, this is Logan from the District Attorney's office. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"You aren't disturbing me," I said. I could see my reflection in the mirror over the telephone table. A little drawn, a little haggard, with the eyes not too sure of themselves, and the old nervous twitch pulling at one jaw muscle; the same old face, needing a tan, red over the high cheekbones where the razor had scraped

"That's fine," he said, as if he really meant it. "Look, Mr. Cobb, about that syringe we were talking about last night. Nobody around here seems to know much about it."

"It's pretty hush-hush material," I said.

"I sort of figured that. Did you put it back in the safe yourself after Harrison left yesterday?"

"No," I said. I found a spot on the wallpaper and began looking at it very hard, as if I could wish it away. "No. I asked Frank Dillio to do it for me. I wasn't feeling up to par. I left early."

"Dillio," he said, in the voice of a man busy writing something down. "Okay. I'll ask him. Maybe he knows something about it. Sorry again for bothering you."

The line clicked. I put the phone down on its stand. I went out in the kitchen and drank my coffee standing up, not tasting it. Then I walked back to the phone and dialed the office and asked for my receptionist.

"Cobb here, Wendy," I said. "Listen, honey. I've been out of touch for a little while. One of those nights."

She made sympathetic sounds, as if she had had one of those nights, too, or could at least remember them. "Why don't you stay home, Mr. Cobb?" she asked solicitously. "Everybody around here's com-

pletely frayed." Her voice went down into the cellar. "And there's some character around here who says he's from the district attorney's office, sticking his nose into things. What do you make of that?"

"It's not what I make of it, kitten," I told her. "It's what *he* makes of it. I'll tell you about it sometime. Look, I want you to get Dillio when he comes in, before the D.A.'s man has a chance to talk to him. Tell him to phone me fast. At home. I'll wait for it. And check this for me, will you? About Harrison. I want to know when they start hanging the crepe, and where. Can you find that out?"

"I already know," she said. "He's on display this afternoon, out at the mansion. All the staff's going out. The funeral's tomorrow. You think we'll get a holiday out of it?"

"Nothing would surprise me," I said. "And if anyone asks for me, I'll be out there this afternoon. This morning I don't feel so good."

"I know what you mean, Mr. Cobb. If anyone asks, I'll tell them."

I had time to smoke two cigarettes before Dillio called, his voice heavy and ragged from the long night behind.

"Something's gone wrong, Frank," I said. "Something that might put a lot of unpleasant publicity on the streets if it gets around. I thought you'd like to know about it before it blows up in your face."

"Oh, for gosh sake," he growled. "What's half an hour, here or there? I've come in late before, and when I'm out playing I don't leave my card around."

"Get your mind up on the sidewalk," I said harshly. "There's a long-gearred character around there waiting for you. He's an investigator from the D.A.'s office. He called around to see me last night, got the keys to the office, and went looking for the syringe Harrison used yesterday in that demonstration. What in hell did you do with it? He can't find it around the office."

"Why should he find it around here, charm boy? It just ain't here. Never was, after Mrs. Harrison called for it yesterday. And there, my brother, is a dish for you. Or maybe you've noticed?" He chuckled. "Y'know, one of these fine days I'm going to take me a trip out there and comfort the poor little widow. . . ."

The voice went on, but I lost track of the words. I took the receiver away from my ear and looked at it blankly. It was still making noises. I cut them off by dropping it on the cradle.

For a long time I stood there looking down at it and not really seeing it, not seeing anything. Then I stooped over, caught it up and spun the dial with a shaky forefinger. Time passed. A robin out on the windowsill made rapid, scolding noises, foraging for breakfast. The dial tone went off monotonously, jarring my eardrums. On the eighth ring the phone out at Stillwood Heights was lifted, held for a moment, and replaced gently. The line was silent.

I put the phone down and went out through the foyer into the hall, grabbing my hat and topcoat off the pegs, and took the elevator down to the basement garage. Twenty minutes later I was up in the hill country, with the city only a blur of molten sun on early morning haze and smoke, tooling the coupe along a private road as smooth as old wine, with all the day ahead of me.

ON A CIRCULAR graveled drive, I parked before a house not much larger than a national forestry reserve. I got out of the car and stood looking at the huge monument of a mansion and at the simple wreath, about the size of a bicycle tire, that covered part of the oaken front door.

Off to the right, from around the side of the house, came a tall, lean old codger with hair as white and soft as milk weed. He was attached to a short length of steel

chain. On the other end of the chain he had a dog as big as a shunting locomotive and just about as pretty. The dog was smiling and talking to himself in a low friendly voice that could have been heard anywhere east of Denver; the old man had no expression at all, and a 12-gauge pump gun under one arm. I didn't think he was out looking for ducks, unless they were the sitting kind. He looked like a man who would rather shoot them sitting.

He stopped about ten feet away, which made him eighty feet too close, and seemed to have trouble figuring out what he was going to do about me. He couldn't point the gun at me without turning the dog loose, and if he turned the dog loose there probably wouldn't be much of me left to point the gun at. That seemed to worry him.

He got a firmer grip on the shotgun and said in a gentle voice, "There is death and sorrow here, brother. I suggest you go away." He eyed me some more, spat at the dog's rump and added, "Vamoose."

"That's a nice dog you have there," I said. "And I'm a friend of the family. You mind if I go in?"

"But of course I mind," he said sonorously. "Pancho here minds too. Do you go friendly like, the way you came, or do I scatter you?"

"Let's try it again," I said. "I'm Jerry Cobb. I worked for Mr. Harrison. I would like very much to see Mrs. Harri-

son on some pretty important business. Would you like to see one of my cards?"

"Can't read." He chuckled dryly and puckered his mouth again.

I shrugged and started up the broad front steps. I could feel the hair rising on the back of my neck. The dog was still talking to himself, making slobbering noises that sounded like Old Faithful on the verge of eruption. I heard the shotgun pump being worked. I stopped on the top step.

"Unless you hanker to join that wreath on the door, friend," the old man said pleasantly, "I would hold it right there."

I held it. I heard him wrapping the chain around an iron stanchion in the lawn, then his feet creaked on gravel and made scuffing noises on the steps. The shotgun muzzle hit me in the back, not very hard, but hard enough to leave a mark that would have to be pressed out. His bony old hand made feathery fanning motions without actually seeming to touch me. He could probably have told me the make of the fountain pen in my jacket pocket when he stepped back.

"Clean," he said, disappointed. He went back and got the dog, and together they went up the stairs past me. The old man pushed on a button the size of a dinner plate, and a chime sounded somewhere deep within the house. We waited.

The dog sat down on his tail and eyed me with mournful hunger. After awhile

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the door opened, the old man said something, and I went in, into soft velvety darkness that hung in deep folds from the ceilings and crept along the paneled wall.

If I hadn't smelled death before, I thought I could then. I stood there, looking stupidly at the butler. I didn't want to go any further. I didn't want to look at Harrison. I hadn't touched the old man. I hadn't gone anywhere near him. And at that last moment, if I could have stopped her from going through with the deal, I would have done it and gone back to being Jerry Cobb, the guy with the bright future, with nothing in his past to bother him.

I wondered, standing there, if I could ever go back to that now. Somehow the thought of touching her now was like the thought of touching dead cold flesh. I took a long deep breath, and as I moved she came out of a room down the hall and stood there, in the cool half-light, only the deep V at her throat and the whiteness of her face showing against the gloom.

I let out my breath and closed my hands around the wetness in my palms and walked forward.

I looked at her for a long moment, and then I said, "I had to come, Mrs. Harrison, to tell you how sorry. . . ."

I heard a door close quietly off somewhere behind me as the butler went on his way. I looked down into Verna Harrison's eyes. Her hands were cool, and as I looked at her she twitched one lip and I knew that inside, down where it wouldn't jar against the surroundings, she was having one hell of a good time laughing at me, laughing at the whole rotten setup, probably even laughing at herself.

I went into the room after her and closed the door and started fumbling for a cigarette.

and buried her face against my shoulder. I blew the smoke over her head and watched it curling lazily in the still air, trapped in dusty rays of sunlight that fanned in through the leaded glass windows. I could feel her shivering against the pressure of my arms.

I said, softly, into her hair, "So you had to play it smart. After all I told you about Dillio suspecting something, you had to go ahead and do our thinking for us. Okay, sweetheart. You thought your way into this. Now start thinking your way out."

I let my cigarette drop on the deep soft rug and ground it in with my foot. An acrid smell of burning nap welled up around us as she pulled back from me. I reached down and caught her tightly by the wrist.

"You're all by yourself, lady," I said, without any feeling at all except a yawning emptiness in the pit of my stomach. "I haven't got a thing to gain by Harrison's death, not a single thing—except you. And angel, you're the last thing under this beautiful sun I want right now. Try to prove differently, Verna. Go right ahead and knock yourself out trying to prove differently."

Her breath was hot, harsh against my neck. She whimpered softly, "You're hurting my wrist, Jerry. Please, Jerry. . . ."

I flung her hand away and walked over to the window and stood looking out across the side lawn. I felt as dirty as an old bathtub.

"Jerry," she said. Her voice was flat, emotionless.

"Don't start that stuff," I growled. "I've been trying to make up my mind which one of you got the bright idea of turning me in. Because last night a man named Logan, a very nice, gentle man with a mind like a steel trap, was around to see me. He was so damn polite I wanted to break down and cry on his shoulder and tell him what a heel I'd been.

**W**HEN I had the smoke deep down in my lungs I took a long step forward and she slid quickly, easily into my arms

He had an idea maybe something was just a little bit rotten about the way your husband died, and it was an idea he wouldn't have had if someone hadn't phoned him. I wonder what a man might find if he had a record of all the calls placed from this house last night, Verna?"

Her eyes were very wide, with darkness beginning to spread across the pupils, swallowing up the irises. She took her lower lip between her teeth and bit into it.

"I had an idea I might come out here and settle both our accounts," I said quietly. "But I don't think I'll have to. I don't think I've got a thing in the world to worry about, sweetheart. Nobody knows I gave you that syringe and the insulin yesterday. All they know is Harrison brought them in himself. Nobody knows about the syringe, or what happened to it, except Dillio. By this time he'll have told Logan, so it's too late for you to buy him off. Too bad you didn't have the time to reach him—he'd have sold out fast to a girl like you. And when Logan finds out you took the syringe, what happens? He'll have himself a field day, asking you why. You've got perhaps half an hour before he gets it into his head to come out here and ask you."

She was still looking at me. Abruptly she turned and walked across the room toward a door set in one wall, opened it and went through. The door closed behind her. I took a handkerchief from my pocket and wiped the palms of my hands and scrubbed my face with it and looked out the window again. The old-timer with the dog was prowling aimlessly around near the high stone wall that bordered the estate. He looked as if he might be playing cowboys and Indians.

A little time passed. Finally I went over to the door and opened it and stepped through into a small antechamber that was almost completely dark except for a pool of light from a small vigil lamp on a bare oaken table. Heavy drapes were drawn

across the windows at one end of the room.

There were three of us in the room then, but one of us didn't care. He lay stiff and straight, with his hands folded peacefully on his chest, in a great shining hulk of a casket. Verna was standing at the foot of the casket.

There was a pungent smell of burning wax and air long ago used up. The candlelight gleamed on his face, was reflected from Verna's eyes. Her lips were parted just enough to show the soft pinkness of her tongue slowly caressing her teeth.

She said, almost in a whisper, "Do you think they'll ever catch up with me, Jerry? You said it was perfect. You thought it up all by yourself. I even remember the hour you thought it up, and the look you had on your face. Do you think anyone in this city is big enough to touch Brent Harrison's widow, Jerry?"

"You aren't so exclusive," I said brutally. "I wish to hell you had been."

She laughed then, just an echo bubbling up through her lips, and moved out into another room. When I followed her, she laughed up into my face. "You fool," she whispered. "Do you think you can just walk away from me? Do you think I don't know about Logan? He called here a long time before you came, a very nice man, very reasonable."

Her head rocked back, and the long, clean lines of her full throat gleamed. Her eyes were half-closed. Her fingers dug into my shoulders.

"Let Dillio worry about it," she whispered. "I didn't take the syringe away from there, Jerry. Just long enough to wash out and put it back in his desk. Nobody saw me, Jerry. . . ." She swayed toward me.

I had trouble talking. I was starting to shake all over. She slid her arm around my neck, softly, the way she always did.

She breathed in my ear, "We've got two lives left, Jerry, yours and mine. That's

all we'll need. Don't let him bother you, Jerry. He doesn't matter anymore."

I slid my arms around Verna and pulled her toward me.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### One-Man Woman

**I**T WAS raining the afternoon they buried Brent Harrison, a fine, drifting drizzle that fogged the windshield of my coupe and threw a mist over the jostling umbrellas out by the grave.

I sat behind the wheel of the car, watching the procession. Off to one side, aloof and looking almost pathetic, stood Logan, his old hat pulled down over his eyes. When the soggy clods were ringing on the metal casket case, he looked up and met my gaze and came quickly toward me, circling the knot of onlookers.

He got into the car beside me. "Funny thing," he said sombrely. "You look at all these people out here today and at all the flowers the old guy got, and you listen to the nice things they're saying, and you wonder what the point of it all is." He put a scarred pipe between his teeth and sucked on it noisily. "Take you, for instance. You hated the guy's guts. You said so yourself. Yet you're out here in the rain, just like me and all the others, to see him off. It doesn't make too much sense."

"You taking up philosophy on your off nights?" I asked him.

He laughed a little. "Not me, mister." He paused and turned his head to stare out toward the grave. "I just dropped over to tell you we finally found that syringe. That guy in your office, Dillio, had it all the time. Thought he put it back in your office, but it turned out he stuck it in his desk and forgot all about it."

He took his pipe out of his mouth and eyed it sourly, as if its taste offended him.

"Not that it made much difference, but if we get a tip, we have to follow it up. Well," he added, looking sideways at me, "I just thought I'd drop over and let you know about it. He's under the ground now. It's all over so far as I'm concerned."

"That's fine," I said. "Too bad you had to bother with it at all."

"You get used to it," he said, shrugging. He got out and stood with his back bowed to the wind, looking in at me. "Any time you're down town, drop in and see us. Glad to buy you a drink."

I said I'd do that. He nodded and slogged away through the wet grass to an old convertible and got in. The last I saw of him he was driving slowly down the hill, the canvas top fluttering in the wind.

I gunned the motor of the coupe and waited, and presently Frank Dillio's heavy form loomed out of the rain. The door opened and slammed, and he was swearing as rain tilted off the brim of his hat and trickled down his neck.

He leaned back in the seat and growled, "Let's get the hell out of here. I could use a drink."

"In a minute," I said. "I think we should pay our respects to Mrs. Harrison first."

"You pay 'em," he said. He pulled a flask from his pocket and wrapped his thick lips around its neck.

I got out of the car and walked along the gravel drive toward the grave, nodding to people I knew. She was standing alone, gazing somberly at the mound of fresh earth, and looking as much like a bereaved widow as any bereaved widow could look. I had to give her that much. She had it, all the way down the line.

I touched her arm and bent my head and said, loudly enough to be heard, "I don't know what to say, Mrs. Harrison. We all thought very highly of him, and of you. If there's anything I can do—"

I felt her hand clutch at my arm and she leaned against me heavily for a moment, her handbag banging against my side. I patted her arm gently and stepped away, flicking at the brim of my hat, and walked back to the car and started away down the drive.

"Well," Dillio said after a few minutes had gone by, "he sure picked the right season to die. Or maybe I should say, he sure had the right season picked for him. You couldn't ask for better funeral weather." He was becoming a little drunk. His eyes were red-rimmed and ugly, and the slackness of his mouth was showing too much.

I tooted the coupe along, picking up speed gradually. Dillio took another nip at the flask and peered blearily out through the windshield.

"Say," he said thickly, "what ever happened to that old hunting lodge you used to have up in the mountains, Jerry boy?"

I glanced at him briefly. "It's still there, or it was last fall. Why?"

He chuckled. "I thought I might like to take a little trip up there sometime, kiddo. You know how it is? The late Mr. Harrison's widow is a nice-looking doll." He looked at me again and laughed, harshly.

I slowed the coupe and put a cigarette in my mouth and began chewing on it. I said quietly, "What's on your mind,

Dillio? You sound like a man who might have an idea."

HIS chuckle slurred. "Me? Hell, Jerry, you know me better than that. I was just thinking, is all." He pushed the flask at me. "Care for a little nip, Jerry?"

"No," I said. I reached for the dash lighter and touched it to the cigarette in my mouth. My hand was shaking. After a while I said, "Okay, Dillio, let's have it. I don't like stalling around with guys like you. Let's lay it out on the table and have a look. If you've got anything, perhaps I'll buy."

"Perhaps you'll buy," he mimicked. He slewed sideways in the seat and stared at me insolently. "You think I'm so stupid I didn't see her come in and take that syringe and go down to the ladies' washroom with it, then bring it back and sneak it in my desk? Why the hell you think I told that cop I'd forgotten about it, sticking my own neck out?" He put his heavy hand on my arm.

"Look, fella," he went on thickly. "For me, I don't care. So you like the dame, and if she knocks her hubby off, that's okay by me. But this is a hard world, boy. Yeah, real hard. You got to pay for everything you get, no matter how you get it. I carried the ball for you, baby, and for the dame. All the way right across the line. All I got to do is go down

**NO LUCK?** - make a date with

**WILDROOT  
CREAM  
OIL**

WILDROOT  
CREAM OIL  
HAIR TONIC

also in  
**TUBES**

WILDROOT  
Cream Oil  
Hair Tonic

WILDROOT  
CREAM OIL  
HAIR TONIC

EASY TO USE  
NO WASTE  
OR SPILLING  
HANDY FOR  
TRAVELING

town and tell that guy Logan I made a mistake about the syringe, and what happens?"

"I see what you mean," I said softly.

"I knew you would," he said.

I smoked the cigarette down until it was searing at my lips, without feeling the pain or tasting the smoke. The car whipped along the smooth black highway, fish-tailing a little on greasy corners.

"It was pretty neat," he said, after awhile. "I still don't get it all, but I got all I need. You put the finger on some doc, or what?"

"Harrison died of a heart attack," I said coldly.

"So does a guy with his skull pushed down around his ears," Dillio sneered. "Sometimes it takes something to help the old ticker stop."

"You know all you need to know," I told him wearily. "What difference does it make to you?"

"Not much, pal. Not much. I just wouldn't want the same thing worked on me, if you were thinking along those lines. One you can get away with, but two might start the wheels rolling. You know what I mean?"

I knew what he meant. I eased my foot on the gas pedal as we reached the city outskirts. When I pulled into the curb in front of his apartment, he leaned over toward me, pushing his face into mine.

"We're pals," he said. "Just like always, eh, Jerry? I'm a guy who knows when to stop, if you see what I mean. You just tell the little lady to drop around tonight and have a talk with me."

"Not here," I said. "And not tonight."

"Tonight," he said, his voice going silky. "It doesn't have to be here."

"All right. You've got the whip. Up at the lodge. We can't take any chances now. That's as much to your advantage as it is to ours."

"I guess that's right," he said, thinking about it. "The lodge will be okay.

You better bring your own car, Jerry."

He grinned and flipped his hand at me and walked unsteadily across the pavement and into the apartment. For a long time I sat looking after him.

I gave him half an hour to settle down, to crack open a fresh bottle, to make himself a nice big "stew" of ideas and plans. Then I went back to the apartment house, driving around the block and parking on a side street.

Outside the door I stopped and threw my cigarette butt away and for a short time stood there in the rain, looking up at his window. Then I pulled my gloves tighter on my hands, flexing my fingers, and went in to pay him off.

\* \* \*

The lodge was set back in the pines, two hours hard driving from anywhere over a dirt road that hadn't been cleared since the first snowfall months before. Soft melting snow thudded against the underside of the car. I stopped on a hair-pin bend and took a small, spare drink from the bottle in the side pocket of the car and shook my head. I was feeling soggy inside and lightheaded, and my fingers were numb inside the gloves. There was a small fleck of blood on the back of the right one. I took the gloves off and bunched them up in a ball and threw them far out into a gully. When I shoved the bottle back in the door-pocket, it clinked against the .45 Colt automatic I carried there. I took the gun out and looked at it for a moment before putting it away again. Then I put the car in gear and drove on slowly.

I parked in front of the darkened lodge, turning the car around so its nose pointed back down the trail. Climbing out I stumbled and almost fell. I steadied myself with a hand on the door and shook my head again. There was a tightness in my throat that didn't come from whiskey,

and my heart was doing a ragged rumba. The air up there seemed awfully thin.

It took me a little while to get into the lodge. I walked around, lighting the kerosene lamps, brushing dust from the tables.

I moved carefully back and started a fire in the fireplace and remembered the gun in the car pocket and went out into the cool night air to get it. Far down the trail I could see a pair of lights coming up the trail, the beams hitting the tree-tops on the long rises. I stood watching them with the gun heavy and slack in my hand. When they were less than half a mile away I went back into the lodge and sat down in a chair. My stomach was moving like a lost soul.

I was still sitting there, the gun tucked down between the arm and the seat cushion, when her car ground to a stop in the front yard. A door opened and slammed. Her feet scuffled on the hard ground and she came in, smiling a small tight smile, her eyes dancing in the fire-light. Her hair was tucked carelessly under a small black beret, and her coat flapped open to show her dress and long, delightful legs. I sat still, watching her, and thinking sad thoughts.

I said, "Hello, angel." But I didn't move. There was a dull gnawing ache in my stomach and my back felt cold as a marble slab and wet.

She stood just inside the door, looking around, the small tight smile firmly in place. Then she walked across the room and stood looking down at me, her hands shoved deep in the slash pockets of her coat.

**S**HE said softly, intimately, "Hello, Jerry." The smile deepened. "Things don't really change, do they, Jerry? I mean, with people like you and me. It's always the same."

"Sure," I said. The words came hard. "Nothing ever changes. Not with you

and me. You didn't have to come, honey. You know what happened to Dillio, and why it had to happen to him. It would have been better for you in town, not up here."

She chuckled, just a thin dribble of hard sound on the stillness of the night air. In the fireplace a log slithered off the stack and fell to the hearth in a shower of sparks and noise. Her eyes didn't move from my face.

"You didn't have to come at all," I went on slurringly. "Right now I don't know why I killed him, unless it was just the habit, or maybe just the thought of you and Dillio. That's the way it was intended to be, all along, wasn't it?"

The corners of her mouth twitched. She murmured, "That's the way it was going to be, Jerry. I didn't think you'd kill him. I didn't think you had that much lion in you."

"It wouldn't have worked," I said wearily. "Not you and him. He wasn't in your class, kitten. I don't suppose it would have worked with me, either."

She shrugged. "You could have saved yourself the trouble. The police knew he went home with you. Even if that's all they know, you won't have much of a chance."

"I wasn't looking for any chances," I said. "I just wanted to be alone for awhile. And when it comes to chances, why try to kid me any longer, Verna? I often wondered how your husband felt when he was going out. Now I know."

The smile faded, lost itself in the inscrutability of her face. "Now you know," she said, and her voice was as toneless and as cold as the wind in the pines. She looked down at her watch.

"I figured maybe another half hour," I said. The dizziness was worse now and I felt as if there was a cold iron hand in my abdomen, kneading my intestines. The sweat was pulling my shirt in close against my body.

"That would be about right," she said. Her mouth was open a little, the pink tongue moving restlessly now over her teeth. She was enjoying herself as much as she ever would.

I thought back on it, all the way back to when I first thought of the plan. Just me, no other guys in on the deal, nobody else but us.

Now it was nobody else but her. It was still a good idea, good enough to carry her back to a couple of million dollars and everything she wanted without any risks, without any partner to crack or make a false step. It would have gone the same way with Dillio, after a time. She was strictly a one-man woman. One a month.

"Half an hour," I said dreamily. "Just thirty little minutes. You won't have very long to wait now, darling." I moved the pack of cigarettes on the arm of the chair and spilled three out on my hand and held them, looking at them. I'd just about make it, if I took long enough puffs.

One of the cigarettes rolled on my palm and fell down beside my leg. I moved stiffly, reaching for it, and I saw her hand move in her pocket. She had a gun there, just in case the party got rough. I kept the grin stiffly in place and fumbled for the cigarette until my fingers touched the rough, checkered surface of the Colt's grip. I took my time about it. I had so

much of it to waste I didn't know what to do with it all.

She saw the gun when it was out and moving. It wasn't moving fast, but it was too fast for her, too deadly for her, and it wasn't in the script. It wasn't anything we had planned together.

The gun made a deafening blast in the quiet room. The kick knocked it out of my hand. She stood in front of me, swaying under the shock of the slug. Her face was a smeared white and crimson blank and she was no longer beautiful, no longer young or attractive or desirable. She wasn't anything you'd look at twice, not now.

She fell very slowly, the little gun spilling from her pocket as she went down. I could see the gun clearly. It lay in a pool of firelight, one of those nickel and pearl toys not much bigger than a deck of cards.

I sat looking at the little gun and at my own on the floor beside it, waiting. I still had two of the cigarettes left, crumbled and battered with the tobacco falling out the ends from the crushing smack of the recoil.

I put one of them in my mouth and laid the other one down on the arm of the chair, very carefully so as not to lose it, and with the other hand I reached for a match.

THE END

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## PIX HAT

Arrested for assault and battery on another woman, a Gadsden, Ala., woman explained that the other woman had sat behind her last night in the picture show and had kept giggling and laughing and she thought she was making fun of the hat she was wearing.

—H. H.

# THIS GUN IS LOADED

"Stand against the wall!"  
Roger growled.



By **HENRY  
GUTH**

Reform-school graduate Roger Waite thought he was a tough guy—but he wasn't tough enough to beat his new pals.

**T**HROUGH the splashing rain Roger Waite saw the house, and the square warm yellow light of its window. He lurched out of the woods and crossed the road, slipping on the slick mud.

He knocked savagely on the door. Rain battered against the house with the roll of kettledrums. The sound seemed to block out the world.

The door opened. He slid in with a quick movement, gripping the revolver tightly.

"Don't move," he said, brandishing the gun.

Then he felt foolish.

A little boy, in levis, with a freckled face, had opened the door. And, inside, he saw an old man in a sweater sitting in a rocking chair reading by the light of a kerosene lamp.

Roger strode into the room.

"I'm going to hide out here," he said grimly. "This gun is loaded and I'll kill you if you try anything funny. I've already knocked out one man."

The old man looked up, his face mellow with lamplight, and puffed on his pipe.

"Take the lad's coat, Billy," he said. "It's dripping wet."

Roger pushed the boy away. He cried hysterically, "Do you want to get shot!"

The little boy tugged on his sleeve.

"Give Billy your coat, lad," said the old man. "He'll drape it on a chair by the stove. Might get a chill, wet that way."

Roger's eyes bugged out. He shifted the gun from one hand to the other and wiggled out of the coat. Billy took it and hung it on a chair and pushed it close to the pot-bellied stove.

Moisture dripped from Roger's hair, and a rivulet ran down into one eye. He wiped the eye with a ragged sleeve. "You're going to listen to me!" he cried, waving the gun. "If they come here, you're to tell them you never saw me. I'll have this gun pointed on you all the time. They might not come, but I'm staying until they stop hunting."

"Move over to the stove, lad. You're shivering."

Roger's teeth clicked. He moved to the stove and let the heat creep into him. It made him weak with relief.

"That's better," said the old man. "Now, what was it you wanted Billy and me to do?"

Roger motioned with the gun. "Stand by the wall," he said. "Facing it."

The old man rose from the chair, and shuffled to the wall. "Come, Billy, let's do as the lad says." He held out his hand. Billy took it and they faced the wall.

Roger stared at them. He didn't know what to do with the gun. It seemed kind of useless now. He scuffed his feet and glanced belligerently around the room. It was a small room, stuffed with furniture. It was comfortable and thoroughly lived in.

Roger had never seen anything like it, he thought bitterly. Just tenements and reform school, where you learned to call guards 'screws'. When you came in for swiping shoes and treated you like a run-away slave. They rode hell out of you, just for the fun of it. When you sassed back, you took a beating. Finally you couldn't stand it anymore. You jumped a screw when he turned away after beating you, and you got his gun. You whacked his head with the butt of it, felling him—and ran. You got away, but they were after you.

He jerked the gun up suddenly. The kid had turned around and was staring blandly at him, wiggling bare toes in the carpet.

"Face the wall." Roger growled ferociously.

The old man gently turned the kid around. "Don't annoy the lad, Billy," he said. "He's having a hard time figuring things out."

"Why?" Billy demanded. "I'm tired of looking at this old wall, Gramps."

"Listen to the rain on the roof," Gramps said soothingly. "Hear how it drums. You know what that means? It means God is washing the world clean. Tomorrow everything will be bright and sunny."

**R**OGER kicked the coal scuttle with his heel impatiently. "Where's the food?" he growled. "Tell me, or I'll . . ."

"You hear, Billy?" Gramps said. "Show the lad where the pantry is."

Billy obligingly twirled about and started running across the room.

"Stop!" Roger yelled.

He crouched, swinging the gun angrily from one to the other.

"Get back there!" he said. "Stay together! I don't want you sneaking off behind my back." He waited until Billy had shuffled glumly to the wall again. "Where's the pantry?"

Gramps put his arm gently across the boy's shoulder.

"Well, lad, it's out back of the house. But you won't want to leave us here alone while you find it."

Roger glared. "Smart guy, huh?" he said. "Okay, you can both march ahead of me to the pantry. Don't try anything funny."

He waited apprehensively, gripping the gun tight, until they were across the room. He followed immediately behind.

"There's beans and ham left over from supper," said Gramps, looking about reflectively. "And a chunk of cake in the bread box. Jeanne baked it this morning, when she brought Billy over." He patted Billy's head fondly. "Cake never lasts long in this house."

"Bring it out!" Roger barked.

Gramps said to the boy, "Set out the beans, ham and cake for the lad. I'll put on a pot of coffee."

Roger stood glowering uncertainly in the doorway until they had the table laid out and the coffee percolated.

"Okay. You can face the wall again."

He sat down gingerly and scowled at their backs. He placed the gun carefully on the oilcloth beside the plate. The aroma of beans and ham made him almost faint. He plunged in.

From time to time he looked up, mouth full and chewing feverishly. His hand hovered over the gun. But Gramps and Billy stood quietly against the wall. Rain drummed and drummed on the roof.

He thought, half gloatingly, that not even a bloodhound could track him in this weather.

"Billy," he snapped. "More coffee."

The kid looked inquiringly up at Gramps.

"Fetch the lad some coffee, Billy."

Billy hurried to fetch the copper pot from the stove. At Roger's elbow, he confidently poured coffee into his cup. He seemed not to notice the gun muzzle looming in his face.

Roger waited until he was back at the wall.

"This is good coffee," he said reluctantly, sipping. "I haven't . . ."

A door slam sounded in the direction of the living room, and then eager footfalls came pattering through the house. Roger leaped to his feet, kicking the chair out from under him.

## Shocking Facts about PIN-WORMS



You may think that Pin-Worm infection is rare and strikes only "careless" families—that, therefore, your children are safe.

Don't you believe it! Medical experts report that at least *one out of every three persons* examined, adults and children alike, was a victim of Pin-Worms. And this embarrassing, annoying condition can spread through entire families.

There's no need to take chances with this ugly pest. A medically approved, scientific treatment now destroys Pin-Worms easily and effectively. This remedy

is Jayne's P-W Vermifuge developed by the famous Jayne Co., specialists in worm remedies for over 100 years.

So watch for the warning signs, especially the tormenting rectal itch. Then ask your druggist for P-W, the small, easy-to-take tablets that act in a special way to bring real relief from Pin-Worms.

**Just Remember:**  
P-W for Pin-Worms



A girl about his own age flounced in, taking off a wet slicker.

"Gramps," she said. "I didn't—" She saw the gun. Her eyes widened. "—find you in the living room."

She stood as though caught in mid-stride. Drops of moisture shone on her smooth flushed face and her yellow hair.

"Stand against the wall!" Roger growled, jerking with the gun.

She didn't move. She just stood looking at him.

"Do as the lad says, Jeanne," Gramps advised gently. "Don't make his work harder for him."

Jeanne seemed to wake from a dream. She snapped her eyes away. She placed her slicker on a chair and went to stand primly beside Gramps.

Roger looked at their backs with dismay. Now what?

They grouped themselves around the stove in the living room. Roger stood back a few feet and covered them with the gun.

"I have to go home," Jeanne said suddenly.

Roger hysterically tightened his grip on the gun butt. "Shut up," he said.

She ignored him. She picked her slicker from the hook where she had placed it. "Mom says to tell you that Billy can stay until Sunday if he wants," she said, and put on the slicker. She walked to the door.

A shout stuck in Roger's throat, as though the passageway was badly worn.

He lurched across the room and yanked her back. He waved the gun in her face.

"This is loaded," he croaked. "I could kill you!" He shoved her roughly toward the stove.

Gramps caught her. "Here, lad," he said. "All you have to do is speak." He put his arm protectingly around the girl and she peered at Roger with a mixture of alarm and curiosity.

Roger stood spraddle-legged, menacing. "She ain't going home," he said flatly. "She'd call the sheriff in two minutes."

Gramps rubbed his wrinkled chin reflectively. "Well, it looks as if any way you work it, the sheriff will know. When her mother misses Jeanne, she'll naturally call the sheriff. Oley will know right away what is up."

Roger glowered indecisively. Finally he grated, "She stays. I'd rather have her where I can watch her."

GRAMPS looked at him peculiarly, and nodded. He patted Jeanne's shoulder. "The lad needs help, Jeanne. He's in bad trouble. I expect we'll have to pitch in and see what we can do."

The girl continued to peer doubtfully at Roger. Her puzzled blue eyes inspected him from head to foot slowly.

"I think he does need help," she said gravely at last.

Roger stared at the girl's fresh, lovely face.

"An old man gets tired standing so much," Gramps said, shuffling to a chair and sinking carefully into it. He ignored Roger's swinging gun arm. "Ahh." He looked blandly about. "Perhaps the lad will explain his difficulty. From the looks of him, he's not a country boy. Where you from, lad?"

"Chicago," Roger gulped unconsciously.

And then, unaccountably, it all came pouring out, in a bitter, galling stream. He curled his lip and spewed out the words. About never having a chance and always having to fight for what he wanted. About being hungry and hate-filled. About sadistic "screws." How a guy could stand only so much—

When he finished talking he found himself in a chair, gun dangling loosely from his fingers, and encircled by a ring of three thoughtful faces. He realized angrily that he had talked too much. He felt naked and exposed, and lifted the gun again to resume authority.

Gramps rocked in the chair. "That's a bad story," he said soberly. He rocked

and rocked, and the cricking of his chair filled the room. Finally it stopped. "Yes," he said. "I think we understand how it was."

Billy climbed sleepily onto Gramps lap. The chair began to rock again.

The girl shifted from one slim leg to the other, and looked acutely uncomfortable standing by the stove.

"Sit down!" Roger snapped.

He glared until the girl was seated across the room from him. "Now," he brandished the gun. "Go ahead and sleep. And don't try anything funny."

The soft chair seduced his body, and his eyelids grew heavy with fatigue. The stove pinged from time to time, and the girl got up twice and put in coal from the scuttle. It glowed like a tired bulb and threw out a halo of warmth. The redness blended into neon lights of cities and he dreamed of being beaten by a guard.

He woke with a start, a beam of sun from the window blinding his eyes. He winked rapidly, saw the room was empty, and jumped to his feet. He lurched into the kitchen.

"Morning, lad," Gramps said from the table. "You looked a mite weary, so we didn't wake you."

Roger stumbled against the icebox and stared about with wild eyes.

Billy was industriously scooping sugar from a bin into the sugar bowl. Jeanne was cracking eggs into a pan at the stove. Coffee bubbled in the pot and the aroma of bacon filled the room.

"Sit down, lad. You'll have your breakfast in a minute."

Roger gaped at him, then sat down opposite him at the table. He placed the gun beside his plate, and glanced apprehensively out the window.

Everything was glistening. He saw red and yellow flowers in a garden, and neat rows of vegetable tops basking in the sun. He saw a grape arbor and a swing hanging from the sturdy limb of a huge oak

tree. The forest ranged behind like a soft green tapestry.

There might be manhunters out there.

He shook his head nervously and turned when the girl brushed his elbow. He clawed frantically for the gun.

But her hands were full of platters. She placed one of eggs and one of bacon before him. She fetched the coffee pot and filled his cup first, then the others. She poured a tall glass of milk and placed it before Billy. Then she took her place to Roger's right.

Roger thumped the gun down.

He saw how close it was to her left hand, and snatched it up again. He glared around suspiciously, then pushed it in his belt.

**B**ILLY happily drank his milk, and squashed a fried egg with his fork. "God has washed the world clean," he observed, screwing around to peer out the window. "Hey, Jeanne, can I ride your bike?"

Gramps chewed bacon thoughtfully. "Not this morning, Billy. The posse will be over soon."

Roger dropped his fork with a clatter. "You went out!" he accused bitterly. "You went out and called the sheriff!" He kicked back the chair and stood up, yanking the gun from his belt. "Damn you!"

The girl calmly put another egg on his plate, and pushed the salt and pepper shakers within reach.

"No we didn't," she said, and went on eating.

"Sit down, lad," Gramps said. He spooned sugar into his coffee cup and stirred. "We haven't been out of the house. But Jeanne will be missed, as I told you. Oley is probably on his way now. Eat your eggs."

Roger sat down and ate his eggs. He was in a daze and scarcely aware of what he was doing.

Later he shuffled aimlessly through the

house, and finally sank into a chair in the living room. The sound of dishes rattling remotely in the kitchen didn't alarm him. He couldn't seem to think straight.

He heard the rear screen door creak and watched, almost with detached curiosity, as the top of Jeanne's head went by the window outside. She soon reappeared carrying a bouquet of flowers. Gramps came in, stuffing a curve-stemmed pipe with tobacco. He settled comfortably in the hollowed-out seat of the big armchair, and lifted a magazine from the table.

Jeanne came in with the flowers. Their bright color briefly focused everyone's attention. Then Billy gravitated in and perched alertly in the cushioned window alcove.

They were all here now, waiting expectantly.

Roger squirmed uncomfortably in the chair. The gun was digging into his stomach, so he pulled it from his belt and dropped it on an adjacent footstool. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

As the silence increased, his nerves tensed. He opened his eyes and stiffened his leg. It was trembling. Then his arm started shaking. Desperately he concentrated on controlling them.

The other arm began shaking violently. His head vibrated in jerks. He thought wildly that he was going to fly apart.

A cool hand pressed his forehead. He found himself peering with dread into the girl's frightened face. But she didn't go away. She kept rubbing his forehead and smoothing back his hair.

He calmed down. The shaking went out of his limbs.

Jeanne peered at him questioningly, critically, then resumed her position in the chair opposite.

"Here comes somebody!" Billy yelled.

Roger scrambled frantically to the window and looked out. He saw a man coming down the road. He swore and dashed back to pick up the gun. When he re-

turned to the window, the man was walking past the house, not even glancing at it.

He wiped his face. He brandished the gun.

"Against the wall!" he cried.

They obediently followed his directions. But the girl glanced at him reproachfully. Billy stared glumly at the wall as though he was sick and tired of looking at it. Gramps puffed his pipe.

Roger sat tensely on the sofa arm with the gun leveled on their backs, and darted quick glances out the window.

The gun became heavy and he shifted hands.

"There's an old squirrel rifle upstairs," Gramps mused. "And a 30-30 carbine out back. Some pistols somewhere, too."

"Shut up," Roger said.

He thought about the weapons, and shivered. If, during the night, they had . . .

"Here they come!" cried Billy.

He had twisted around and was craning his neck to see out the window. With a guilty expression he faced the wall again. Roger tore to the window. A stricken sob gurgled in his throat. He smashed a pane of glass with the gun.

About fifteen men came striding down the road, with glinting rifle barrels in the crooks of their arms. They paused in a group about two hundred yards away.

Then they dispersed. Roger twisted around frenziedly, trying to follow their movements through several windows as they crept through trees and brush to surround the house. He swung back to the front window and thrust the gun out the broken pane. One man was still out there, standing alone in the middle of the road. Something glinted brightly on his shirt, and a shotgun was cradled in his arm.

"That's Oley," Gramps said suddenly at his shoulder. He blew a puff of smoke in Roger's face. "We had better get busy."

Before Roger could yell for him to stop,

he was shuffling from the room, with Billy scurrying after him.

Roger leveled the gun on the girl. "Don't you move," he grated, "or I'll kill you."

He saw the sheriff standing about fifty feet from the house, at the picket gate.

"Hello," he yelled. "In the house?"

Roger fired blindly.

The kickback rammed his hand against a ragged edge of glass. He swore and looked out to see what effect his shot had.

The sheriff stood unruffled by the gate, still cradling the shotgun.

"You're surrounded, son," he shouted.

"You better come out."

Roger sucked desperately at his bleeding wrist. Words of rage choked in his throat.

**H**E FELT a gentle tugging at his arm, and Jeanne was briskly wrapping the wound. He stared at her incredulously.

Gramps and Billy clumped in, carrying guns and boxes of cartridges. Gramps started shoving shells into the weapons. He went about it unhurriedly, still puffing on his pipe.

Roger's mouth fell open.

"You haven't a chance," the sheriff yelled. He paused a few seconds. "Let Gramps and the children out. You don't want to cause any killings."

Gramps handed the 30-30 carbine to Jeanne, and without a word she took up a position at a side window.

Billy picked up a revolver with two hands and carried it purposefully to the opposite window.

Gramps came alongside Roger and, with the butt of his squirrel rifle, smashed out another pane of glass. He thrust the long barrel through the opening and squinted down the sights.

Roger backed off as though suddenly confronted by a leper. He stumbled against the coal scuttle and dropped to his knees. He looked around the room with horror.

He looked at Billy grimly resting the

revolver butt on the window sill, his small finger curled around the trigger, his quick eyes following a movement in the brush outside. At Jeanne, white-faced and tense, aiming a Winchester unsteadily through a pane of glass, her mouth drawn into a hard slash and at Gramps standing like an executioner, with a bead on the sheriff. Roger climbed weakly erect and leaned on the stove. The gun dropped from his fingers and clattered on the floor. "Stop!" he said hoarsely.

Gramps held his rifle loosely in his gnarled hand. "Have you decided, lad?"

Roger stared dumbly at the floor, and his knees sagged.

"Fetch the brandy," Gramps snapped.

He swung across the room and lifted Roger. He settled him in the chair.

"My Lord," Roger said. "You're all crazy—crazy as bats." He wiped his face and shook his head. His thoughts were incoherent. "I can't . . ."

Something cool was thrust against his teeth, and his head tilted back. He felt the brandy burn down his throat.

"Put the guns away, Billy. The lad has decided he doesn't want help," he heard Gramps say.

He heard Billy racking up the weapons and carrying them away. And then a door opening and heavy feet clumping in.

Gramps was speaking again. "Morning, Oley. Send the men around to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Jeanne, put on the pot."

"This him?" the sheriff asked.

Roger sat dumbly in the chair, looking at his shoes.

"He's decided to give himself up," Gramps said.

"Is that so?" the sheriff muttered suspiciously. "Were those guns I saw Billy carrying out as I came in?"

"Yep," said Gramps. "We was aiming to help the lad; but I don't think he could stand to see real killing."

*(Please continue on page 130)*

# A CORPSE IN TIME....

When the fiery, stacked widow roared into the swank funeral parlor, demanding to see her husband's remains, there was only one hitch—the coffin was bare!



Belinda Starr snapped,  
"I'm taking over  
now...."

*Exciting Detective Novel*

**By**

**ROBERT MARTIN**



**CHAPTER ONE**

**No Body at All**

**T**HE sickly sweet odor of flowers almost suffocated me. From somewhere there was organ music, soft and mournful and far away. I stood on a blood-red carpet, my hat in my hand, and I waited. There was a sudden whirring sound behind me. I turned quickly. An old-fashioned wall clock was gathering its strength to strike. The whirring wind-

up stopped, and the strokes began—slowly, spaced out. I thought it would never make it, but it did. Eleven times.

A door opened quietly, and a girl entered. She was dressed in solid black. Her tall figure was something to dream about on rainy nights. I looked at her face. White skin, faint hollows beneath the cheek bones, a full-lipped mouth. Just the faintest touch of lipstick. Gray eyes, big and solemn. She stared at me gravely.

"Fiske is the name," I said. "Mr. Blair phoned me."

"Oh, yes." Her voice was low and throaty, almost a whisper. "I am Miss Fabian, Mr. Blair's secretary. This way, please."

I followed her through the door and down a wide red-carpeted hall. There were many mirrors, and gilt furniture. The smell of the flowers became almost overpowering, and I could hear the muted organ music more clearly. Miss Fabian walked slowly, with measured steps. Her hips swayed just a little. She stopped before a door studded with brass and said in her throaty voice: "Just a moment, please." She stepped inside and closed the door. Once more I waited.

I was lighting a cigarette when she came out. "Come in," she said in her whispering voice.

I held up my cigarette, leaned close to her, and whispered hoarsely: "May I smoke?"

"Of course," she said clearly and loudly. She had a nice voice.

I said, "Thanks," went through the door, and closed it behind me. I was alone with W. Arlington Blair.

No flower smell here. No organ music. Just pictures. Hundreds of neat little photographs of men and women, covered two walls, from the ceiling to the floor. They made me dizzy.

I pulled my gaze away from them and looked at W. Arlington Blair.

He was lying on a silver brocaded divan

His eyes were closed. A long slender man, elegantly clad in a black double-breasted suit. His hair was white, carefully combed and trimmed, and a narrow white mustache accentuated the even sun-lamp tan of his face. On a low table beside him was a soda syphon, a silver bowl of ice cubes, and a bottle of scotch whiskey. A tall thin glass was supported on his chest by a slender white hand. The glass contained two inches of liquid and a melting ice cube.

He opened his eyes and spoke at the ceiling. "Fiske," he said wearily, "the Blair Memorial is ruined."

W. Arlington Blair was not a friend of mine, but I knew him casually. The most important thing I knew about him was that he charged a minimum of two thousand dollars to embalm and bury a corpse. But the lucky corpse got a deluxe funeral, with all the famed Blair trimmings. He had the biggest and fanciest undertaking establishment in town. The Blair Memorial boasted a well trained staff of sleek and soft-voiced assistants, and a fleet of hearses, ambulances, and pall bearer's cars. If W. Arlington Blair was ruined, it could only be because people had stopped dying.

"Why?" I asked.

He swung his feet to the floor and placed his glass on the table. "This is a crisis, Fiske," he said solemnly. "My business is at stake, my personal reputation is in jeopardy." He paused, and poured more scotch into his glass, not bothering to add soda, "I have been called upon to lay away the mortal remains of Walter R. Starr," he went on. "I presume you have heard of him?"

It was like asking me if I'd ever heard of the President of the United States. Walter R. Starr was—had been, rather—the most famous criminal attorney in the mid-west. His death the day before had been front page news from coast to coast. He had dropped dead following a dinner

party in the bachelor apartment of a Dr. John Wayle. The dinner guests had included Walter Starr's maiden sister, Abigail, and Myra Duval, his recently divorced wife. The papers had made a point of mentioning the latter fact, together with the information that Walter Starr's second wife, his bride of two months, was in Texas visiting her mother who was ill. He had died suddenly of a heart attack, the papers said, and they had plastered their stories with photos of Starr's pretty young wife, as well as shots of his equally pretty, but older, ex-wife. As a private detective, I tried to keep abreast of local events, but up until a half hour before I had felt nothing but a detached interest in the death of Walter Starr.

I said to W. Arlington Blair: "Congratulations. That should be a juicy hunk of business for you."

He shook his head slowly. "I can't bury Walter Starr—if I don't have his body."

"Some other undertaker beat you out?"

He waved a hand impatiently. "Certainly not," he snapped. "Starr's sister arranged for me to handle the funeral—in the absence of Mrs. Starr. She selected the casket, and the type of service. Then I received a telephone call from Mrs. Starr in Texas. She said that Mr. Starr's sister had just called her to tell her of her husband's death. She asked me to refrain from embalming the body until she arrived here. She was quite upset, but I gathered that she wanted a Dr. Dixon to do an autopsy. Naturally, I respected her wishes—after all, she is the wife of the deceased. When I informed Mr. Starr's sister, she became very angry and demanded that I proceed with burial preparations. I told her as tactfully as possible that I was legally bound to comply with Mrs. Starr's request. In the meantime, my assistants performed what services they could for Mr. Starr, and his body was placed in

its casket in one of our refrigerated chambers—we call it the Sunrise Room. This evening, Mr. Starr's sister, Abigail came, accompanied by Dr. John Wayle and a Miss Duval." They viewed the body for a short time, and then left. I accompanied them to the door. A short time later I made my rounds of the Memorial, and when I entered the Sunrise Room I saw to my horror that Mr. Starr's casket was empty." He took a long pull at the scotch. "It's fantastic—nothing like it ever happened before. The body is just—gone. And Mrs. Starr is due here sometime tonight."

"Have you notified the police?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "No—not yet. If it gets out, I'll be ruined. You've got to do something. I'll pay you. . . ."

"My rates are standard," I told him, "whether I do you any good or not."

"Fiske," he said desperately, "I've heard you are clever. Find that body before morning and there's a thousand in it for you. Two thousand—anything. . . ."

I THOUGHT fast. Body-snatching was a new racket to me, but a job was a job. "Does anyone beside yourself know that the body is gone? I mean, have you told anyone?"

"No. I closed the empty casket, and came right down and called you. Come on, I'll show you." He stood up and moved to the door.

"Wait," I said. "I've got to know something." I pointed at the bewildering array of photographs on his walls. "Who are these—your in-laws?"

He smiled. It was a sad, loving smile. "Those, Mr. Fiske, are photos of all the persons laid to rest by the Blair Memorial. They are all there, from my first body, to Mr. Starr." He leveled a long finger at a vacant space close to the ceiling. "He will go in there."

"If we find him," I said.

He placed a hand around my shoulders and gazed deep into my eyes. "I'm counting on you, Fiske," he said huskily, like a losing football coach in the third quarter. "I know you're clever—"

"Sure," I said, "I'm clever as hell." I shook his arm off and started across the room. But I stopped. A shrill scream sounded from beyond the door.

W. Arlington Blair looked at me, his eyes bugged out. I jumped to the door, jerked it open. In the hall Miss Fabian was biting her knuckles and backing away from the muzzle of a long-barreled .22 target pistol with an over-sized sight. The gun was held firmly in the hand of a red-haired girl with blazing blue eyes. Miss Fabian turned toward W. Arlington Blair. "She—she wants to see Mr. Starr," she quavered. "I told her that the Sunrise Room was closed for the night—"

"Nuts," the red-head snapped. "I'm tired of being pushed around by Abigail, and the rest of them. I'm taking over now. . . ." She squeezed her eyes shut, and swayed a little. The gun drooped in her hand, and I thought she was going to fall.

I sprang forward and placed an arm around her. Gently I relieved her of the .22 and dropped it into my coat pocket. She leaned against me. "I'm so tired. . . ."

W. Arlington Blair strode forward and stuck out his chin. "Who are you?" he said coldly.

I felt her body stiffen, and she pushed herself away from me. She flung a loop of red hair back from her forehead and said in a steady voice: "I am Mrs. Walter Starr, and I demand to see my husband."

Blair's tall frame seemed to sag. "I—I—," he stuttered, "of course, Mrs. Starr. You shall—right away. . . ." He shot a helpless glance at me.

I grasped the red-head's arm firmly and led her into Blair's office. I lowered her into a deep leather chair. I heard Blair speak crisply to Miss Fabian. "That

will be all, Florence." He came into the office and closed the door.

The red-head sat with her head against the back of the chair with her eyes closed. I sized her up. She was all right. A straight nose, a firm chin, a well-shaped mouth, a healthy tanned skin. Her loose gabardine topcoat hung open, revealing a dark green man-style sport shirt, a narrow tooled belt with a silver buckle in a steer's head design, and tailored grey flannel slacks. On her feet were short white wool socks and brown moccasins.

Blair held out a tinkling glass to her. "Please drink this." He sounded like a mother trying to get a kid to take a dose of castor oil.

The red-head opened her eyes and took the glass. I noticed that she didn't wear nail polish. She smiled faintly. "Thank you. I'm sorry to have caused such a scene, but it was a shock, hearing about Walter, and I haven't slept." She took a swallow of the drink, leaned her head against the back of the chair. "Tell me about Walter," she said in a dead voice "All of it."

Blair glanced a question at me, and I gave him the nod. He cleared his throat and began to talk. He told it just like the newspapers had printed it. When he had finished, she opened her eyes. "Thank you," she said quietly.

Blair cleared his throat again. "Madam, I offer you my sincere sympathy. But death must come to all of us, and if the Blair Memorial can do anything to ease your grief, we shall be happy to do so. Your husband will be buried with the simplicity and dignity befitting his respected station in life. We—"

I stopped him by holding up a hand. He coughed a couple of times, and turned back to the scotch bottle. I said to the red-head, "You've had a rough time. Let me drive you home. You'd better get some rest, so that you'll be fresh for your husband's burial."

She fixed her eyes upon me. "There isn't going to be any burial," she said evenly.

I heard Blair's startled gasp. I took a deep breath, and then said: "How's that, ma'am?"

"There isn't going to be any burial," she repeated.

"You just come along with me—"

"Stop it!" she snapped. "I mean what I say. I'm not a child. My husband hated funerals. He considered them barbaric, indecent, a carry-over from the jungle. No matter what arrangements his scheming sister and Myra have made, I won't permit them to go through with them. Walter was my husband, and I'm going to see that his wishes are carried out." She stood up, and her blue eyes were blazing again.

W. Arlington Blair fluttered like a moth around a hundred watt bulb. "But, my dear woman—no burial? What would you suggest? There's got to be a burial.

"Shut up!" she said sharply, and she took a fountain pen and a check book from her topcoat pocket. "I'll pay you for your trouble up until now. And then I want to hire one of your hearses, or ambulances, or whatever you call them, and driver. I want my husband's body placed in it, and then I'll dispense with your services." She placed the check book on the table and poised her pen. "How much?"

**B**LAIR was bug-eyed again. His mouth opened, but nothing came out but a stuttering sound. I was standing beside the red-head, and I sneaked a look at the balance on her check stubs. It was well over five figures.

Blair found his voice. "Madam—this is highly irregular. I can't allow you to do such a thing.

She swung on me. "You," she snapped. "You look as if you might have some human feelings. What does this ghoul charge for his ghastly business?" Her

voice was steady, but I could see that she was fighting for control.

I shot a warning glance at Blair, and said to the girl, "The charge is two thousand dollars, ma'am. That includes the casket and the use of the hearse. But we will require identification before we can permit you to remove the body of Mr. Starr."

Her lips tightened. She flipped out a leather wallet and handed it to me. I leafed through the cellophaned compartments. Driver's license, car insurance cards, a snapshot of the late Walter Starr, and a Social Security card bearing the name of Belinda Ayers. She saw me looking at it, and she said crisply: "That was my maiden name," and she held up her check book for me to see the engraved name on each check. Belinda Starr. I handed her the wallet. She was Mrs. Walter Starr as far as I was concerned. I turned to Blair.

"Please have Mr. Starr's casket placed in a hearse," I told him, "and brought around to the front entrance."

"But—but—" he sputtered.

I winked at him. "When Mr. Starr's sister arrives tomorrow, tell her that Mrs. Starr has taken charge of the body. That will relieve you of all responsibility."

He got it then, and his dumbfounded expression charged into one big smile.

Belinda Starr began to write in her check book. "To whom shall I make this payable?" she asked.

Blair started to speak, but I broke in hastily: "To Lee W. Fiske, ma'am. I am business manager for the Memorial."

She nodded, and her pen moved swiftly. Blair stopped smiling, but there wasn't much he could do about it. The girl tore out the check and handed it to me. I thanked her, folded it neatly, and placed it in my wallet. Blair watched the check disappear with the expression of a starving dog in a butcher shop. He swallowed a couple of times, but he didn't say anything.

I shot him a quick glance, and jerked my head toward the door. He moved out into the hall like a man in a trance. I followed him, and whispered, "If she insisted upon seeing the body, the whole thing would blow up right now. This will give us a little time. Get that hearse loaded right away."

He said stiffly: "Your strategy is questionable, Fiske, but I'll cooperate. However, that check, really—"

"Money, money," I broke in. "Is that all you guys think about?"

He glanced up and down the long hall. "Where is Miss Fabian?" he muttered. "Florence, Florence," he called loudly.

He didn't get an answer.

Belinda Starr came out of Blair's office. Her face was pale, and her lips trembled. She touched my arm. "Could—could I see him before I take him away?"

W. Arlington Blair had a sudden spasm of coughing, and he turned away. I said quickly: "We'll have to hurry—if you want to get him out of here before they come back. There was some talk of a wake."

"A wake?" Her lip curled. "Who's bright idea was that? Myra's?"

"Myra?"

"Walter's ex-wife," she said bitterly. "Myra Duval. Didn't you know? He divorced her to marry me. She's a good friend of Walter's sister, Abigail." She lowered her eyes, and her shoulders shook a little. "Please hurry. All I want is to be alone with Walter—and to do what I'd promised him I'd do."

I almost asked her what she had promised her husband she would do, but I decided that I'd better get going before she took another notion to peek into her husband's casket—an empty casket. So I patted her arm, shot a meaningful glance at Blair, and led her down the hall. As we passed the old-fashioned clock in the reception room, I saw that the hands stood at ten minutes until midnight. The full-

figured Miss Fabian was nowhere in sight. I guided Belinda Starr out into the cool night, and I led her down a flagstone walk to a cement drive curving down to the street. She stood close beside me, her face a pale blur in the gloom. My hand closed over her .22 pistol in my pocket, and I said: "Gun talk is pretty strong. Did you have to use it?"

She shivered. "I suppose it was silly of me. But in the last twenty-four hours I've been through a lot. Abigail's telephone call telling me about Walter, and the plane ride here, and that girl—Mr. Blair's secretary—was so impersonal, and she asked questions. I had the gun in my hand before I knew what I was doing." She paused, and then said: "Mother lives on the outskirts of Fort Worth. I was out behind the house shooting at tin cans when the call came. I didn't even change clothes—I came just as I was. I knew I'd have to get here quickly, to keep Abigail and Myra from taking over. They hate me so. . . ."

"Why?" I asked.

She was silent for a moment, and then said: "Abigail hates me because her brother divorced Myra, her dearest friend, to marry me. And Myra hates me because—well, isn't it obvious? I was Walter's secretary when he married Myra. But he soon found out about her drinking, her ugly fits of rage, and the other men she couldn't leave alone. He stood it for two years, and then he divorced her. Later, he—"

"Married you?" I said gently.

She nodded. "Two months ago. I had loved him for a long time. I was glad when he divorced Myra. He used to talk to me about her. He was almost twice my age, but that didn't matter—I adored him. For two months, with him, I was happier than I'll ever be again. And now. . . ." Her voice broke, and she buried her chin in the collar of her coat.

From up the drive I heard the soft

purr of a motor, and I saw a car with dimmed lights glide toward us. I touched the girl's arm. "Here it comes," I said.

She lifted her chin and stood like a statue.

The long black hearse stopped with a velvet touch of brakes. I stepped to the driver's door and opened it. "I'm driving," I said to the man inside. "Mr. Blair's orders."

The driver, a young fellow in a black uniform, got out quickly. He was glad, I guess, to be relieved of a midnight chore. I held the door open for Belinda Starr, and she slid under the wheel to the right side of a the seat. As I got in, I saw her cast a quick glance through the glass partition at the dull gleam of the bronze casket lying behind us. Then she turned around and stared straight ahead.

I asked the jack-pot question. "Where to?"

"Just drive," she said. "I'll tell you where."

I wheeled the hearse down the curving drive and into the street.

## CHAPTER TWO

### One Wild Widow

I HEADED out the lake road. The hearse handled as if it were on tracks.

All I had to do was to keep the tip of a finger on the wheel. I settled back in the seat and watched the road unwind beneath the headlights. We drove for maybe twenty minutes before Belinda Starr spoke. "Turn right at the next road," she said. She lit a cigarette and leaned back in the seat.

The next road was more of a lane than a road. I swung into it, and the hearse rocked gently in the deep ruts. There were thick woods on both sides of us. In some places the trees overhung the road, making a dark cave beyond our headlights. I decided that this was as good a place

as any to stop, and so I swung over to the grass beside the road and stepped on the brakes.

The girl turned a white face toward me. "What's the matter" she said sharply. "Where are we going? And why?"

"To a town called North Ridge," she said impatiently. "This is a short cut."

I found a cigarette and lit it. "That's half an answer. Give me the rest."

She stared at me silently. Then she said in a brittle voice: "That doesn't concern you, Mr. Fiske. I've paid for the hire of this car. Please drive on."

She had me there, but I didn't get it, and I didn't like it. I took a pull on my cigarette. Something glinted in my eyes, and I glanced at the rear-view mirror. A pair of headlights swung off the main highway and headed toward us, the glare growing bigger by the second. The girl saw the lights, too, and she twisted around and looked back. Her fingers dug into my arm.

"Go," she breathed. "Hurry!"

I didn't move. It was a one-way road. "Relax," I said, and I pressed the button which rolled down the window on my side.

A long yellow convertible swung out beside us, one set of wheels almost in the ditch, and rocked to a stop. Two women jumped out on my side, and I saw a man run around in front of the headlights. A woman's shrill voice cried: "Belinda—are you out of your mind?"

The girl beside me tightened her fingers on my arm. "It's Abigail and Myra," she said in a low voice. "I'll handle it." I felt her breath on my cheek as she leaned across me. A strand of her hair tickled my cheek. "Abigail, darling," she said. "Whatever is the matter?"

I saw one of the women clearly in the reflected glow of the headlights. She was tall and angular, not young, with a sharp face and thin painted lips. She was wearing a severe black suit, a white turban, and low flat-heeled shoes. Another woman

stood just behind her, and as I stared, she moved forward into the light. She was as tall as the first woman, but much younger. She had a handsome hard face, a sneering red mouth, and hot arrogant eyes. Pale yellow hair blew in the wind. Her long loose coat hung open, revealing a full figure in a skin-hugging sand-colored dress. She didn't say anything. She just stared, her hands thrust into the pockets of her coat. The wind plucked sparks from a cigarette in her mouth. The man hovered in the shadows. All I could see of him was that he was hatless, and that he was wearing a rough tweed top-coat.

The turbaned woman's shrill voice cut the night. "Belinda, I demand that you take Walter's body back to the Blair Memorial. It's a good thing that I returned there tonight—I had a premonition that you would show up and do something outlandish. Mr. Blair told us what you had done. Lucky we caught up with you. I am Walter's sister, and I'll see to it that he's buried decently. What is the meaning of your horrible request for an autopsy?"

Belinda Starr's face was so close to mine that I could have kissed a corner of her mouth by moving my head a half an inch. I sat stiffly, and let her do the talking. She said in a hard voice: "I am Walter's wife, Abigail. Don't forget that. . . . Hello, Myra, dear. Who is that behind you? It couldn't, by any chance, be Dr. John Wayle?"

The man stepped into the light. He had a round pink face and a short yellow mustache. "Hello, Belinda," he said quietly. "We—we all feel Walter's death very deeply. Belinda, what's wrong? This mad action of yours—"

I felt Belinda Starr's body stiffen. "Don't you think I know what Walter wanted?" she said bitterly. "Abigail and Myra are determined to parade him before the public in a disgusting funeral ex-

hibition. But Walter didn't want it that way. He—"

The turbaned woman stopped her with a sharp gesture. She pointed a long finger at me. "You, driver," "return immediately to the Blair Memorial. If you don't, I'll have Mr. Blair discharge you."

"No, no," Belinda Starr whispered "Please."

I was on her side. After all, our cargo was just an empty bronze casket. So I said to the skinny woman: "We're driving on—and don't follow us."

The man stepped close to the hearse and said to me. "You working for Blair?"

I nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Lee Fiske."

He bowed politely. I'm Dr. John Wayle. You'll be doing us a great favor—and Mrs. Starr, too, if you'll return to the Blair Memorial and let Mr. Starr's funeral proceed in an orderly manner. This chasing around the country with a man's body is—is idiotic." He stepped clear of the hearse. "You can back up to the main highway."

"No!" Belinda Starr whispered.

I let out the clutch a little, and we began to move slowly, away. The skinny woman in the turban screeched. "You can't get away with it. Stop them, John."

Dr. Wayle stepped in front of our left headlight and held up a hand. I wasn't in any mood to dilly-dally. I had other worries on my mind this night. I stepped on the brakes, slipped Belinda Starr's .22 from my pocket, and slanted its long muzzle over the edge of the window. Dr. Wayle saw it, and he jumped out of the way as if I had already zinged a slug into his gizzard.

"Stand aside, people," I said. "We're on our way."

The blonde babe spoke for the first time. "The police will have you within an hour," she said nastily.

I figured that maybe she was right, and

I let out the clutch. He walked smoothly away from there, rocking gently in the ruts. I peeked back. The convertible's lights were doing a criss-cross in the narrow road. Then I saw the diminishing red tail lights as the car tore for the highway. I turned my eyes back to the road.

Belinda Starr laid her head against my arm. "Thank you," she murmured, and I felt her body tremble. I looked down at her. She was sobbing quietly with her hands over her face. I lifted my arm and dropped it around her shoulders. She huddled against me. I held her close, while the hearse practically guided itself down the rutted road. After a while, the girl stopped trembling, and she lay quietly against me.

**WE CAME** to a wide road. A faded signpost told me that North Ridge was ten miles to my left. I turned left and stepped on the gas. We flew into the town on velvet wings. It was a small, quiet-looking place with wide streets, sweeping lawns and many trees. Off to our right, on a side street, a neon sign read: Lunch, Beer and Wine. I stopped by the curb. Belinda Starr stirred and lifted her head.

"North Ridge," I said.

She peered out over the square. Her face looked small and pale in the light from the street lamps. "Home," she said quietly. "I was born here." She pointed to a street leading up a gentle hill away from the square. "That way, please."

"There's a place open where we can get something to eat."

She hesitated, and then she said: "I—I haven't eaten since yesterday noon." She glanced over her shoulder at the casket gleaming dully in the darkness. "Do—do you think Walter would mind?"

My reply was probably influenced by the thought of a couple of hamburgers and a cold bottle of beer—and by the fact that I would have a little more time to figure

what I was going to do about finding the missing body of Walter Starr. "Heck no," I assured her. "From what I've heard of Walter Starr, he was a pretty human guy."

She nodded silently. "He—he was wonderful . . ."

I eased the hearse around the square to the beer joint. There was an alley beside it, and I pulled into it and turned into a narrow space in the rear and stopped in the darkness beside a stack of empty beer cases. Belinda and I got out, and I locked both doors of the hearse and checked the lock on the door in the rear. Then we walked down the alley to the front of the joint and went inside. The barkeep came over and said: "'Morning, folks. What'll it be?"

I looked at my wrist watch. It was ten minutes to one in the morning. Belinda asked the barkeep: "What kind of wine do you have?"

"Dark port, white port, sherry and musky-tell."

She smiled faintly. "Sherry—and a ham sandwich."

The barkeep looked at me.

"Two hamburgers, well done, and a bottle of Canadian Ale."

He nodded and moved away.

I then said to Belinda: "How about telling me what's going on?"

She looked at me with level eyes. "Do you really work for Mr. Blair?"

"Why?"

She shrugged faintly. "You don't seem to be the type. How did you get that scar on your cheek?"

I gave her my stock answer. "I cut myself shaving."

"How very interesting," she said in a brittle voice. "Do you shave with a bolo knife?"

I leaned forward. "Look, let's stop this merry-go-round. You paid Blair two thousand dollars. At your request, I drive you and the body of your husband to this place

called North Ridge. We are now sitting in a beer joint and your husband's body is out in back in a hearse. You told Blair you wanted an autopsy. Where do we go from here?"

She said coolly: "My check was made out to you—not Mr. Blair."

I told her the truth. "I'm working for Blair."

"Not as a hearse driver."

"No," I admitted, "but I'm working for him. What do we do now?"

The barkeep came with our drinks and placed them on the table. "Sandwiches coming up," he said, and he moved away.

Belinda lowered her lashes and sipped at her sherry. "I liked the way you got away from Abigail, and Myra, and Dr. Wayle," she said, "and I don't care who you are working for. I'm going to tell you this, my husband did not die of a heart attack. That's why I want the autopsy."

I took a long swallow of my ale. Then I asked, "how do you know?"

She raised steady eyes to mine. "Because the day before he died I had a letter from him telling me he had just had a complete physical examination, including an electrocardiograph. His heart was perfect. He sent me a copy of the doctor's report. He was very pleased about it, because he wanted to buy some more life insurance." She paused, and tears filled her eyes. "For me," she added.

"I see," I said. "And now you want to know what did cause his death?"

"I have a right to know. Fatal heart attacks do not usually happen without warning. That's why I phoned Mr. Blair to hold Walter's body for an autopsy. I also wired Dr. David Dixson, here in North Ridge, to do it. I told him that Walter's body would be brought to him sometime tonight. Dr. Dixson is a noted pathologist, and—" She closed her eyes.

I touched her hand. "And that is where we are going now—to this Dr. Dixson?"

She nodded silently.

"Couldn't you have arranged with Blair for an autopsy?"

She opened her eyes. "I don't trust him, and the rest. Abigail is the worst. She has always hated me. She wants complete control of Walter's body, to run things. And she's a bosom pal of Myra's. She tried to turn Walter against me in an attempt to get him to take Myra back."

"What about this Dr. Wayle?" I asked her.

"He's all right," she said. "He was Walter's friend. But he's in love with Myra—has been for years. But I think he played square with Walter, even though he knew that Myra was playing up to any other man who attracted her. John Wayle is that kind of a man—it's a shame, really. Myra bitterly contested Walter's divorce charges, but he finally won—after he privately agreed to retain Myra as the irrevocable beneficiary of his fifty thousand dollar paid-up life insurance policy. Walter said it was worth it to get rid of her, but he wanted to buy more life insurance for me." She brushed a hand over her eyes and tried to smile at me. "Forgive me for boring you with my personal affairs, Mr. Fiske. If you will just take me to Dr. Dixson's." She started to rise.

"Sit down," I told her. "We haven't had our sandwiches yet."

"I—I'm not hungry, after all."

The barkeep brought the sandwiches then, and she sat down again. I had become interested in the Walter Starr affair, and I wanted to hear more. But I didn't have much luck. Belinda Starr wouldn't talk any more, except to answer a direct question. As we ate, our conversation went something like this:

"So your husband's death will net Myra Duval, his ex-wife, fifty thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"Will Myra marry Dr. Wayle now?"

"No—not as long as the insurance money lasts."

"How about your husband's sister, Abigail? Will she gain—I mean financially—by her brother's death?"

"Not that I know of. She's a retired school teacher, and has a pension."

"Apparently, Abigail is jealous of you. Could it be that she had a sort of mother complex for your husband? And she feels that Walter should have stayed married to Myra, her friend?"

"Possibly. Walter and Abigail were the only children, and their parents have been dead a number of years. Myra lives in Abigail's house. Abigail also rents rooms to tourists."

"Tell me to shut up, if you want to, but is this Dr. Dixson a friend of yours?"

"A very old friend. He brought me into the world. When my parents moved to Texas, I stayed here to work in Walter's law office."

I stopped asking questions. Later, when we were once more in the hearse, I said: "Where do you intend to bury your husband?"

She said: "There isn't going to be any burial."

It was the third time she had said it. I thought it over as I wheeled the hearse around the square. I didn't get it. But Walter Starr was her husband, and if she didn't want to bury him, it wasn't any of my affair. Then I thought of the empty casket behind me, and I began to sweat.

"Up the hill," Belinda Starr said. "Turn right at the third block."

I obeyed, and she pointed at a white frame house back from the street in the middle of a big lawn and flanked by pine trees. A stone drive circled around to a double garage in the rear. A small sign with gilt letters glittered briefly in our headlights: Dr. David T. Dixson, Physician and Surgeon.

"Stop by the back porch," the girl said.

I turned the big hearse into the drive, and I thought: Think fast, Fiske, your time of grace is over. As I stopped by the

back porch, a light came on and a man walked out to the steps. He was tall and erect, with a thin face and heavy grey brows. His hair was white and neatly combed. He walked quickly over the grass and opened the door of the hearse. "Belinda," he said, "I'm so sorry. I received your wire."

AND then she was in his arms and sobbing bitterly. The tall man held her close and awkwardly patted her shoulders. Slowly he led her into the house. I drove the hearse into an empty side of the garage and parked beside a blue sedan. I locked the hearse, closed the garage doors, and walked over the wet grass to the porch. There was a light in the kitchen, and I saw Belinda sitting at a table. The tall man was standing beside her. I went up to the door and knocked softly.

The tall man opened the door. "Come in, sir," he said gravely. He had a deep pleasant voice.

I stepped inside and stood with my hat in my hand. Belinda Starr introduced: "Dr. Dixson, Mr. Fiske. He was kind enough to bring us—Walter and me out here."

Belinda Starr stood up. Her face was as white as paper, and there were blue shadows beneath her eyes. "Doctor Dave," she said, "I want to see him. I want to see Walter before."

He inclined his head. "Of course, Belinda. And then you must get some rest." He turned to me. "Mr. Fiske, will you be kind enough to go out and open the casket?"

I stared blankly at Dr. Dixson and Belinda. She turned away and looked out of a window. Doctor Dixson spoke to the girl: "Belinda, you need sleep, rest. I think you'd better wait until morning."

She turned quickly to face him. "No. I've waited long enough. I want to see him—now."

Dr. Dixson glanced at me helplessly.

I cleared my throat. "Uh—Dr. Dixon is right. You'd better get some rest."

"No." Her voice trembled on the edge of hysteria. "Now!"

Dr. Dixon shrugged faintly, his face grave. He looked at me.

I couldn't stall any longer. Sooner or later, Belinda Starr would have to know that her husband's body was not in the casket. I moved slowly to the door, my mind racing to think of what I would say when the lid of the casket opened to reveal a cozy satin nest—empty.

There was a crunch of tires in the drive, and a car door slammed. I looked out of the window. I saw the dim outline of a yellow convertible, and the dark shadow of a man moving swiftly over the grass. Steps sounded on the porch, and the door opened. Dr. John Wayle stepped inside. His gaze flicked past me to Belinda Starr, and then to Dr. Dixon. "Hello, Doctor," he said quietly.

Dr. Dixon smiled and nodded. "How are you, John? What brings you out at this time of night?"

"To help Belinda, if I can," he said, and he moved over to the girl. She stared at him silently. He said to her: "I'm sorry about what happened tonight, but there wasn't much that I could do about it. You know how Abigail has always felt about Walter. I took her home and quieted her down. Then I came here as fast as I could. I knew where you were going—Blair told me that you wanted an autopsy, and that Dr. Dixon was to do it. In fact, I suggested an autopsy to Abigail, but she acted like a crazy woman." He paused, and placed a hand on her arm. "I—I haven't had a chance to tell you how sorry I am. Walter was one of my oldest friends."

She nodded silently, and attempted a tremulous smile.

Dr. Wayle turned to the older man "Doctor, may I help? I was with Walter when he died, and the symptoms all point-

ed to angina. As far as I know, Walter had never had a previous attack, but he worked very hard, and—well, since Belinda wishes it, I'd like to make sure that I was right."

Dr. Dixon nodded slowly. "I shall be happy for your assistance, John."

Dr. Wayle turned to Belinda Starr. "Shall we do it now?" he asked gently. "I'm due at the hospital early in the morning."

She clasped her hands tightly before her, and her eyes were bright. "Yes," she said. "I want to know. I must know. But I want to see him first."

There was a short silence, and the three of them looked at me. The spotlight was once more on Lee Fiske, alleged private eye, a smart guy who hired out for screwy jobs and drove a hearse through the night with a glamorous red-headed widow and her dead husband's empty casket on board. I knew that I could pretend ignorance and amazement when the empty coffin was opened—but not for long. The whole thing would boil back to my client, W. Arlington Blair, and then all hell would break loose. I opened the door like a man taking his last step on the last mile.

I mumbled: "Don't you want the casket brought inside?"

Dr. Dixon said: "Yes. I have a small operating room on the south side of the house. But you'll need help."

Dr. Wayle stepped up beside me. "I think the two of us can manage it." He nodded at me. "If you will back the hearse to the side door . . ."

"Sure," I said. I followed Dr. Wayle out to the porch. He started across the grass toward the garage, walking briskly.

He was about ten feet ahead of me when a streak of flame burst from the far corner of the garage, and a sharp report echoed up the alley. I flopped to the ground, a purely instinctive action of self-preservation, and pressed my face against the cold grass. Another shot ripped the

night—this one seemed very close to me, and I rolled over the grass into the black shadow of the garage.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Shot in the Dark

I TUGGED Belinda Starr's .22 from my coat pocket and lifted my head. The night was suddenly silent. Then I thought I heard the furtive sound of scurrying footsteps in the alley behind the garage, but I wasn't sure. Dr. John Wayle lay writhing slowly in the grass just inside the range of light from the back porch. I figured if he could wiggle he was still alive, and I headed for the alley, the gun in my hand.

Dr. Wayle's teeth-gritting voice stopped me. "Fiske—"

I turned and ran back to him. I leaned down. His hat had fallen off, and there was sweat on his face. I saw a ragged black hole in the shoulder of his tweed topcoat, and I smelled the faint bitter odor of burned cloth. He struggled to one knee and pointed a limp hand toward the street beyond the house. "Don't bother about me—he went that way."

I ran down the drive. Dr. Dixon and Belinda Starr stood on the back porch peering out into the darkness. "Wayle," I yelled at them. "He's shot," and I kept going until I hit the street. I didn't see anything but yellow pools of light from the street lamps and the deep shadows of the trees along the sidewalks. I stood a moment, looking up and down the street. Lights began to come on in the houses close by, and a pair of headlights came tearing up the hill from the square. A police prowl car turned into Dr. Dixon's drive, and I waved it down. Two cops jumped out. One of them said: "We got a call there was shooting in Doc Dixon's back yard."

I told them what had happened, but

they just grunted, lifted Belinda Starr's .22, and hustled me into the house.

Dr. Wayle was sitting in a chair with his shirt off. Dr. Dixon was swabbing a red groove in the young doctor's upper left arm. Belinda stood by, her face white. My entrance with the two cops confused things for a while, but eventually we convinced them that they should be out scouring the town for a potential killer instead of dilly-dallying with silly cop questions. They finally left with warning grunts. But they kept Belinda Starr's .22.

I asked Dr. Wayle if he got a good look at him.

He shook his head slowly. "I saw him, but not clearly. Just a tall man in a dark overcoat. He shot at me from a corner of the garage—twice. The second shot hit me. He sighed, and smiled wryly. "Of course, it could have been a patient of mine who figured it was easier to shoot me than to pay my bill."

Dr. Dixon chuckled. "From the way you young fellows charge now days, I can't say that I blame him." He looked at me. "Seriously, I believe that John surprised a prowler fooling around my garage."

"Anything of value out there—besides your car?" I asked him.

"I leave one of my bags in the car—and there's a .32 automatic in the dash compartment. I've carried it for years, ever since I was once held up on a night call in the country."

"Is your car locked?"

"Sometimes I forget." He said.

"I'd better take a look," I said, and I went out to the garage. I peeked into the hearse first. Walter Starr's casket was still there. I couldn't decide if I was pleased or disappointed. I tried a door of the sedan. It wasn't locked, and I looked inside. A tan leather bag, like doctors carry, was on the front seat. I opened the dash compartment. I found a flashlight, a half-filled box of cigars, a pair of

sun glasses, and an old model .32 automatic. I pulled out the clip and turned the flashlight on it. It was full of brass cartridges, and there was a slug in the firing chamber.

I dropped the gun into my pocket, took the flashlight, and made a quick tour of the alley and the surrounding area. A couple of neighbors, aroused by the commotion, followed me around and asked a lot of questions. One of them had an overcoat over his pajamas. I ignored them as much as possible. In the soft dirt of the alley I found a woman's high-heeled foot prints. They entered the alley from Dr. Dixon's drive, and left in the opposite direction, toward a vacant lot and a string of chicken coops in the adjoining block. I followed the prints for a short distance, but lost them in packed gravel and cinders.

I went back to Dr. Dixon's house. I made a final search of the alley behind the garage. Something glinted in my light. I leaned down. A small pearl-handled revolver lay in the grass between the alley and the wall of the garage. I tossed a handkerchief over the gun and picked it up. It was a neat, pretty little weapon, .25 caliber. Still holding the handkerchief around it, I clicked open the cylinder. One cartridge had been fired. I folded up the gun and dropped the gun into my pocket. Then I went back into the house.

They were all in the kitchen. Belinda Starr's eyes had a desperate strained look in them. They sought mine, and stayed there. Her steady stare made me uncomfortable, and I looked away. Dr. John Wayle had put on his shirt and coat and was sitting by the table sipping at a tall glass. Dr. Dixon was perched on a high stool by the cupboards. He, also, was holding a glass. On the table was a bottle of bourbon and a soda siphon.

Dr. Dixon nodded at the whiskey. "Help yourself, Mr. Fiske."

As I moved to the table, Dr. Wayle

said: "D'you find anything out there?"

I poured whiskey and squirted soda before I answered. "Not much," I said.

Belinda Starr's bright eyes still bored into mine. "I want to see him."

"Dr. Dixon stood up and moved over to her. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you wait until morning?" he said gently. "You can stay here, and so can John and Mr. Fiske. I've plenty of room."

She continued to stare at me. "Get him," she said. "Bring him in now. Then maybe I can rest."

I took a long swallow of my drink. Dr. Dixon said: "I'm afraid Mr. Fiske can't do it alone. John can't use his arm now, and I'm not as husky as I used to be."

Belinda Starr moved to the door. "Then I'll go out to the garage," she said crisply. "Do you have a flashlight, Mr. Fiske?"

I nodded dumbly, and finished my drink in two long swallows. It didn't help. I opened the door, and Belinda Starr and I moved across the lawn. I entered the garage ahead of her and unlocked the rear door of the hearse. She stood quietly beside me. I swung the door open, crawled in beside the casket, and reached out a hand. She grasped it, climbed in, and knelt beside me. I placed my hands on top of the casket and said softly: "Are you sure?"

She nodded in the darkness. "I—I want to see his face. Just once. Then I'll be all right."

Suddenly I knew that I'd have to tell her. I'd stalled too long—far too long. It wasn't right, not fair to her. I felt at last that I must tell her, somehow. I flicked on the flashlight, and it cast a yellow circle over the gleaming bronze of the casket. I opened my mouth to speak the words I had to say, but no sound came out. I tried again. "Look—" I croaked.

"Open it," she breathed. "Quickly." Her fingers dug at the lid.

I grabbed her wrists. "No!" I yelled.

But she was raising the lid, and I cursed W. Arlington Blair for not screwing it down. I tried to pull her away, but she pushed violently upward, and the white puckered satin gleamed in the light. Belinda Starr's face was a white oval of chalk, and her eyes were hot lumps of coal. My fingers dug into her wrists, and I said: "I'm sorry. I should have told you—"

Inside the dark hearse her scream pounded at my ear drums. And then abruptly she was quiet, and she slumped slowly over against me. I raised the flashlight. Walter Starr's casket wasn't empty. It was full of a girl in a black dress. Her eyes were bulged out, and her tongue was a swollen obscene stump protruding from her open mouth. W. Arlington Blair needed a new secretary. Miss Fabian's life had been strangled out of her. . . .

**T**WO minutes later I stood on the back porch-kicking at the door. I held the limp form of Belinda Starr in my arms. Dr. Dixon saw me through the glass, and he jumped to open the door. I carried the girl through the kitchen, into an adjoining living room, and laid her on a divan. Dr. Dixon leaned over her, one hand on her cheek and the other feeling for the vein in her wrist. Dr. John Wayle came to the door and stood quietly.

I told them quickly what had happened, all of it. I didn't spare W. Arlington Blair or myself. When I had finished, I saw that Belinda Starr had opened her eyes. She was watching me silently. Dr. Dixon looked at me with cold eyes. "That's a fantastic story, Fiske." His gaze turned to Dr. Wayle. "Don't you agree, John?"

The younger man nodded slowly. "Very," he said dryly. "But I find it interesting. Tell us more, Mr. Fiske. If there is a female corpse in the casket intended for Walter Starr, where is Walter's body? And why is it missing?"

I shrugged. "That's what I'm trying to find out."

Dr. Dixon said firmly: "We'd better get the police back here." He moved toward a phone on a table.

"No," I snapped.

Dr. Dixon turned slowly. "You object?" he said coldly.

"The police will only confuse matters more—at least, at the present time. And we have Mrs. Starr to consider."

Dr. Wayle said hotly: "You didn't consider her when you led her to believe that her husband's body was in that casket. What are you and Blair up to?" He swung angrily back into the kitchen, picked up his tweed topcoat, and flung it over his arm. "I've got to tell Abigail," he said to Dr. Dixon.

I stared at Dr. Wayle's topcoat. It was an ordinary tweed coat, with the scorched and ragged bullet hole high up in the left sleeve. I backed up a little so that I could keep them all in view. I had a cold, lonesome feeling. There was so much to be done. I didn't know for sure what had happened to Walter Starr's body, but events in my mind were beginning to form a hazy pattern—a pattern of death.

Dr. Wayle said to me: "You're on a hot spot, Fiske. You and Blair." He turned to Dr. Dixon. "I'll be back. Take care of Belinda."

Dr. Dixon nodded. "Of course, John."

Dr. Wayle turned away, the coat still hanging over his right forearm. "Wait," I said to him, and he turned slowly.

"I found a gun in the alley," I said. "One bullet had been fired from it. And there were woman's footprints in the alley, behind the garage, from where the shots came from—at least, one of the shots."

"There were two shots," he said harshly. "The second one hit me. And it was a man who did the shooting. I saw him run for the street."

I sighed deeply, and looked around the room. Dr. Dixon stood quietly, his thin

face grey and drawn. Belinda Starr lay on the divan staring at the ceiling. She seemed not to have heard our conversation. "Where is Walter?" she whispered. Her voice rose in a plaintive whimper, like a child's.

"Tell her, Fiske," Dr. Wayle said bitterly. "Go ahead. Tell her."

Dr. Dixson turned and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder.

The kitchen door slammed, and rapid steps crossed the kitchen. A woman's shrill voice called: "John. Are you here? I saw your car out there, and—"

Abigail Starr stopped abruptly in the doorway. She was still wearing the white turban, the black suit and the flat-heeled shoes. Her thin face was haggard beneath a thick coating of make-up.

"Who is this person? Oh, yes, the hearse driver, the abductor of my brother's body—he and that woman." Her contemptuous gaze fell on Belinda Starr, and then swung to Dr. Wayle. "You're a fool, John. I knew you would come here to help her with her devil's work. Autopsy! I won't have my brother's body mutilated." She turned briskly to me. "You—get out to that hearse. I saw it in the garage. Drive it back to the Blair Memorial. I'll go with you. Walter is going to be buried decently."

Belinda Starr sat up suddenly. Her eyes were burning. She got to her feet and pointed a finger at Abigail. "You took Walter away."

"Hussy!" the skinny woman screamed. "You blinded him. You poisoned his mind against Myra. Walter belongs to Myra, and to me."

Dr. Wayle moved forward. "Stop it!" he snapped to Abigail Starr. "Don't talk like that. Belinda is Walter's wife—don't forget that."

"Wife?" Abigail screeched. "Myra is Walter's wife. A few words in a courtroom by a paid judge can't change that." She pointed a long quivering finger at

Belinda Starr. "She wasn't even by his side when Walter died. I was! Myra was!"

I added my nickle's worth to the family argument. "Where is Myra?" I asked.

"None of your damned business," Abigail snapped.

For several minutes I had known what I had to do. It was just a matter of making up my mind to do it. I might be wrong, but I had to take a chance on that. There were too many things which needed explaining.

Belinda Starr stood stiffly, her hot eyes on Abigail. "Where is Walter?"

I took the plunge. "Ask him," I said, and I nodded at Dr. John Wayle. "Ask him why there are powder burns on his coat sleeve, when he said the shots were fired at him from behind the garage—a distance of at least thirty feet. Ask him whose footprints are in the alley. Ask him why there is only one bullet fired from the gun I found—when there were two shots. Ask him why he followed us here to Dr. Dixson's house." I stopped. I had said enough for a start.

No one spoke, or moved. The silence grew and filled the room with its somber implications. Belinda, Dr. Dixson and Abigail stared at me stupidly, their minds shocked into a blank. Dr. John Wayle stood frozen. His heavy cheeks looked crumpled and white. He shifted the coat on his arm, and the wicked black snout of an automatic nosed clear. I sighed. He had probably been holding the gun there for a long time. I should have guessed that he had another gun. We work, and we try, and we get pushed around, and it always seems to end like this—facing a gun, or a knife, or rolling in a gutter with a knee in our guts or a thumb in our eye.

Dr. Wayle said in a clear low voice: "I could kill you all—now. Or I could argue and bluster. But all I want now is to get it over with—do what I have to do. For days I've been on the fringe of madness.

I'm sane now, at last." He looked at Belinda Starr with sad, brooding eyes. "I'm sorry, Belinda—more sorry than I can say. But I've always hated Walter—because of Myra. She's in my blood—has been for years.

"When Walter divorced her, I thought maybe I'd have a chance. But I didn't. She laughed at me, and said that as long as Walter lived I would never have a chance. She planted a seed in my brain. As long as Walter lives! Those words have been my meat and drink . . . You see, Belinda, Myra was using me. She didn't care about Walter—she cared about his money. After he divorced her, she still had the insurance on his life. We planned it together, Myra and I. She promised to marry me when it was over. She would have the insurance money, and I would have Myra. But she'll never marry me. I see it now. Why should she? But I must go to her. She is waiting for me now." He backed toward the kitchen.

"You'll never make it," I told him.

He smiled gently. "Oh, yes, Mr. Fiske. Easily. It isn't far."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Undertaker's Last Word

**D**R. DIXSON looked like a man having a bad dream. Belinda Starr stared at Dr. Wayne like a dead woman. I figured she was about at the end of her rope, and I kept an eye on her. Abigail Starr sank slowly into a chair, her mouth hanging open. She seemed to be having trouble breathing.

I said to Dr. Wayne: "You poisoned Walter Starr, I suppose? That's why you took his body—to avoid the autopsy. You said he died of a heart attack, and if the autopsy disclosed the presence of poison, you would be on a very hot spot. Before you leave, would you mind telling us what you did with his body? And how did it

happen that you strangled Miss Fabian?"

As I talked, I calculated the distance between us, and I tried to figure the odds if I jumped for him. I had two guns in my pocket, but I'm not a quick-draw boy, and if I made a sudden move I was pretty sure that a private dick named Lee Fiske would be in the obituary columns come the morn. So I stood still.

Dr. Wayne smiled his sad smile. "I'll tell you, Fiske." He nodded gravely at the rest. "And Belinda, and Abigail, and you, Dr. Dixon. I don't mind talking about it now—I want to. I'm finished, done for. I know that. I—I guess the thing that bothers me most is that I betrayed the doctor's oath." He looked at Dr. Dixon, and the corners of his mouth twitched. "I'm sorry, sir, about that." He sighed, heavily and went on: "I gave Walter poison in a brandy after dinner at my house. Cyanide. It hit him right away.

As a physician, I had the authority to declare the cause of his death. It was well known that I was Walter's friend." He paused, and his lips twisted bitterly. "I thought I was safe. How was I to know that Belinda would demand an autopsy? When Blair told me, I knew I had to get rid of Walter's body. Yesterday afternoon I dug a grave for him in a woods not far from here.

Last night I accompanied Abigail and Myra to the Blair Memorial, and I left with them. Outside, I told them that I had some office appointments, and I excused myself. Then I entered the Memorial by one of the rear doors, went up to the Sunrise Room, lifted Walter's body from the casket and carried it down a back stairway to my car. Nobody saw me—I thought. I buried the body in the woods, and went back to my office. A short time later I had a telephone call. It was a woman, but at the time I didn't recognize the voice. She said, 'If you don't want it known that you abducted the body of Walter Starr, meet me in the Sunrise Room

at eleven-thirty.' That was all, and she hung up."

Dr. Wayne paused, and his sad eyes looked at each of us in turn. "Frankly," he said quietly, "I was terrified. I had to go to the Sunrise Room. Miss Fabian was waiting for me. She told me that she had been standing in a dark alcove at the end of the hall, and had seen me carry out the body of Walter. She wanted money to keep quiet about it. Ten thousand dollars." He smiled wryly, and his hands made a helpless gesture. "Even if I'd had ten thousand dollars—which I didn't—I wouldn't have given it to her. I couldn't take the chance. I could never be sure of her. And I—I had already killed once—it wasn't too difficult the second time. It was unfortunate for Miss Fabian, but those who attempt to dabble in blackmail must expect some risks. I strangled her to death. I thought I would bury her in the woods beside Walter, but I heard voices in the hall outside, and I quickly placed Miss Fabian's body in the only hiding place available—Walter Starr's empty casket.

"I hid behind some heavy drapes while Blair's men came in and took the casket away. I waited a while, and then I sneaked down the back stairway, got into my car, and drove around to the front entrance of the Memorial, where I met Abigail and Myra.

"It was then that I learned that Belinda had just taken the casket away. Abigail was extremely upset, and she insisted that I follow Belinda in my car. Myra, of course, knew that I had killed Walter, but I didn't have a chance to tell her that I had abducted his body, and that I had been forced to kill Miss Fabian."

He paused, and inclined his head at me. "After you told me your name tonight—out on the road—I checked, and I learned that you were a private detective. That alarmed me, and so I persuaded Myra to help me in a little play-acting

which I hoped would clear me in the eyes of the law. I see now that it was a flimsy, desperate farce. Anyhow, Myra followed me here in her car and parked a block away. She hid in the alley behind the garage. Then I came in here, volunteered to help you with the casket—I assumed that neither you nor Belinda was aware that the body was missing—and when I came out, Myra shot at me, as we had planned. Then she ran away down the alley to her car, and I shot myself in the arm and threw the gun into the alley. I had to get rid of it, and if it were found, it would naturally be assumed that it belonged to my unknown assailant."

He paused, and looked at the four of us with bright, friendly eyes. "You are all nice people," he said. "I don't mind telling you this. You have a right to know the facts." He smiled ruefully. "Unfortunately, I wasn't nearly clever enough. I should have remembered to fire a bullet from my gun before I wounded myself—so that the number of bullets fired from it would correspond with the two shots supposed to have been fired at me.

"Mr. Fiske noted the discrepancy, and that, together with Myra's high-heeled footprints in the alley and the fact that I made powder burns in my coat, was enough to start him sniffing along my rather obvious trail of murder." He cocked an eye at me, and went on: "No doubt you have noticed that Abigail is wearing flat-heeled shoes, and therefore knew that she did not make the prints in the alley?"

I nodded. "Yes, I noticed."

He sighed, and shook his head slowly. "It doesn't matter any longer. When I learned that Belinda wanted an autopsy, I think I knew the game was over. I—I'm afraid I'm not very adept at this sort of thing. You'll find Walter's body buried near a sycamore tree in the southwest corner of Caskey's woods." He glanced at Dr. Dixon.

Dr. Dixon nodded his head dumbly.

Dr. Wayle backed slowly away, holding the gun steady. I followed him slowly. He shook his head at me. "Don't come any closer—please don't. I've killed enough. Just give me five minutes. You won't be sorry—I promise. It will save so much trouble." He reached the door, and felt behind him with his left hand. I heard a click as he set the night lock. He opened the door. "Goodbye," he said suddenly. The door slammed behind him, sharply.

I JUMPED forward, my fingers feeling for the catch on the lock. Outside, I heard the throb of a motor. The catch on the lock was stubborn. And then suddenly it clicked open, and I pulled back the door. Dr. Wayle's yellow convertible was gone. I heard the high whine of tortured gears in the street in front of the house.

I jumped down the porch steps, ran across the grass and into the garage. I slid behind the wheel of the hearse, backed it out, and gunned it down the drive to the street. As I swung toward the square, I glimpsed the convertible careening right at the foot of the hill. A screeching of brakes and tires came to me. The hearse rolled swiftly down the hill. At the bottom I braked it once, and swung right at the square. I pointed the nose of the hearse out the state road and let it roll. The speedometer needle trembled at seventy miles an hour, and the motor settled down to a happy hum. I strained my eyes ahead. The convertible was scooting along ahead of me without lights. I nudged the accelerator, and the hearse took off.

Beyond the convertible a weak red tail-light loomed up. It was a jalopy, limping along on tired pistons. The convertible swung out sharply, passed the jalopy, and swung back out of my sight. I was nudging the jalopy's tail when we hit a curve. I swung the wheel, and the jalopy faded

away on my right. Bright lights from the opposite direction hit my eyes. The jalopy was just behind me, not quite clear of my rear bumper. I cut in anyhow. The oncoming car swerved out, flirting with the ditch. There was a hole, and I went through, my foot on the floor boards.

Ahead, I saw the convertible all but stand on its front wheels and turn left into a side road. I jammed on the brakes; but I was going too fast. I overshot the side road by a car's length. I gunned the hearse in reverse, slammed on the brakes, and turned left. The convertible was out of sight in the darkness. I poured on gas.

Autumn leaves and bare branches whipped past my headlights. I made a sharp curve by twisting the wheel and fanning the brakes. The hearse straightened out, its motor a throbbing roar in the night. Something yellow loomed directly ahead of me. I grabbed the emergency brake and fought the wheel for control. The hearse rocked to a stop behind the convertible, bumpers touching. I jumped to the road. There was a black coupe beyond, at the entrance to a lane leading into the woods. I unlimbered Dr. Dixon's .32 and jerked open the door of the convertible. Empty. I ran forward toward the coupe. I could see it very plainly in the lights from the hearse.

A muffled shot cracked out into the night. I ran faster. Another shot. Then silence. I reached the coupe, whipped open the door. Gun smoke stung my nostrils. I leaned in.

Myra Duval was slumped sideways beside the wheel. A needle-line of blood streaked her right cheek. I saw that the bullet had entered her ear. Her eyes were open, but they were no longer arrogant. But her red mouth was still sneering, the edges of her teeth showing a little. Dr. John Wayle sat beside her. His right hand held his automatic flat against his chest. As I watched, the hand slid down

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# AFRAID TO LIVE

DOROTHY was behind the wire cage in the parking lot where she worked, totaling up the day's receipts. Dan stood looking at her for a long moment, trying to swallow the big ache in his throat. Then he pushed through the office door.

It was easy to see why Mel Duggard would go for a girl like Dorothy. She had a cloud of blonde hair and nice, wide-open blue eyes. She was fresh and young and her mouth was clean and her eyes still had youthful wonder in them. She had a good figure, too. Mel wouldn't overlook that.

She looked up from her tickets and when she saw it was Dan standing there, her lips drew into a thin line.

"Dorothy—"

"Listen, Dan I'm busy. I don't know what you want, but I wish you wouldn't bother me any more.

He wanted to tell her a lot of things. He wanted to tell her he was sorry about the quarrel and maybe it was his fault. He wanted to tell her how empty the apartment was since she moved out and how lonesome he was.

He tried to say all that, but he couldn't get the words out, somehow. He took his hands out of his pockets and then put them back again. "Dorothy . . . you—you aren't going out with Mel Duggard, are you?"

He didn't know why he'd asked her that. The words just seemed to come out.

Her eyes got little glints of fire in them. "That's no longer any of your business, Dan Skeels." She went back to counting the tickets.

The trouble was, Dan was a coward.

He'd grown up with a kind of cringing sickness inside him. That's why he hadn't been able to stand up to Mel Duggard. He'd just had to hang around, sick and shaking and watch Mel take Dorothy away from him. You ought to, he thought, be able to go to a doctor for the kind of sickness that was inside him. . . .

He started walking, a skinny kid with a shock of black hair, big eyes and large bony hands that dangled at the ends of thin wrists. He walked for blocks and finally he went down a flight of sidewalk steps into a damp little cellar honky-tonk where blind Mamber played piano every night.

Mamber was playing *Body and Soul* and it was something to hear . . . the delicate, haunting music the blind old man wrung out of the rickety upright piano. He played with his head tilted back, smoke from the cigarette in the corner of his mouth drifting past his sightless eyes.

A few couples were swaying out on the tiny concrete floor. One or two were at the bar. Otherwise the place was empty. Dan sat on a chair on the bandstand and listened to Mamber play, letting the music lessen some of the ache inside him.

When he finished that chorus, Mamber snuffed his cigarette out against the scarred piano, turned and smiled, "Hello, Dan."

Dan's fists were so tightly clenched in his pockets, his fingernails were eating into his palms. "Mamber," he asked suddenly, "What makes a fellow a coward inside?"

Mamber nodded slowly. He started playing again and didn't say anything for a long time. "I wondered when you was

By CHARLES BECKMAN, Jr.

This time, trumpet-player Dan's cowardice would lose him his wife for good—unless he was man enough to snatch her from the sizzle-seat.



gonna talk to me about it, Dan. You been fightin' yourself a long time, ain't you, boy?"

"It—it ain't easy. Sayin' it right out like that—"

"Take the beginnin' of a man to admit it, Dan. I always knowed was somthin' eatin' at you. When a man plays good trumpet like you do, it's because he's got somethin' wrong inside him. He ain't tuned up with the world right, somehow.

An' he's got to play it out of him or burst wide open—"

Mamber tilted his head back and went into *Mood Indigo* softly, with a steady, moving rhythm in his left hand. "You ask me whut makes a man a coward, boy? Well, it's cause something taught him whut fear is when he was a right

youngun. He wasn't bo'n afraid. He learned it—from somebody or somethin'—back in his chil'hood."

"But what can you do?"

Mamber smiled. "Sometime ain't nothin' you kin do. Most all of us is cowards 'bout something, though we won't admit it. Jes' don't fret, boy. Time comes when you really got somethin' big enough to fight for, the Lord will give you stren'th—now go home and git your horn. It's time for you to go to work."

Dan walked through the gathering dusk to his two-room flat. Somehow, when Dorothy had been with him, this neighborhood hadn't looked so sordid. He hadn't noticed the yelling kids or the wash hanging between the buildings or the smell of garbage in the alleys.

The two rooms had looked pretty bad at first. But after they brightened the dark woodwork with ivory enamel, put new checkered linoleum in the kitchen and hung pictures on the bedroom wall, it looked a lot better. On hot nights, when Dan wasn't playing, they'd sit out on the fire escape, holding hands and looking at the city. Some time Dan would play his trumpet, softly beside her in the darkness. Dorothy liked music as much as he did.

He went up the back stairs, now, fitted his key in the lock.

**M**EL DUGGARD was in the bedroom, waiting for him. He was sitting in a chair, propped against the wall, leafing through a magazine. A spiral of smoke curled up from his cigarette which was burning the edge of the new radio-phonograph combination Dan had given Dorothy for her birthday.

The familiar sickness ran through Dan, making his knees weak, his mouth dry, leaving a pit of nausea in his stomach.

"Hello, kid," Mel grinned. He took a long drag on the cigarette, laid it back so it would burn a new spot on the radio's mohogany cabinet. He looked at it and at

Dan and grinned again. Then he stood up. He was a big guy, towering over Dan three or four inches. He wore thick-soled shoes, high-waisted slacks, a loud striped green shirt with an off-color bowtie and wide suspenders. He had crinky red hair that seemed to stand straight up in marcelled waves. The girls all went for Mel and his snappy line. The maroon convertible his Pa had given him helped some, too.

"Congratulate me, kid," he chuckled. "I'm about to be a happy bride-groom."

The sickness got worse inside Dan, only now there was a cold hand squeezing his heart, too.

"Ain't you interested who the lucky girl is? Well, I'll tell you. It's Dorothy." He peeled a stick of gum, wadded it into his mouth and grinned at Dan.

"She—she's my wife, Mel," Dan stammered, his heart going like a trip hammer.

Mel shook his head. "Ha-ah. Was your wife, kid. She wants a divorce."

Dan blinked. "No," he said.

Mel pursed his lips. "Well now," he sighed. "Dorothy said you might be a little stubborn. She told me I'd have to come around and convince you."

"She was happy with me until you came along," Dan said past the tightness in his throat, blinking rapidly to keep the hot fog out of his eyes.

He thought about the fun they'd had together, furnishing this little flat, saving money for records. How they'd planned to buy a second-hand car, soon's Dan got a job with a bigger band.

"Exactly," Mel was saying. "But you see, I did come along. So now she ain't happy with you any more. She wants to marry me."

"No," Dan said. "She doesn't know what's best for her. She's young and kinda crazy. But she'd be miserable with you. Go away and leave us alone, Mel. Go away. . . ."

The grin was spread all over Mel's

face now, everywhere except in his eyes. They were small and beady and there was a kind of insane light in them. Like the time Dan remembered back in school when Mel caught a puppy by the tail and stamped the life out of its twisting, squealing body. He started walking toward Dan, grinning like that, and Dan backed up until the wall stopped him. Mel took a handful of Dan's shirt and twisted until the seams popped.

"You gonna divorce her?" he panted in Dan's face.

Dan was so scared his teeth clicked. But he shook his head.

Duggard brought his big hand up and it crashed into Dan's face—again—again—again—and all the time he grinned with the wild light in his eyes.

The room swam before Dan's eyes. He could taste warm blood. He was suddenly a kid in school again, getting one of his weekly beatings from Mel.

"All right," he heard himself sob. "I'll give her a divorce. Please don't hit me any more, Mel!" Duggard had beaten him down to his knees.

Mel gave him a parting kick. "That's just a sample of what you'll get if you change your mind," he panted. He gathered up his loud plaid sport coat from the bed. As an after-thought, he shoved the radio-phonograph off the table and it hit the floor with a splintering crash. He laughed, going out of the place—

Joe sat on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. Even after it got dark and the neon sign across the street cast its reddish light into the room, he didn't move. Finally, he got up. He went in the bathroom and washed his bruised face. He examined his lips in the mirror. They were puffy and swollen. But only one corner was cut. He'd be able to work tonight.

He picked up his trumpet. He looked once at the broken radio on the floor. Then he walked out of the room.

He was playing with a five-piece band in a little night-club half way on the other side of town. He walked every night to save money.

It took nearly an hour. As he started down the steps into the night-club, a girl came out of the shadows. She caught his arm. It was Dorothy. Her face was white and twisted, her eyes big, dark splotches. Her fingers biting into his wrist were like ice.

"Dan—I'm in a jam. . . ." She began crying. She pushed both hands into her hair at her temples and started getting the shakes. In a minute, Dan could see, she would be having hysterics.

He got her down into the stuffy little night-club that hadn't opened for business yet and forced some straight bourbon between her lips. She choked on it, but it brought some of the color back to her face and stopped her from shaking so much.

He had her back in a booth where it was private. Maybe he should have asked her why she had come to him. Maybe he should have been bitter about it and told her to go to Mel, if she was so crazy about him. But he did none of those things.

She was his wife and she was in a jam. So he said, "Tell me."

She swallowed. She was staring straight at the wall, as if hypnotized. "Dan, I . . . you have to come over to my place right away."

He nodded. "All right, sure." He told the bandleader he'd have to get along minus a trumpet player for a while. Then he and Dorothy took a taxi. She had rented a small apartment in the same neighborhood where Mamber played. They went up the stairs silently. She got out her key but she was shaking so much, Dan had to put it in the lock of the door for her.

She whispered, "It— isn't pretty, Dan—"

THE door swung inward and Dan looked down at the man lying there. She was right, it wasn't pretty. It never is when a man gets shot in the face. Dan nearly gagged.

You could tell from the looks of the room that Dorothy lived here. Everything was neat and orderly. It was a one-room efficiency affair with a tiny gas range and refrigerator at one end and a single bed in the other. There was a stack of Dorothy's favorite movie magazines on the floor beside the bed and a box of candy. A tiny radio on a table next to the bed was still playing softly.

There was enough left of the dead man's face for Dan to recognize. He was a small, rat-faced man dressed in a loud striped suit. It was Sam Cockerell, a crooked little loan shark who ran a hole-in-the-wall office in this part of town. Musicians called him "Dillinger" Cockerell because of the rates he charged and the strong-arm methods he used to collect. If you owed Sam Cockerell money and didn't pay on time, you might find yourself in some alley, beaten to a pulp. That's why Sam never asked for collateral.

Dan shivered at the thought of Dorothy's getting mixed up with a crook like Cockerell.

"I owed him money," she whispered through stiff lips. "I wanted some new dresses, so I made a loan. It was due today, but I didn't have it and I didn't go to his office. He came up here tonight when I got home from work. He started getting nasty, Dan. I was so terribly scared. . . ."

"Dorothy—"

She shook her head. "I know what you're thinking, but I didn't shoot him, Dan. I swear I didn't." Her fists were two icy knots at her sides. She was fighting to keep her voice from rising hysterically.

"He was facing me with his back to the door. He was saying some terrible things. And just then the door opened. Quietly,

Dan. He didn't see it. A man was standing there. I couldn't see what he looked like. The hallway was dark and I was frightened. He said one word, 'Sam', just like that. Cockerell turned and the man shot him. Then he stepped back out in the hall and closed the door." She spread her hands over her face. "I never saw a man die before, Dan."

"You haven't any idea who this man was?"

She shook her head. "I tell you it was dark in the hall, Dan. I wouldn't have known if it was you standing there." She started crying softly, hopelessly, "Dan, when the police find out I owed Cockerell money—they'll think I—"

The telephone rang. Dorothy stopped crying, stared at it with wide, dark eyes, as if it were the police calling to say they knew she'd shot Cockerell and were on their way up to arrest her. The whole room seemed to be holding its breath. There was only the soft drip of the kitchen faucet, the radio playing "Cruising Down the River" and the persistent telephone—

She snapped the radio off, picked up the telephone. She said "Hello" in a small voice and then listened for what seemed an eternity, staring at Dan with wide eyes. Then she whispered, "Yes—yes, all right. Right away." She hung up.

"It was Mel Duggard, Dan. He says he knows about the murder and I should come over to his place right away. He said not to let anybody see me leave the apartment."

Out in the back street, they caught another taxi. They rode in silence to where Mel Duggard lived. His father owned a delicatessen store on the corner. Mel's long maroon convertible was parked in the side street beside the store. Old man Duggard, a widower, lived above the store. Mel had an apartment in an old frame three-story house back of the store.

Dan walked beside his wife down the dark side street. They stopped before

Mel's house. There was a light on in his downstairs apartment.

Ever since Dorothy had come to him for help tonight, Dan Skeels had had a strange feeling. She had seemed so small and afraid beside him. He had been scared too, probably more than she had ever been, but he hadn't let on. He had acted almost like a man. He thought about what Mamber said. That most people were cowards about something, though they wouldn't admit it. Maybe they were doing what he had done tonight—pretending. Maybe that's what being a man meant. Being scared and sick inside, but not letting it show.

Now that they were in front of Mel's house, though, even the pretense left Dan, he stopped, clenching his fists in his pockets.

Dorothy looked at him. "Aren't—aren't you coming in with me, Dan?"

He ran his tongue over his dry lips. "I—maybe I'd better wait outside, Dorothy."

She stared at him. Then her shoulders slumped. Her eyes became bleak and dead. "For a while I thought—" She choked. "Oh, nothing." She ran up the steps, rang Mel's bell and then went in his apartment.

Dan stood there, hating himself. Hating what he had seen in Dorothy's eyes. Wishing he were dead. He drew a shaking hand across his eyes. Then he slipped up on the front porch of the old building. One of Mel's blinds were only half drawn. He could see into Mel's living room. Duggard was standing there in a silk dressing gown. His red hair seemed to be standing straighter up than ever. He was grinning down at Dorothy.

IT WAS very quiet in this neighborhood. Dan could hear a cat mewing in some alley, the exhaust of a car in the next block. And he could hear Mel's and Dorothy's voices.

Dorothy was saying, "Why did you phone me, Mel Duggard? What do you know about—about Sam Cockerell?"

Duggard grinned at her. "Don't be in such a hurry, baby. We got plenty of time. C'mon, sit down." He tried to put his arm around her, pull her down beside him on the couch. But she wrenched away from him, backed up.

"Tell me what you know about Cockerell."

His grin widened. "I know you're in a bad fix, baby. And you'd better start getting friendly with ol' Mel if you want to get out of it."

Dan didn't get this. Dorothy wasn't acting as if she were in love with Mel. As if she wanted to marry him, the way he'd told Dan when he gave him the beating.

She suddenly gasped. "You killed him, Mel Duggard. You were the man in the hall."

"Now my baby's getting smart," Mel said. "And if you'll get a little smarter, everything will be all right."

"But, why? Why did you do it?"

"Why? Because ol' Mel is smart, honey. He always gets what he wants. One way or the other." He shrugged. "I knew you owed Sam Cockerell money. I knew what kind of a guy he is. I phoned his office today, told him you couldn't pay the debt and you were leaving town early in the morning. If he wanted to collect, he'd better get to your apartment when you got off from work tonight. I followed him. I waited until he was in your room, then I opened the door and shot him. You begin to understand?"

Her face was like chalk. Her shoulders slumped. "I—I think I do—"

"The gun I used is the one they keep in your desk down at the parking lot. I found it one day when I came to take you to lunch. You see how bad it looks for you?"

Mel chuckled. He walked over to a writing desk, opened a drawer, took the

gun out. He showed it to her, then dropped it in the drawer again and slid it closed. He lit a cigarette. "Now, honey, you say 'yes' to Mel, like I been tryin' to get you to do for the last two months. Then everything will be okay. I'll give you a perfect alibi. I'll tell the cops you were with me, riding, when Sam got shot. I'll throw the gun away. They won't be able to prove a thing without the weapon. Sam had dozens of enemies. They'll think he went up to your place to wait for you and somebody else came in and killed him."

"If—if I don't marry you?"

He shrugged and his face got mean and ugly. "I don't like for girls to say no to me, baby. I'll see that the police find this gun—and the I.O.U. that you gave Sam. That's all they'll need. They'll know Sam was killed in your place, that you owed him money. And when they trace the gun and find out it came from your desk at the parking lot . . . honey that's all they'll need to send you to the chair!"

He tried to put his arm around her again. "Aw, baby, don't make me do it. I can give you everything. A pretty apartment, a car, clothes. . . ."

She shook her head. She seemed dazed. "But I love Dan."

"That sniveling coward."

She closed her eyes. "I—a girl can't live with a man she doesn't respect," she whispered. "But I can't stop loving him, just the same."

"He wants to divorce you," Mel swore. "He told me tonight he was going to start divorce proceedings in the morning."

Dan was beginning to get the whole picture. The whole fantastic scheme sounded like Mel Duggard, all right. Dorothy had probably been a little dazzled by his car and money at first. But she hadn't really cared anything about him. She'd refused his advances. Mel

couldn't take that. It would drive an ego-maniac like him out of his mind for a girl to refuse him.

Dan walked off the porch and stood on the sidewalk. He knew what he was going to have to do. His thin, pale face was clammy with sweat.

Mamber had said, "time comes when you really got somethin' big to fight for, the Lord will give you stren'th—"

Dan prayed for that strength now. He had something plenty big to fight for—Dorothy's life.

He had thought it all out tonight when he sat on the bed in his apartment after Mel beat him up. He'd thought about what Mamber said, "You ask whut makes a man a coward, boy? Well, it's cause something taught him whut fear is when he was a right young-un. He wasn't bo'n afraid. He learned it from somebody or somethin' . . ."

Dan had thought about that a long time and had finally come up with the answer. He'd dug back into his childhood and he remembered how his Pa had been. A weasely, sniveling man, always afraid. Afraid of losing his job, afraid of getting sick, afraid of his boss. A kid ought to have an old man he can brag about and make his hero. But the spineless, whimpering excuse of a father Dan had only taught him to fear. He'd lost his first fight with Mel in the second grade. After that, Dan hadn't tried any more.

Well, he wasn't going to get over being afraid. As long as he lived, there would be that awful, sick weakness inside him. But he'd never let it show again—to Mel or Dorothy. It was just something he and God would know about.

He opened the front door and walked into Mel's room and his legs were water and cold sweat was gluing his shirt to his thin chest and his stomach was twisted up in a knot. He was so scared he couldn't trust himself to speak. He only stood there, blinking to keep his eyes clear.

Mel's mouth fell open. "What do you want?" he snarled.

Dorothy had whirled as he came in. She was staring at him with a strange mixture of disbelief and hope.

He half stumbled over to the writing desk, fumbled at the drawer where the murder gun was hidden.

"No you don't," Mel swore. He crossed the room in two strides, grabbed Dan's shoulder and whirled him around. His big left hand smashed into Dan's face, sent him crashing against the wall.

Dorothy screamed. Then she sad out.

Dan lashed out with his foot. It caught Mel in the shin. Duggard dropped the paper weight and grabbed at his leg with a hoarse cry. Dan pushed to his feet, bracing his back against the wall. He lashed out with his right fist as hard as he could swing. Pain ran all the way up to his shoulder and he knew he'd broken some knuckles.

Duggard's nose was bleeding in great red spurts. He put his hand over his nose and then took it away and looked at it. "I'll kill you," he gasped, sobbing now with pain and rage. "I killed Sam Cock-

erell with this gun and now I'll kill you, Dan Skeels. And if I have to, I'll kill that cheap little wife of yours."

For the first time in his life, Dan Skeels got mad. A red haze came down over his eyes and the savage instinct to kill with his bare hands gripped him.

He lurched forward, clutching at Mel Duggard. He scratched and bit and gouged. He didn't know that he had Mel on the floor and was swinging with both hands, beating the red-headed bully's face into bloody pulp while Duggard screamed for mercy.

He didn't know when Dorothy came in with the police—the two patrol officers she'd found cruising in this neighborhood in a squad car. He didn't hear them say, "It's all right, son, you can stop now. We heard Duggard say he killed Sam Cockerell."

He felt them tugging at him, trying to pull him off what was left of Mel Duggard. "Let me hit him once more," he panted.

And he heard his wife, Dorothy Skeets, tell the other policeman proudly, "He's my husband."



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## *Gripping Suspense*

### *Novelette*

By

**ROBERT P.**

**TOOMBS**

#### CHAPTER ONE

##### *Pitchfork Kill*

**M**ILT CLARK dragged one sleeve over his wet forehead, tossed the pliers among the scattered array of tools in a corner of the garage and rolled a cigarette. "Guess I'm as dumb as that vulture up there," he said to the kid, Johnny.

The gangling seventeen-year-old in faded jeans shook his head. "We'uns call 'em buzzards. An' they ain't dumb. Somethin's dead down back of Slater's, I reckon."

It was almost sundown. Cyprus Creek sweltered in breathless warmth. The small, Florida town with its single main street seemed unusually deserted—waiting in sinister expectancy.

"Listen, Milt, just 'cause you're from some big city up No'th an' never had no steady job, or trade or nothin', you're doin' swell. Got a place to board, up at Abbot's, and folks are beginning to cotton to yuh."

"They what?" Milt said.

"They're beginning to like you. You ain't gonna leave are yuh?"

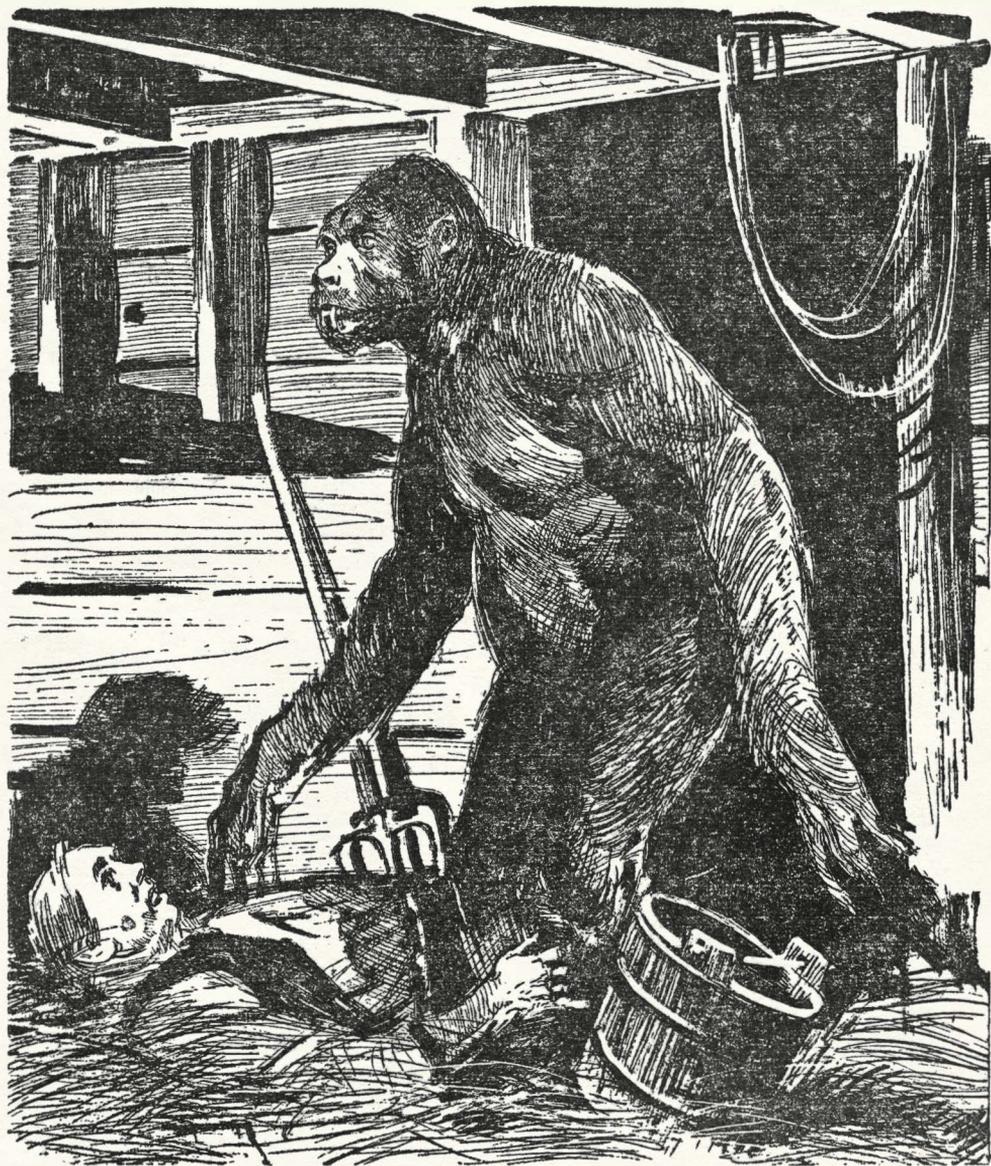
There was a quality of perpetual restlessness about him. He looked at the

Garage-mechanic Milt Clark wouldn't swallow the story of the homicidal ape, until they came face to face.



He scooped up the gun and whirled.

# BODIES BY NIGHT



swamp's dim outline through the open rear of the garage; live-oaks with their moss plumes stirring in the evening breeze, the rustling palmetto.

"I dunno," he said slowly. He unbuttoned his greasy coveralls and stripped them off. "If it wasn't for you, Johnny, old Pringle would fire me. I just don't have the knack. You do all the work."

Johnny frowned. "Shucks. I don't either. If we had any money, you an' me could open a garage of our own."

Milt picked up a sack of groceries. "I got these for Ma Abbot. Now I'm broke again. This ain't no job, kid. Old Pringle doles out my pay like it was for charity."

"Maybe you could get a job as deputy fer Sheriff Blane? He and some of the men are still huntin' that ape-man that got away from Haleck's circus."

Milt shook his head. He was remembering how Blane had accused him of encouraging Joe Abbot to drink. It wasn't true. He told Blane off that day and got cuffed around plenty.

"You know how I feel about Blane," he said shortly. "He thinks he's tough—when he's got a gun on his hip."

It burned him up all the more as he thought of what a good friend Joe Abbot really was. Bleary Joe, who brought him home to be a star boarder even when he couldn't pay a dime some weeks to Ma, who took in washing and waited for the day Joe would stop drinking. . . .

"Hey!" Johnny interrupted his thoughts. "Somethin's wrong. Listen."

The sound carried sharply on the warm air—a woman's scream.

He and Johnny stared at each other. Johnny's mouth hung open. "Maybe that ape-man circled in from the swamp." He ran out back, peering. "C'mon, Milt." His voice was high-pitched, trembling. "They's a crowd gathering back of Slater's at the edge of the woods—C'mon."

Milt hung onto his package of groceries

and followed the kid's flying heels. A hill, slanting downward beyond Slater's two-storied house, lent momentum to pounding feet. Beyond a rickety shed in a small, open glade, a growing cluster of people stared silently.

They drew close and saw the body hanging on a pitchfork; the four tines emerged through the back, embedded in a large pine tree.

"Moss Gearhardt," Johnny breathed, his face white. "He wasn't too bad a guy, even if he did get Joe Abbot drunk all the time. You knew him, Milt."

Women in the growing crowd shuddered and averted their faces; some gathered enough courage to peek through their fingers. Reverend Bouth laid hold of the pitchfork, tugging and pulling with no effect. He stepped back, lifted his eyes to the sky where the vulture wheeled. "Dear Lord," he said, "No man dwellin' in Cyprus Creek could be guilty of such a sin as this.

"That ape-man, you mean." A tall, gaunt farmer shouted. "It's strong enough to do that. Probably seen men handling pitchforks all its life in a circus."

"Aren't you going to say a word for Moss there?" An old woman quavered.

Reverend Bouth looked over the top of his glasses at this intrusion. "I was comin' to that," he replied severely. He glanced at the tree, lifted his eyes again and complied with a short prayer.

"**N**OW you got to ring the bell." Mrs. Parker insisted, tugging at his arm. "My man's out helping search the swamp. I won't stay alone in the house tonight neither. You ring the church bell and get 'em in here, Reverend Bouth."

An excited murmur rose from other women in the group.

The reverend waved his thin hands. "The sheriff has to be notified. We'll post a guard." He frowned, looked over the few men present.

All except Milt averted their eyes. He was staring at the handle of the pitchfork.

Mrs. Parker, who, for all her one hundred ninety pounds weight, carried herself with dignity, sniffed loudly. "A fine lot. It takes nerve to stay down here in the dark with—" She lost confidence and her voice dwindled.

They all looked at the pine tree.

"That's so . . . it's gettin' dark," Reverend Bouth agreed hastily. "We'd best go."

Johnny started to follow the rest, paused, "What you lookin' at, Milt?"

Milt handed him the groceries. "Here. Hold these a minute." He went up and laid hold of the pitchfork handle.

"Hey!" Johnny whispered, aghast.

Milt jerked, but the tines didn't budge. The reverend hadn't been faking. "You remember that, kid," he said. "No man could jab a pitchfork that hard in a tree, let alone through a man's body too."

"That ape-man must be a whopper!" Johnny breathed.

Milt looked at him sharply. "You mean you've never seen it? I thought you hung around a lot out at Haleck's winter quarters?"

"Yes. But I never seen Moe. That's what they call the ape-man that's got away."

"Where did they keep him?"

Johnny shrugged. "Moss Gearhardt had charge of him— just got the job a few days ago. Then Moe escaped. I don't know what kind of a cage they kept him in. An ape-man is really a gorilla, ain't it?"

Guess so." Milt replied. "I'll take those groceries. Joe's been drinkin' probably, and I better get up to the house and see if Ma's all right."

"Let's get outa here." Johnny agreed fervently. "They's a lake down back of these woods and that thing may be lurkin' around."

Milt touched the pitchfork again; fin-

gered the end of the handle. Then he turned abruptly and followed Johnny. "You go on to the garage— it's getting late. I'm going home. . . ."

The church bell began tolling as Milt picked his way through the gloom, covering the two long blocks to Abbot's place. This would bring everybody on the run. They'd probably band together there for protection once the news of this outrage spread. In the darkness he made out the blurred outline of the china-berry tree that stood in the front yard, and turned up the path that skirted around back.

The house reeked of gin. Joe Abbot lay on the kitchen floor. Ma Abbot leaned over a washtub, slowly, methodically bending up and down.

Milt shook his head, feeling a sudden lump in his throat. It was always like this. Nothing good ever really happened to the Abbots. He walked in through the open screen door, twisting a limp cigarette to the other corner of his mouth. "It's hot," he remarked, dumping the sack of groceries on the table that stood in the center of the room.

"Shut the screen," she reminded him. "And don't tell me that the window ain't got none. Joe's gonna fix it Sunday for sure."

Milt smiled wryly. "He get drunk and start cussin' you again?"

She sighed and rested her elbows on the edge of the tub. "He don't mean nothin'. He's good to me when he's sober. I'd rather have a man like that than the other way around, wouldn't you?"

"How should I know?" Milt knelt by the older man and slapped the lined, sodden face.

Joe Abbot mumbled incoherently and turned over with his face against the wall.

"Leave him alone, Milt. It's cooler there than in the bedroom. What's doin' down town? I heard the bell ringing. You gettin' the fidgets again, or are you gonna stay on with us?"

HE DRAGGED deeply on his cigarette and snipped it at the sink, wondering how to tell her. Finally he just blurted it out: "Someone stuck a pitchfork in Moss Gearhardt. Pinned him to that big pine down back of Slater's."

A wet lump of clothing slipped from Ma's grasp; she turned. "Moss Gearhardt—you mean that big roustabout? The one that always loafed around the courthouse steps?"

"Yeh. Everyone in Cyrus Creek is scared silly. There ain't a soul on the streets now that it's dark."

"You saw him?"

"Sure I saw him." A muscle jumped in Milt's cheek. He went over and poured himself a drink of water, gazing at the dirty glass. "If I was smart I'd clear out of Florida—at least this part of it. These swamps around here give me the creeps."

"Moss Gearhardt," she whispered. "Who'd want to do a thing like that? He was a louse, but he liked kids. I say any man who likes kids—"

"Everyone thinks that ape that got away from Haleck's did it."

She dried her hands on her apron, swift, agitated movements. "I bet that's it. I said that Bliss Haleck would bring bad luck with him when he brought a circus to winter here. He took up good farm land. He's always buying land . . . when he can grab it cheap."

"Who told you that?"

She gestured toward Abbot. "Ask him. Bliss got him drunk last week and almost bought all our land. When Joe sobered up he got mad. Joe knows this land is going to bring good prices some day. Don't you talk Haleck to me. All he's got out at that circus is freaks. Maybe he let that ape loose just to scare people into selling' out cheap."

Milt looked at her, eyes narrowing. "Joe tell you that too?"

"Of course not. I just thought of it."

"Maybe you better not think so much."

They gazed at each other, and the insects looped and darted around the yellow globe above the sink. It flickered and went out.

Milt!" Her voice fluttered weakly. Her heavy steps blundered around the room. The table creaked and a tin pan bounced on the floor, sending tinny reverberations through the blackness, that slowly died away.

"Stand still." Milt growled. "Get away from the window, I can't see. . . . Lights are out all over town."

"Milt, I haven't been near the window. I'm by the washtub—I think."

"Don't move, Ma. Someone must have come in. But he was moving, groping blindly. His hand found the table, slid open the drawer, spoons, forks, knives—the carving knife, bone-handled with a heavy blade. . . .

As he brought it out, the shape hit him, engulfing him, driving him back. He stabbed outward, viciously. There was a tearing sound, and his head cracked against the wall—hard.

Fragmentary thoughts swam dizzily in a curtain of blackness before his eyes; sharp-etched pictures, each a distinct portrait of past events—like the day he bummed into Cyprus Creek.

The kid, Johnny Lee, who for some reason salvaged him out of the pool hall—showed him a few things about tinkering with motors and got him a precarious job at Pringle's garage. Sheriff Blane's heavy-jowled face hung before him, sneering. He was half afraid of Blane. Haleck, a big shot, always running around in city clothes—owning fine cars, houses and barns.

And now, he was sitting up, fingering his matted black hair. Something that must have been blood came away on his fingers from an open cut where his head had collided with the wall, and he remembered the thing in the kitchen. A pinpoint of light wavered before his eyes,

grew larger. Ma had a candle lit. She was kneeling by his side, her face a thousand years old.

"Please Milt—wake up."

"How long you been goin' on like that?" he whispered. "You all right, Ma? Not hurt?"

"What was it? You were fighting with something. . . ."

"I don't know. He climbed to his feet.

"What happened after I blanked out?"

She licked her lips, holding the flickering candle with both hands. "There was a growling sound. I thought you were surely killed." Her eyes went over the kitchen, a shambles, table overturned, broken dishes. Abbot's quiet form by the wall.

Milt found the knife, picked it up and righted the table. A lot of good he was with a knife. He threw it in the drawer, looked at Ma and saw her trembling.

"Gimme the candle before you drop it," he commanded. He melted wax on the wooden table top, sticking the candle upright.

"This once I'm glad Joe's drunk," Ma quavered. "Listen, Milt. We've got to let the sheriff know that ape's hiding around. I'll light more candles and get Joe to bed."

Milt crouched beside Joe and turned him over, staring unbelievably at the wide open eyes. The man's throat was covered with welts. He was dead. Strangled!

## CHAPTER TWO

### No Ape-Man?

**I**T MUST have been the rigidity of Milt's back as he rose to his feet, that told Ma. She rushed forward and he spun; grabbed her. "No, Ma. Don't look. . . ."

He didn't want to see the expression on her face. He pulled her head against his

shoulder. "I'll find who done it, Ma. I'll find him. It wasn't no ape—choked the life out of him."

The light came back on, flickered, grew bright. A beetle dashed against it. Cyprus Creek returned to life.

He couldn't leave Ma there alone. Milt blew out the candle, guiding her toward the back door. "I'll take you to the church. Everybody's probably down there."

"I can't leave him. I—"

"Shut up, Ma. Do as I say."

Outside he paused, eyes roving the darkness. She felt the tautness of his arms and jerked back. "That—that thing's out here somewhere. . . ."

"It wasn't no ape," he said again, under his breath.

He tugged at her arm, urging her down the path.

There were only a few streetlights, one to a block, hanging over the asphalt street. Their steps scraped loudly. It was almost as if they had the town to themselves. Like the "hunch" he carried locked away inside; a bit of knowledge shared, as far as he knew, by no one else. The handle of the pitchfork that killed Gearhardt had been whittled at the tip to make the usual tapering point. For what reason? The answer came to him in a flash when he laid hold of the murder weapon and found it so solidly embedded in the tree. It had been driven in. Gearhardt could have been killed somewhere else, the body, with the tines sticking through it, propped up against the tree and the pitchfork driven into the wood. This act would have marred and dented the conical point on the tip of the handle. Someone had hastily whittled a new point, but not so expertly that it defied detection. And yet the crowd, gathering around in the dusk had missed it—even Johnny, who was as sharp as a tack.

Moving now through the darkness, he wondered about Bliss Haleck. Suppose

he was back of all this; had made up the story about an escaped ape-man? Moss Gearhardt, supposedly in charge of the creature, but knowing the truth—was dead. He might have tried blackmail, or simply threatened to tell the truth. He knew it wasn't an ape that had crept into the darkened kitchen and murdered Joe. His knife had ripped into cloth—he'd hear that tearing sound as long as he lived. A murderer was loose in Cyprus Creek, as cunning as a beast, depending on mob hysteria and the gullibility of frightened people to mask his crimes.

Cars and wagons were lined around the small church as they approached. He helped Ma up the rickety wooden steps. Inside, there was a buzz of excitement; people staring at them as he gripped Ma's arm, keeping her upright.

Mrs. Parker detached herself from a group and hurried over. "What's wrong, Milt? Ma, you look done up. Let me help you."

"Joe's dead," Ma said heavily. "That—that ape got him. If I kin just set down for a spell."

Mrs. Parker listened in stunned amazement. "You poor thing," she turned, cupping her hand to her lips. "Folks, did you hear? The ape got another one—Joe Abbot. Where's that fool sheriff?"

She took Ma's arm and they led her to one of the long seats. The crowd swarmed around them, asking innumerable questions.

Milt drew Mrs. Parker to one side. "Where's Blane?"

"He's supposed to organize a posse. Most of the men are here waiting for him. They brought Gearhardt's body up to the undertaker's a few minutes ago."

"Looks kinda funny—Blane not showin' up at a time like this. Does anybody know why the lights went out?"

"It was a short or something," she replied vaguely. "We were scared to death until the reverend got candles. The

town won't draw a free breath unless that ape-man is caught."

He left her and circled among the men. Most of them were armed; a sprinkling of shot-guns and rifles, one or two revolvers. They sidled up to him asking questions about Joe Abbot's death, and he recounted the story sketchily. More and more people arrived at the church, whole families, grim and anxious-eyed.

"The sheriff's gonna have a busy night!" A local farmer predicted. "And some of us better go to Abbot's house and stay with the body."

Three of the men volunteered to do this, stamping out of the church in bleak silence, guns held ready.

Milt went back to the knot of people surrounding Ma Abbot. She looked up and saw him. Her lips twisted bitterly. "You'll have to find somewhere else to stay from now on."

"Sure," he agreed.

Her eyes glazed over again. She moaned. "My poor Joe. . . . Come back to me. . . ."

He clenched his hands. "You'll be all right, won't you, Ma?"

She swayed, lips moving wordlessly. The other women were staring at him, motioning him to leave. "She's had a terrible shock," Mrs. Parker soothed. "We're all upset with these terrible things happening, one after another. . . ."

Reverend Bouth mounted his pulpit, waving his arms. "Listen men, I got word that Blane is at his office. He wants you down there. He says to bring what guns you may have. He advises the ladies to stay in the church tonight. That's all!"

**M**EN swarmed toward the door. Milt joined them. The town awoke under their tramping feet. It was the most excitement Cyprus Creek had experienced in years. They milled in front of the sheriff's office, some trickling inside. Milt edged in too, joined a line of men who were

waiting to be sworn in as extra deputies. Every light in the place was ablaze.

"I'm gonna swear you in all at once, men," Blane rasped. He ceased whittling on the pine stick and snapped shut his staghorn knife, slipping it in a vest pocket. "It's too damn hot in here. Now hold up your hands. Hey! he pointed at Milt. "Get outa that line. I wanta see you about Abbot when this is over. I've been to the house and had a look around—sent some of the boys to take away the body."

"You get around fast, don't you?" Milt said stonily. His light blue eyes didn't waver. "Just like that ape-man."

Blane stiffened. "What's that?"

"I don't think Joe Abbot was murdered by no ape. What do you think?"

Blane leaned forward, planting both hands on his desk. Maybe I don't. You were there—so they tell me. Keep talkin', Clark."

"Well Joe was lyin' on the floor drunk when the lights went out. Whatever it was, jumped me first—I had a knife from the kitchen drawer, and I stabbed out—ripped into some clothes, then my head hit the wall and I didn't know anything for a while. Why didn't it finish me? Instead, it hunts up old Joe. Doesn't make sense does it? And is this escaped ape wearing a lot of clothes?"

Blane's eyes bored into Milt's. "So that's your story? I don't like it. Get outa that line. I'm holding you for questioning."

Milt's face reddened, his fists clenched.

Some of the men looked at him, shifted impatiently on their feet.

Milt slipped back against the wall, hands jammed into the pockets of his jeans, to conceal their trembling—fighting the urge to go over that desk after the sheriff.

Blane stood up straight, the rolls of fat on his stomach bulged the dirty grey shirt out in front. "All right, boys—You swear to uphold the law in ev'ry

respect, and do what I tell yuh to do?"

There was a concerted chorus of "I do's" interspersed with "sure 'nuff" and "reckon so."

Blane pushed back his bag hat, gazing up and down the line. "Yer all residents of Cyprus Creek here, and this here ape-man that's gone on a rampage is dangerous. With two men dead already, what's he gonna do next? He may stay in the swamp, start traveling clear across Florida—or he may hang around here and show up again tonight. We ain't hankerin' fer any more bodies. Bliss Haleck says he's a killer an' we sure enough got proof of that. I say if we gotta shoot him—why shoot. The damn thing ain't human anyway."

"Just a minute, sheriff. Guess most of you know me—I'm Bliss Haleck. If you can possibly take Moe alive, it would suit me better. But I'm offering a thousand dollar reward—dead or alive!"

Excited exclamations came from the men.

Blane nodded. "That's fine, Mr. Haleck. However I ain't takin' unnecessary chances with the lives of our citizens." He looked at the men. "You boys heard what I said. Now you've all got rifles and revolvers." He turned toward a gun cabinet on the wall.

Milt let his glance drift to the window. Johnny Lee was there. He motioned, holding up a revolver, pointing at it meaningfully.

**M**ILT'S face remained expressionless, but one eyelid drooped. He edged along the wall, slipped out into the darkness and a shadow joined him.

"Gee—you almost got to be a deputy, huh, Milt?"

He looked at the skinny lad and nodded.

"What'd ya want to be a deputy fer?"

"I wanted a gun."

"Here—I thought you could use one, after I overheard a few things the sheriff

said. Take it—it's a .45, holster an' all. . . ."

Thanks, kid." Milt buckled the gun around his waist. "You heard Blane say something about me before I got here?"

"I couldn't see who he was talkin' to, but it was about the murder of Joe Abbot. He said he reckoned you didn't have no alibi."

"Oh, he did."

"I heard him say he was gonna give you enough rope to hang yerself!"

Milt's lips tightened.

Johnny gripped his arm. "It was the ape though, wasn't it, Milt?"

"No kid, it wasn't the ape, and it wasn't me! I'm going to try and find out a few things."

The way Blane looked at you when you were talking up to him—I bet he thinks you're a tough customer!"

"Blane may be thinking a lot of things," Milt said between his teeth, but I'm wonderin' about that knife of his. He always carries it, don't he?"

"Sure. Usually has it in a thong, looped to his belt."

"He hasn't got it on a thong now."

"Maybe he lost it."

"And maybe he couldn't reach high enough to whittle the end of a pitchfork handle—had to take it off."

Johnny put his head on one side, peering up into Milt's face. The end of the handle?"

"You keep your mouth shut, that's all. I'm going to Haleck's—prove there never was an ape-man!"

"Huh? Milt are you crazy? Moss Gearhardt told me all about Moe, one day. Joe Abbot was with us, in the beer parlor. Moss was gettin' Joe drunk as usual."

Milt grabbed Johnny's shoulder. "That's right. It was always Moss that got Joe to drink. Joe might have straightened up and got a job if it hadn't been for Moss.

Moss was dirty that way. It tickled him

to see Joe staggerin' around helpless.

"Maybe Moss was murdered because he knew something. Maybe he told it to Joe—and Joe was murdered too. And maybe that something—?"

"Was what you're suggestin'. That no ape-man got loose—that there isn't an ape-man."

"Yeh. It's something to work on anyway."

Johnny twisted excitedly. "Listen—there's Bliss Haleck's station wagon down the street. I heard him say he's goin' out and bring his wife back to the church. Why don't we sneak in the back of it? We can get to the bottom of this ape business out there at his place?"

"Good! But not you, Johnny. You try and find what they've done with that pitchfork—it's evidence."

Johnny's eyes shone bright. "You be careful—"

Milt moved casually down the street. Men were drifting out of Blane's office. Milt shifted the revolver on his hip, glancing around. No one seemed to be watching him. He climbed through one of the rear doors, closed it and lay down on the floor, shielded by a long seat.

Shortly the front door opened on the curb side; Haleck climbed in and the car moved swiftly off.

Five minutes later they turned into a driveway. Haleck shut off the motor and leaped out. His steps echoed on a wooden porch; a door slammed.

Milt edged up cautiously, peering around. The car was in front of a two-storied house; windows making yellow blotches from the light within. He opened the door and climbed out. The sheds were scattered off in an oblique direction, and he moved that way—silently, drawing the revolver. The weight of it felt reassuring in his hand. He broke it open, making certain it was fully loaded.

He turned the corner of a barn and came face to face with a caretaker. He

was wearing overalls, a floppy, broad-brimmed hat. His teeth gleamed in the dark, and he reached toward his hip.

"Drop it!" Milt snapped.

His hands came up slowly.

"Yes sir, boss. What you-all want?"

"Turn around."

"You gonna crack me on the haid? I ain't gonna do nuffin', Boss. I jus' guard Mister Haleck's property."

"Shut up and turn around."

Slowly the big fellow turned, the whites of his eyes like gleaming moons. He kept staring over his shoulder.

Milt pulled a revolver from the man's hip pocket and tucked it inside his own belt beneath his shirt. "Now what about that ape-man? I want the truth."

"Moe? He got away. Ev'rybody knows 'bout that."

"Yeh? You're lyin'. There ain't no ape-man. Never was."

"I swear, boss! I'll show you where they kep 'im."

Milt cursed under his breath. "Got you fooled like all the rest, huh? Show me—walk slow and easy."

A car turned into the driveway from the main road. He pushed the caretaker back until the white glare of the headlights swept past the edge of the barn. "Now move," he growled.

They trailed down the long length of the barn, past an open door. . . . Too late, Milt dodged back. An iron bar wielded by a big figure smashed against his wrist; knocked the .45 into the dirt.

"Stand still, fella."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### On the Spot

**I**T WAS Bliss Haleck. He picked up Milt's gun, holding it loosely in his hand; set the iron bar against the barn. His lips parted in a triumphant grin. "You're Milt Clark, aren't you,

work at Pringle's garage? What the devil are you up to?"

"You figure it out."

"Oh— Tough, eh? But dumb—I heard you say you didn't believe there was an ape-man. That's very interesting. What's your game?"

Milt managed to keep his voice cool. "What's yours?"

The change of expression that swept over Bliss Haleck's face was startling. He scowled, thrusting out his jaw. He spoke to the caretaker. "That was Blane who drove in. Get him."

"So you're working with the sheriff?" Milt sneered. "Nice setup."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Clark," Haleck drawled. "Blane saw you sneak into my car. He was glancing out of his office window. He waited and phoned me here. Said to see what you were up to. I was to wait until he got here. But I play things my own way."

"Oh sure. You weren't afraid I'd find out anything. I'm just a dumb mechanic. You're a big-shot. Got nothin' to hide, huh?"

Haleck shrugged. "What is there for me to hide?"

The sheriff covered ground with lightning rapidity for all his bulk. He saw the gun Haleck was holding, and Milt, nursing his wrist. "What's up Mr. Haleck?" He pushed his hat back on his head. "Clark, I told you I was holding you for questioning. I ain't in the habit of havin' men run off when I give 'em an order."

Milt blazed, "Since when am I taking orders from you?"

"Since you got yourself mixed up in a killin' that I ain't made up my mind about yet." Blane bellowed. "What'd you sneak out here for?"

Haleck cut it. "He's got the crazy notion there never was an ape-man."

"You preferin' charges against this fellow?" Blane asked him.

"I certainly should. . . . Holding up one of my men. My wife's scared to death as it is. I've got to take her into the church tonight where she'll be safe."

Milt looked at Blane. "I had a right to look around out here," he said lamely. "As far as the gun—everybody's carrying guns tonight." He watched both men closely, trying to catch any signal that might pass between them.

"What in hell you gettin' at?" Blane rasped. "This talk of there not bein' an ape. Why would Mr. Haleck make up a story like that?"

"It's absurd!" Haleck snorted.

"Yeh?" Milt said evenly. "You're buyin' a lot of land around here. Folks sell out cheap if they're scared to live in a place."

"I buy land. I don't deny it," Bliss Haleck laughed. "And there's nothing underhanded about it. You've got a vivid imagination, Clark."

Milt lost his head. "It ain't imagination when I tell you my friend Joe Abbot was strangled to death by someone who knew just where he was layin' on the floor—someone wearin' clothes. And Moss Gearhardt wasn't murdered by any ape either." He bit his tongue.

Haleck and Blane were staring at him. They exchanged glances, betraying no sign of emotion, faces unreadable.

"Well!" Haleck drawled at last. "I think maybe you've got a lot to talk over with this fellow, Blane. He sounds like a private detective."

"Sure 'nuff," Blane agreed softly. "He's just brimfull of ideers." He took the gun from Haleck and trained it on Milt.

Milt stiffened. They were in it together. He stared down the revolver muzzle, trying to gauge the tightening of Blane's pudgy fingers around the trigger. This would be an ideal spot to get rid of him—forever.

Haleck stepped back hurriedly. "I've got to take my wife to the church. Do as

you like with this here character, Blane."

Blane and Milt eyed each other. Desperately, Milt wondered if he could whip out the revolver still tucked inside his shirt. For some reason no one seemed to remember he had it. But the act would be suicidal. He held his breath, tensing his muscles, feeling the sweat rolling down his ribs. "Won't do you any good to get rid of me. Someone else knows you killed Moss Gearhardt, Blane. I told someone else."

It was a long chance; a shot in the dark, but it seemed to take effect.

The gun lowered. Blane's head jugged forward. "You're one of these here fast thinkers, eh? Playin' detective, like Haleck said. I think you're right about Abbot bein' murdered. But just how do you figure it—about Moss?"

"You run him through with the pitchfork, maybe in the edge of the woods back of Slater's. Then, tryin' to make it look like something did it, you propped Moss up and pounded the pitchfork into the tree. I don't know what you used to pound with—maybe a hammer or a big piece of wood outa Slater's shed. Then, because the marks were plain on the end of the handle, you used your jackknife to smooth it up."

**B**LANE opened and closed his mouth, ran one hand over his bristly jaw, staring oddly. "Where in hell d'you dig up all these ideers?" He toyed with the revolver in his hand. "Why do you think I done it?"

"I saw you whittling with that knife you always carry on a thong. The thong's missing. I figure a man would have to reach up pretty high to carve the end of the pitchfork handle at the angle it was in the tree."

"Weaker'n dishwater." Blane snorted, slapping his thigh. "I got tired of usin' that thong and threw it in the drawer of my desk at the office this morning."

"Yeh? You got tired of a long-standing habit on the right day, didn't you?"

The big man's lips drew back in a snarl, face reddening. "Figurin' me as the killer is where you're wrong."

Milt laughed.

Haleck's station wagon swung away down the drive, heading for the main road.

Blane motioned with his gun. "Get moving—to my car. We've got a lot to settle—you an' me."

Milt nodded grimly and headed in the desired direction. He was sure Blane was lying about that thong.

When they reached the car Blane ordered him to drive and climbed into the front seat beside him still holding the revolver. He tossed it on the back seat, but dropped his hand to the butt of his own gun on his right hip. "You don't like me, do yuh?" He said bluntly. "Since we had that little ruckus one day? I found out later that it wasn't you gettin' Joe Abbot drunk all the time—it was Gearhardt."

"That's what I tried to tell you," Milt replied shortly. "Where do you want me to drive to?"

"Head for town—down back of Slater's where Moss was stuck to the tree."

Milt looked at him sharply.

He headed the car down the drive, past the house and turned in the direction of town. He sat straight, trying to keep the gun inside his waistband from bulging out the front of his shirt.

"Drive fast," Blane ordered. He drew his revolver and held it on his lap, turning half around to face Milt. Then he said slowly, as if thinking out loud. "You coulda killed Joe Abbott easy."

Milt stared straight ahead, lips pressed tight.

"You got a nasty crack on the head there. Most likely he did it trying to fend you off. An' you got such a neat explanation of the way Gearhardt was done in too!"

"I was at the garage all day," Milt

flared. "And I'm ready to prove it."

"Sure. I already found that out."

"Checking on me, huh?"

Blane chuckled. "You see—I don't like you either!"

Milt digested this in silence, watching the speedometer creep over the fifty-five mark. "If you think I accused you of murdering Gearhardt just because I don't like you, you're wrong, Blane."

"You're a fool then. A lot of knives besides my pocket knife could have been used to whittle the end of that pitchfork handle. But there is something you're overlooking. It'd almost seem as though it would take two people to prop up the body and pound the end of that pitchfork handle. Gearhardt was a heavy man; a pitchfork handle is pretty long."

Milt shot him a glance. "You're husky enough for my money."

Blane chuckled again, but without merriment. "We'll take a look in Slater's shed and see if you're right about that hammer—or something laying around that could be used to pound with. And remember—this gun of mine goes off real easy."

"I bet! All you gotta do is say you accused me of murderin' Joe Abbot, and that I tried to get away from you, huh?"

"Tha's right, smart guy."

Milt started to swing down Cyprus Creek's one main street.

"Take the back way." Blane snapped. "And slow down. I ain't hankerin' for attention."

The car's lights cut a swath through the darkness as they pulled up on the edge of Slater's lot.

"Shut 'er off and climb out." Blane ordered. "You know where I want to go. Git movin'."

Slater's big house was empty and dark, probably all at the church. Something moved beside the porch. It caught Milt's eye and he hesitated—was it a dark, furry shape vanishing around the side? The hair on his head stirred as if an unseen

hand pawed over it, and he battled this feeling away. Surely his eyes were deceiving him? There wasn't any ape.

Blane evidently hadn't noticed a thing. He prodded Milt's back with the revolver, a flashlight in his other hand. They tramped through the night, with Blane guardedly shooting little spurts of light ahead, turning it off quickly each time. They went down that sharply slanting hill and the air grew moist and cool.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

##### *Stick to the Garage, Chum*

**P**RESENTLY the big pine loomed up before them. The ghastly thing that it had supported was gone. He and Blane shared this darkness together—spreading like a warm, star-studded pool, melting into the tree. Milt clenched his teeth, listening for the quickening of Blane's rasping breath, waiting for him to flash the light once more—then he saw the pitchfork on the ground.

Blane saw it too, grunting, sweeping the light back and forth. "I told the boys to leave everything alone; just take the body away."

Milt thought of Johnny, probably the kid had been afraid to come down here alone and get the pitchfork when he heard where they had left it.

"We'll have a look at that in a minute," Blane said hoarsely. "Let's see what's in the shed." He motioned with the light. "That way."

It was a rickety lean-to with a staple in the door that hadn't seen a lock for a long time. It creaked loudly when Milt pulled it open. The yawning keg of rusty nails was the first object to meet his eyes as Blane followed him inside, sweeping the light in a circle. There was some gunny-sacking; a pile of rotting oranges in one corner, roaches scuttling for the walls, and a large hunk of raw meat that looked

like it had been torn and twisted, gnawed by sharp teeth.

Blane gave a muttered exclamation. "Looks like we've stumbled on something. Slater's killed a bear last week over in the pineland. Now what d'you suppose would be hungry enough to tear into a hunk of it like that? Does an ape eat meat? I wonder—"

"I still don't believe in that ape, if that's what you're gettin' at," Milt said shakily.

"And I still say you're a fool! Haleck ain't bluffin' about that thousand dollar reward. Look! Over in that corner. . . ."

Milt jerked, but kept his eyes on Blane, suspecting it was a neat trick to distract his attention. He wasn't falling for it.

Blane pushed by him impatiently. In that instant Milt started to reach for his revolver, but Blane swung around too quickly, and he paused. Blane kicked a heavy maul with his foot. "Looks like your theory is pretty near correct. Here's what they could have used to pound that pitchfork into the pine."

Milt nodded, eyes hard and wary.

Blane caught the look. "And you think I used it, huh?"

"I'll admit it doesn't make sense, you bringin' me in here to look at it."

"You been thinkin' all this time that I brought you down here to bump you off. You've got nerve—I'll say that. Even if you did have that gun under your shirt, an' been waitin' fer the right chance to grab it."

Milt stiffened.

Blane pushed forward, holding his revolver ready, reached in and jerked the gun from Milt's belt, tossing it in a corner. "I'm too old a hand, Clark, at this game. I spotted that rod before we ever left Haleck's."

"Okeh," Milt grated. "So you're a smart guy. What did you bring me down here for?"

"Because I think you murdered Joe.

Abbot—after you had him murder Moss Gearhardt.”

Milt’s mouth fell open in complete astonishment.

“You done it all right, Clark. But I sure as hell can’t figure out your motive. I watched your face when we stopped by that pine outside. Pretty gruesome, lookin’ at that tree, if you was responsible for what hung on it a couple of hours ago. You’re a hard man to figure, Clark.”

“Because I didn’t have nothin’ to do with it,” he declared. “Look—maybe I’ve been wrong about you.”

“You’ve been wrong about a lot of things, fella. Haleck fer one. I know he’s been buyin’ land, swingin’ deals here and there; gettin’ it pretty cheap too. He thinks a packin’ house is gonna be built near here, which would sure cause a boom in our little community. So he’s speculatin’ with land values—with an ape runnin’ around loose searing ’em into sellin’ cheap. Also that ape is servin’ as a swell blind for whoever murdered Moss Gearhardt and Joe Abbot—if there is an ape.”

“That’s my ideer.” Blane waggled his revolver. “Someone like you, just takin’ advantage of circumstances. Maybe you put old Joe up to it—killin’ Gearhardt, then you killed Joe to keep him from talking. All I lack is a motive. C’mon Clark, what was behind it all?”

“You’re crazy!”

Blane’s face, partly shadowed in the spreading rays from the flashlight, grew hard, implacable. “You might fool your young friend Johnny Lee, but you’re talkin’ to me now.”

**M**ILT’S nails dug into his palms. “You’re wasting time.” Then a thought occurred to him; a way to identify the murderer. The idea had lain buried deep in his subconscious all along, concealed by the swiftness of events. He drew in his breath sharply, feeling an inner surge of exhilaration. “Blane, we’ve

both been going at this thing all wrong.”

“Shut up.” the sheriff roared. “I’m sick of you playin’ detective. I’m runnin’ this show.”

A twig snapped outside.

The man’s expression changed; a funny, startled look sweeping over his heavy features. He whirled—just in time to meet the furious onslaught of a dark, furry shape hurtling from the darkness. . . . A growling, bestial thing that carried him back into Milt—all three of them sprawling in a tangled heap. The sheriff’s gun remained silent, either knocked from his hand, or cramped under that heavy, writhing form—but miraculously the flashlight stayed lit, rolling across the dirt floor. Milt pushed free and dove for it, flashed it desperately into the far corner where Blane had tossed his revolver when he jerked it from his belt. He raced for it, sensing that the thing on top of Blane was aware of his stumbling movements, was lunging. . . .

He scooped up the gun and whirled, firing point-blank—the gorilla’s long, shaggy-browed face contorted as it staggered back, rearing upright, almost as tall as Milt in the glow of the flashlight. He fired again. Blood ran from the open mouth and it shrieked; fell on its side, shivered and grew motionless.

Blane was staggering to his feet, wiping a gashed cheek on his sleeve. “You satisfied now?” he wheezed grimly. “I thought I was done for.” He kicked the massive hulk sprawled on the floor. “Take that blame light out of my eyes. I want a better look at it.”

“You can see it from there. Don’t get any closer.”

“It’s daid all right. Nice shootin’. You gonna hand that gun over?”

Milt smiled grimly. “What do you think?”

Blane’s big form tensed, his breath whistling through his teeth.

Milt said sharply, “I’m taking you to

the church and I don't want any tricks. Haleck will be there."

"You got a reward comin'. Is that it?"

"Shut up and get movin'."

Blane stared at the gun. "Haleck wouldn't pay you off tonight. In case you're gambling on gettin' some cash to get away with."

"I'm gambling all right. But not on getting away. I didn't murder Joe Abbot. But I've got an idea—a way we can identify who did."

Blane looked skeptical.

"Almost everyone in town is at the church. I told you I slashed into some clothes when I struck out in the dark, remember? All I'm asking is that you line everybody up and look 'em over."

"What kind of proof is that?"

"Sure its a slim chance, but I bet if he's in the bunch he'll start gettin' nervous. Maybe we can spot him."

Blane scratched his chin, bent, and picked up his hat where it had fallen on the floor, slammed it on his head. "Do I get my gun back now?"

"If you play the game with me—put on a real act at the church. Yes."

"Reckon you did save my life." Blane glanced down at the big animal. "Okeh, Clark. It's a deal."

Wordlessly Milt handed over the sheriff's revolver.

Blane took it, slid it into the holster. "C'mon. We'll walk."

Milt followed him outside. Single file they headed back up the hill, cutting at an angle in the direction of the church.

Men were standing on the steps evidently attracted by the sound of shooting.

"I don't know how you think we're gonna trip anybody up," Blane said over his shoulder. "There's been plenty of time for a person to patch up a rip, even change clothes fer that matter."

"We gotta try," Milt insisted stubbornly. "What other chance have I got, with you trying to pin it on me?"

As they mounted the steps, men drew aside to let them through.

"It's Blane," someone said. "What happened to your face, sheriff?"

"Clark here got the ape when it jumped me," Blane answered curtly.

The word spread swiftly as they pushed on through the crowd, entering the wide doors. Those on the porch followed, asking for details.

"Shut these doors," Blane ordered. "And a couple of you men stand guard. I don't want anybody leavin'."

They looked at him curiously, sensing trouble.

"And you," Blane said to Milt, "stick close—where I can keep an eye on yuh."

They pushed their way down an aisle toward the pulpit; women drawing back with a shudder when they saw the sheriff's gashed cheek. Milt spotted Haleck, still in the tan suit, lounging against a pillar. He looked at him coldly, moving forward. "Are you the Clark who killed Moe?"

Blane stopped. "That's him. You owe the guy a thousand bucks, Mr. Haleck. Good thing I didn't run him in—yet."

Haleck shrugged. "I'll write him a check first thing in the morning."

Milt swallowed. He was looking that suit over—in vain. There were no rips or gashes that he could see. He grew aware of Johnny Lee, pressing close against his side.

"You all right, Milt?"

"Sure," he said. "Brace up, kid. Don't look so worried." But inside he was far from calm.

**B**LANE raised his voice above the babble of voices, holding up his arms to gain attention. "Listen—you people. The ape's daid all right. But Moss Gearhardt and Joe Abbot were murdered. That murderer is in this church. I wanta look you all over. So file by me here, one at a time, where Clark can see yuh too."

Silence filled the big room. Reverend

Bouth started to protest, but Blane silenced him with a glance. "Come on now—rig up some sort of a line. You're in it too, Reverend—everybody."

Milt stared intently as a line began forming. "What we're looking for," he shouted, "is torn clothes. If any of you see anyone trying to patch themselves up, it would save time if you hollered out—." He was perspiring, beginning to think how utterly hopeless it was. And Blane was more than fair, examining each one closely, muttering each time: "Okeh. You're in the clear. Git over by the wall." His eyes met Milt's, and he shook his head grimly.

Johnny tugged at Milt's sleeve. "If you git that reward you an' me could open a garage?"

Milt was staring at a rent in Johnny's pant leg.

"Oh shucks," Johnny grinned. "I ain't got a solid pair of jeans to my name. What are you lookin' so funny at me fer?"

Milt gripped the lad's slim shoulder. "I'm sorry, kid. When you're as scared as I am you think funny things."

There was only one thing to do, Milt decided. Call the whole thing off. He moved toward Blane. . . .

And then a woman screamed: "Over there, quick!"

Heads craned: Milt raised tip-toe, feeling a surge of elation, but saw only a swirling knot of people. . . . Blane running, knocking men and women aside.

Milt shoved and pushed, wallowing in the sheriff's wake, and abruptly burst upon a scene that left him stunned. Blane was struggling with—a woman!

"No," Milt told himself. "It couldn't be—" and then, he realized all too clearly—the truth. The woman was Ma Abbot, her face contorted as she struggled vainly to pull free of Blane's grasp. As she swung around, Milt saw a slitted gash in the back of her skirt.

She was the one who had blotted out his view through the window in the dark kitchen—but had lied to him.

The rest came next day. Milt, hugging a thousand dollar check from Haleck, walked into Blane's office.

"Set down," the sheriff drawled. He propped booted feet on the desk. "It was a crime of passion, you might say."

Milt sank onto a chair. "She confessed?"

"Sure. Complete. She hated Moss 'cause he kept gettin' Joe drunk all the time, burnin' up her hard-earned cash. She and Joe were comin' back from fishin', Joe carryin' a pitchfork they had used to get worms, and a knife—I guess the same one you found in a kitchen drawer. Down in the woods back of Slater's, Moss Gearhardt stopped them. He had a bottle and was lookin' fer Joe. Joe liked that fine. Ma didn't. There were hot words and she grabbed the pitchfork, run Moss through before he could dodge. Then she made Joe help her git him to the pine, pounded the end of the fork with that maul, like you suspected, and whittled the end."

"I get it. But why did she kill Joe?"

"He threatened to talk. Got panicky. She loaded him down with booze, while she tried to think of a way out. You came in. The light goin' off was a break, and she acted fast. She tried to knock you out with a skillet, but when she crashed into you, your head hit the wall and you quit movin'. In the confusion she didn't know you'd gashed her skirt."

Milt rose slowly, a picture of Ma in his mind, coming at him through that black kitchen with an upraised skillet gripped in one hand—someone he had liked, trusted.

It felt like ice-cubes forming in his stomach. He drew a deep breath, staring down at Blane. "I had you and Haleck figured all wrong, Blane. I better stick to garage work."

# VULTURE IN A GILDED CAGE

*Thrilling  
Mystery  
Novelette*



## CHAPTER ONE

### Clipped Eagle

**B**ARNABY JONES' voice on the phone was as laconic and crisp as usual. Without preliminary he said, "How would you like to go bird hunting?"

"What kind of birds?" I inquired. I didn't know the season was open on anything, except maybe canaries.

"We've got a whole covey of very queer

One of them was a killer—the Raven, the Oatbird, the Dove—or the Bird of Paradise.

**By WILLIAM GROPPENBACHER, Jr.**



When Barnaby Jones of Homicide invaded the dead Eagle's aerie—he flushed the wackiest covey of murder-happies who ever got the bird.



birds indeed," said Barnaby. "I think you might be interested." He gave me an address in the Thirties, near Lexington, and I said I'd be on over.

I took a cab. It was a wild and gusty March night, with occasional splatters of rain riding the wind, and I remember thinking that somebody had certainly picked a fine night for a murder. It was murder, of course, or Barnaby Jones of Homicide wouldn't be mixed up in it.

The address turned out to be an old brownstone, looking rather more solid than some of them do, possibly because it had escaped being cut up into apartments or turned into a rooming house. An ambulance and a couple of squad cars were parked in front, and a uniformed cop was parked in the doorway. I said Lieutenant Jones was expecting me, and he led me in.

Voices were coming through a door to the right of the hall, and the cop poked his head inside and mumbled something. Barnaby's voice called out, "Come on in, Charlie."

I walked through the door and stopped dead. The damned room was a bird cage. It was full of assorted cops, fingerprint men, photographers, medics and so on, but it was still the inside of a huge bird cage. Gilded, too. Big gilt bars curved down from the top of the domed ceiling to the floor. The background, behind the bars, was a remote-looking sky blue. Directly opposite the door was a box-like object, built, I vaguely surmised, to resemble one of those porcelain trays that hold bird seed or water. Directly above it, perched on a gilded bar, was a life-sized eagle, carved out of some kind of slate-gray stone. He had a dispirited and droopy look, he also had the most baleful eye you ever saw on bird or beast.

There was a lot of other weird junk scattered around, but I didn't bother with it then; I looked at Barnaby Jones. He was sitting on a low platform kind of arrangement, holding a big leather-bound

book on his lap. His hat, which just missed being something off the Texas border, was shoved on the back of his head, and he looked more like a happy oilman sitting in the lobby of a hotel in Dallas than a New York detective sitting in the middle of a screwball homicide. He nodded his head towards the center of the room and said, "There's the Eagle."

I had been so taken with all the gilt I hadn't noticed the body. He was lying on his back, staring straight up at the top of the cage. He looked to be tall, but with his arms and legs outflung the way they were, you couldn't be sure. He looked about fifty years old. Maybe it was just suggestion, but his features did seem to have an eagle-like cast to them; his beak of a nose would have looked good on any man's silver dollar. Even the dinner jacket he was wearing gave him the right air of austerity.

I said, "A spread-eagle, I take it?"

"Spread—and dead," amended Barnaby. He unfolded his long legs, stood up, and said to the medical examiner, "Let me know when you have something." Then he looked at me and grinned. "Come fly away with me." He pulled on a section of the bars behind the platform, and a door swung open. We walked on through. This room wasn't quite so daffy. It was a peaceful room, and it was just an ordinary rectangle, with no domes and curves. The walls were done in murals, soft blues, grays and greens, a kind of misty seascape. Sure enough, there were a few birds browsing around here and there in the scene, but they weren't agonized like the stone eagle in the other room; they looked like well-adjusted and happy birds. Barnaby put the big leather-covered book on a big desk, and sank into a chair behind it. I relaxed in another chair and waited for him to give.

"This Eagle, as he called himself," he said, "was named Francis MacGregor, and I guess he was a pretty high flyer.

This house was his aerie—he even called it that—and he did some slick and high-grade preying on other birds from here. I don't know much about it yet, but his racket seems to have been a combination of a dozen or so of the looniest cults this side of Los Angeles. Maybe you've gathered that the motif, so to speak, was birds."

"Vaguely," I admitted. "I'm bright that way. But I don't fit that name MacGregor in with the kind of guy who would run a show like this."

"Very smart of him. The mystic kind of pose has been overdone. And while you may not exactly trust all Scotchmen, you usually do believe them. Anyhow, he was smart; his record's clean. The D. A. had him in once on a malpractice charge, but it didn't stick, because they couldn't prove any laying on of hands." Barnaby sighed. "You'd think, in this what they call enlightened age, the lawmakers would realize that a smart operator can do more damage by working on people's minds than a stupid one can working on their bodies.

"But that's neither here nor there. The point is, this Eagle got his wings clipped a little over an hour ago, with rat poison, we think." It was now ten-thirty. "From what I've found out, rat poison was appropriate enough. There were four people in the house tonight, and according to them the doors and windows were bolted from the inside and nobody else came in. That's a hard thing to prove, one way or the other, but if they're lying they're doing it in perfect harmony."

THE door to the bird cage opened and one of the print men came in. He handed Barnaby a sheet of notepaper that had been crumpled up and then smoothed out again. He said, "Two sets. His and a woman's. We'll check on them."

Barnaby handed the paper over to me. It was thick and heavy, cream-colored, the kind of paper a woman used to luxury

would use. The handwriting, in vivid blue ink, was feminine but bold. It read: *See me in a few weeks—I'll beg for it.* That was all.

Barnaby said, "That was crumpled up and lying in that bird-bath contraption, which, if you look at it close, turns out to be a fireplace. He probably didn't intend to burn it, because the fireplace was clean."

"What do you make of it?"

"It might mean anything, or nothing. But I would like to know what it was this dame thought she would be begging for in a few weeks. Usually, if you know you're going to beg for something, you start begging right now. We'll know about it before we're through, though. I hope.

"I'm going to talk to the flock. You can hang around, but move over there in the corner." I moved, and he fiddled with a statuette of a parrot on the desk. "Microphone for a wire recorder," he explained. "This was the old Eagle's sanctum, and I bet he got down some juicy dialogue on those reels.

"He got it set the way he wanted it, went over to the door and told somebody to bring in Lola Maderos. He opened the leather book, which was more like an album, and I could see that each heavy page had a fancy heading and a lot of notes on it. He flipped it to the page he wanted. "This one," he said to me, "is the Raven."

"Huh?"

"Every one of 'em is some kind of bird or other. According to what kind of characters they have, if any, I suppose."

I don't know what you think of when you hear the word "raven." I'm a city sparrow, myself, and my first-hand experience with birds is limited to pigeons and a couple of fast excursions through the Bronx Zoo. Maybe that's why when I think of ravens I think of Poe's poem—a somber, ominous, threatening kind of

bird. Which wasn't quite the impression Lola Maderos gave out.

She was tall, and you would have called her stately except for the sinuous way she walked. She certainly had what the Victorian novelists called raven tresses; the blackest, glossiest hair I've ever seen. Incongruously, she wore it pulled tight against her head and gathered into a hard knot at the back. I wondered what she looked like when she took her hair down; but one look at her eyes, as black and hard as patent-leather shoe buttons, made me wonder whether she ever did take it down.

Barnaby, standing behind the desk, motioned her to the chair across from him. She smiled faintly and glided across the room. She was wearing a long, black gown, something like those things Chinese women wear. On most women it would have been shapeless, but she had the kind of figure that would look good in a gunny sack. With each step you saw the smooth glint of silk through the slits that came half way up the skirt. She sat down and crossed her legs in a manner that allowed me to concentrate most of my attention on that glint of silk.

Barnaby said, "You were Mr. MacGregor's secretary, and you were known in the—er—organization as the Raven. Is that right?"

I half expected some sort of exotic accent, but it was just a nice, cultured American voice, a trifle remote. "Yes. I handled the correspondence and most of the business affairs. The Ea—Mr. MacGregor didn't like to be bothered with such matters."

From somewhere under the black gown she took an onyx cigarette case, lighted a cigarette from a lighter on the desk. She blew a stream of smoke on the parrot that held the microphone. "I assume you've put the talking bird to work?"

Barnaby blushed, looked confused, and stammered, "Well—yes." I knew he was

putting on an act, but I don't think she did. "You don't have to talk if you don't want to, of course, but there has been a murder, and we have to ask some questions. You understand that?"

"Perfectly." Her tone implied that she understood that, and a good many more things that Barnaby would never understand. "What make you so certain it's murder?"

"We have our reasons. What makes you think it wasn't?"

"I didn't say that. But The Eagle hasn't been altogether himself recently."

Barnaby snorted. "You'll never make me believe that if an old showman like that decided to take the Dutch way out, he'd use rat poison."

She shrugged. "You're very mistaken if you think he was nothing more than a showman."

"I don't think that, not by a long shot. Just what was the racket?"

I wouldn't have thought a dame as diamond-hard as that could look naive, but she did. She said, "Racket?" as though it were some word in a strange foreign language.

"Let it go," said Barnaby. "It'll all come out. Tell me—just what was the routine around here? What did MacGregor do? What was the outfit all about?"

Her look pitied him for not having been next to the inner secrets. "Mr. MacGregor's mind was as far above the ordinary human's as the eagle is above the sparrow. He had mastered the workings of the subconscious mind. He could control it completely—his own, or anyone else's."

"Regular Svengali, huh?"

"Not in the least. He was a master of hypnotism, of course, but it was unnecessary for him to use it."

There was a lot more cross-examination, but what it boiled down to was this: The Eagle ran a one-man show. To

some extent, he operated just like a psychiatrist; long conferences, with the patient stretched out on a couch, dredging up stuff from the subconscious and shoveling it out for the old boy to inspect. His particular come-on was this bird business.

He interviewed the prospective clients in that bird cage room, where he explained to them that their real selves were imprisoned just like birds in a cage, and what he was going to do was free them. Then he would conduct them into the room where we were sitting, and show them how to find peace and repose. After that, he would teach them to soar.

IT WAS a pretty good angle, at that; and with the theatrical aspect of it handled properly, you can see how it would appeal to a certain kind of unhappy personality. The decorations of this place were well done. It wasn't any papier maché and tinsel job—it was top-flight stage artistry.

That was the bare bones of the routine, but even though he soaked the clients a spanking good consultation fee, that probably wasn't much more than enough to pay the nut. Lola Maderos, the Raven, naturally wasn't going to tip any of the other angles, but they didn't have to be spelled out. For one, he painted himself as a sort of high-powered minister, with a fashionable church and a flock of charity parishioners to support. For another, that wire recorder was a dead giveaway to blackmail.

Barnaby asked, "How many people have been in here today?"

"Quite a few. I can make a list for you."

"Could anybody have come in without your knowing about it?"

"It's possible, but not very likely. My office is next to this room, and usually the door is open when he isn't having a conference." She indicated a door just behind her chair.

Barnaby asked offhandedly, "The Eagle was quite something of a hypochondriac, wasn't he?"

"Absurd. The body is controlled by the mind. He simply didn't believe in illness."

"For a guy who didn't believe in being sick, he certainly had a hell of a collection of medicine."

It almost looked as though she blushed faintly, but I couldn't be sure. "I suppose you mean in his bathroom? He took that away from the women who consulted him. He wouldn't allow them to have any medicine."

"They must have catholic tastes in pills. There's everything from sodium amytol to benzedrine in there. Including strychnine."

If that meant something to her, she didn't register it. Barnaby handed her the sheet of notepaper and asked whether she recognized the handwriting. She looked at it indifferently and shook her head.

Barnaby asked, "Do the words mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing."

"Who was he expecting to come here tonight?"

"No one that I know of. Of course he didn't tell me all his affairs." There might have been a faint trace of resentment in her tone as she said that.

Barnaby dismissed her and told the man outside to bring in Mrs. Rose Hulbert. He flipped a couple of pages in the book, and said, "This one is the Dove. Her husband is in the bucks in a very large way, and I wouldn't be surprised if our Eagle occasionally got his claws on some of them."

The name Dove suited her. She was dressed in gray silk. She was small and plump, maybe about forty-five years old, and she still had a muted beauty. She must have been pretty close to the Eagle, but she didn't show any grief. Instead, there was a quiet radiance in her face.

When she sat down, Barnaby asked, "Do you live here, Mrs. Hulbert?"

"Oh, no." Her voice had a soft, dove-like quality. "I do have a room upstairs, though. Sometimes I stay overnight, but not often."

"How long have you known MacGregor?"

"Our glorious Eagle?" There was almost a worshipful note in the soft voice, so the words didn't sound as silly as they look. "More than two years. I helped him, in a small way, to build this magnificent place."

"How, exactly?"

"I have a little money." She added quickly, "Oh, it was worth ten times as much as I gave him. I had never known real happiness before I met him."

"Just what do you mean, happiness?"

If she thought the question was impertinent, she didn't say so. "I had never known my real self, all my potentialities, until he taught me how to find them. He—" She looked to be all set to recite us a chapter from the Eagle's bible, but Barnaby held up a restraining hand.

"Some other time," he said. "Since you admired him so much, you must be deeply affected by his death?"

"His spirit," she proclaimed, "is still alive. Grief will do no good. He didn't want us to feel grief."

"Didn't want you to? You mean he suspected he might die?"

"We all die sometime," she said simply.

Either this lady was a very dim bulb, or she was very expert at keeping the brightness hidden.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Quoth the Raven

**S**HE said she had been there all afternoon, had last seen the Eagle at dinner (I wondered whether they ate bird seed) and had noticed nothing

unusual about him or any of the others. After dinner she had spent some time in the aviary on the top floor, and had then gone to her room. She told us all this with that same air of misty rapture.

Barnaby showed her the note and asked her about the handwriting, but she just looked at it dreamily and said she couldn't imagine whose it might be. He asked her what kind of medicine the Eagle took, but she gave us the same answer the Raven had—he never touched the stuff.

"Where can I reach you if I want you again?" Barnaby asked.

"I'll stay here tonight," she said. "I want to be close to his spirit as it soars upward."

Barnaby managed not to snort, which was quite a tribute to his upbringing. As the door closed behind her he said, "Could anybody be that giddy?" Then he got up and went out to the bird-cage room.

When he came back he wagged his head mournfully and said, "You would think once in a while somebody else in Homicide would draw one of these crackpot killings, but it always has to be me." Which was just so much noise, because this was the kind of case he always pretends to dislike violently, while as a matter of fact he has the time of his life probing into these off-base personalities.

I said, "I could follow the scenario better if you'd tell me just how this bird got it. What's all this double talk about medicine?"

"Oh, that. I was just talking to the M.E. again. The guy died from strychnine—which he was carrying in capsules in a little box in his pocket. That won't be definite until after an autopsy and an analysis of the capsules, but it's good enough for a working theory."

"I thought you said rat poison. I never heard about rats going in for taking capsules."

"That's what it was, though. They've

got a big collection of birds—real, live birds—up on the top floor. They keep a lot of grain around to feed 'em, and that draws rats. So they mix their own poison, about an eighth of an ounce of strychnine to a half bushel of corn. That's enough to knock off all the rats in Hamlin."

"I still don't get the capsule angle."

"The box that had the capsules in it originally held a prescription. We just checked with the doctor who gave it to him, and he said it was some kind of dope for arthritis. Two capsules every four hours."

"Then that business about him not believing in medicine was just so much malarky?"

He gave me a pitying look. "Every time you find one of these fakirs who's really in the big-time brackets, you've found a man who's too smart to practice what he preaches."

A cop stuck his head in the door and said, "Do you want to talk to this fellow Keith now?"

"Sure," said Barnaby. He said to me, "John Keith is known in the flock as the Catbird."

He was a peppery little guy, maybe fifty years old. The only distinguishing feature about him was a pair of snapping blue eyes, hard as agates. From the way he flashed them around I got the impression he thought they looked fierce, and tried to cultivate that effect. I never thought about it before, but I suppose you can exercise the eyes, build them up, so to speak, like you would a bicep. He had done a good job of building up a fierce pair of eyes in an inappropriate skull.

He glared first at me, then at Barnaby, and sat down belligerently in the chair by the desk.

Barnaby drawled, "Let me see, you take care of the birds, don't you?"

"Among other things."

"Such as?"

"I taught him all he knew about birds."

"What did he do for you in return?"

"Paid me a miserly wage. Taught me what little he knew about the human mind."

"What little he knew? I thought he knew everything."

"Ha! I could give him cards and spades every day of the week and twice on Sundays."

"Very interesting," murmured Barnaby. "You are known as the Catbird, aren't you?"

He leaned forward and shook a sharp finger at Barnaby. "That was nothing but jealousy of the worst kind, and don't you forget it. It's my belief he thought of me, in his own private mind, as a falcon."

"A falcon is a dangerous bird."

"Meaning what?"

"There seems to be a dangerous bird of some kind on the loose around here."

**H**E DREW his bony little frame erect, and actually managed to look imperious. "A falcon," he said, "strikes in the open. Like a thunderbolt out of the wide, blue sky."

"Oh," said Barnaby mildly. "But since you looked after the birds, you also no doubt had charge of that rat poison?"

"I did. Strychnine sulphate. I bought it myself at the corner drug store, as you'll see if you look on the poison register there. I mixed it myself, with the grains."

"Where did you keep it?"

"In a cabinet back of the aviary, along with the medicines and other things."

"Locked?"

"As open as the wind. Anybody could get into it that had a mind to, if that's what you mean."

"Uh-huh." Barnaby casually handed him the note. "Recognize that handwriting?"

He glanced at it and sneered. "'Beg for it.' Ha! That's the kind of thing I'd have no truck with. No, I don't know

the hand. Is there any reason I should?"

"Not that I know of. How do you put in your time around here?"

"Various ways. I rarely come downstairs, except for meals, or to get out and away from the daft atmosphere of the place for an hour or two."

"Did you have dinner here tonight?"

"I did not. I went out at four o'clock and didn't return until after seven. I had a glass or two and a bite to eat with a friend in a tavern on Eighty-fourth Street." He reeled off his friend's name and the address of the tavern with an air that dared Barnaby to prove him a liar.

Barnaby took down the information, then asked, "When did you last see the Eagle alive?"

"About eight o'clock, just after they'd eaten. He came for a look at the birds, as he often did."

"Was he alone?"

"He was not. One of the others—the Dove, it must have been—was with him, though I paid them no particular heed. I was busy."

After he left the room, Barnaby flipped through the leather book, looked at a page, and said, "This is the last of the resident birds. Marjorie Carstairs. It sounds like a phony name. Her bird-name is the Bird of Paradise." He gave me a look that came close to being a leer. "We'll have her for dessert."

She would do for dessert any time. Especially if you like ripe peaches and whipped cream and powdered sugar. The word "gorgeous" is woefully overworked, especially in connection with blondes, but here was the woman for whom that word was invented. She was beautifully under-dressed in a shimmering strapless blue evening gown that had no back to speak of, and not much more front. Her thick blonde hair was massed in a way I couldn't describe, except I know it was a work of art. Her make-up, except for the red slash of lipstick, was so delicately done you

had to look twice to be sure it wasn't some wonderful achievement of nature.

She paused in the doorway long enough to give each of us a slow look with the twin blue stars she used for eyes. Then she crossed the room in an easy, graceful way that was a poem in motion, and sat in the chair by the desk. In spite of all that spectacular beauty, she contrived to look like a little girl sitting on the edge of her chair in front of teacher and all ready to give a recitation.

Barnaby took her over pretty much the same ground he had covered with the others, and I began to think, sadly, of another hackneyed old phrase—beautiful but dumb. When he showed her the note, her comment was, "Pretty writing, isn't it?"—which will give you an idea of how helpful her answers were. But the girl didn't look stupid. She just looked lovely. Barnaby finally asked, "Did the Eagle have many men among his clients?"

I thought her eyes narrowed just a little. "He didn't have any objections to men."

"Do you?"

She smiled. "I love 'em."

"Have you by any chance happened to introduce any men to the Eagle?"

"Two or three. I've been living here, you see, and several of my friends have called for me here."

"Oh. Are you on the staff?"

"Not exactly. I do little things when he asks me to, but mostly he just lets me stay here because he's so kind."

"Uh-huh. Well, that's all for now. Don't leave town without letting us know."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

She closed the door gently behind her and Barnaby said, "Some dame. Some smoke-screen. He lets her stay here because he's so kind. Oh brother, the kindly old eagle."

"What's her angle, do you think?"

"My gosh, Charlie, you must need a

drink. Her angle? She's a shill for the joint. Even that silly name, Bird of Paradise, fits! she's just a gorgeous show-piece. I haven't decided yet whether she knows what she's doing, but that's it. That kind of woman has one objective in life—rich men. She probably plays hard to get and keeps 'em dangling. At least part of the time they're dangling there in that bird cage, and the Eagle gets his beak into them. He won't be able to take a bite out of every one that comes along, but I bet he gets his share."

"Oh," I said wittily. It all seemed very simple once it was spelled out for me.

**B**ARNABY sat there for a while, looking off into the misty distance of the murals, and drumming on the desk with his fingers. Finally he said, "I think what we're looking for is a cuckoo."

"Cuckoo?"

"You don't know much about birds, do you?"

"You couldn't exactly call me an ornithologist."

"A cuckoo isn't quite so dumb as he is generally thought to be. Among other bright tricks, he frequently moves in and takes over a nest some other bird has built. I think that's what's going on here."

"I don't get you."

"This Eagle has built a beautiful big nest, well lined with that comforting green stuff. Somebody is moving in on him. Whoever it is had to get him out of the way first. What kind of a bird would be likely to do a thing like that?"

"As you pointed out, I don't know anything about birds. But I'd say that raven-haired damsel called Lola would be in the best spot to make a move."

"How so?"

"Confidential secretary. Kept all the records and so on, and probably knows everything that went on, right down to the last exclamation point."

"Yeah. But the point is, anybody who

figured to move in would also figure to go right on running the business."

"You mean that little bird who thinks he's a falcon?"

"Who else?"

"For my dough, I'd a lot rather unburden my subconscious to the Raven. Or even this last number, this Bird of Paradise."

"That would be your unconscious."

"Skip it. But I don't follow this cuckoo-in-the-nest theory. There could be lots of other things behind it. For one, getting chilled is an occupational hazard for anyone who's in the blackmailing line. Or maybe he had a roll stashed away somewhere. Or maybe one of the clients did it just for spite. Anyhow, you haven't altogether persuaded me it wasn't suicide."

"Think of that," said Barnaby with mock admiration. "The brain does still turn over, doesn't it? But I already told you about the suicide. One, he had no reason. Two, if he had, it would have been something spectacular, not messy. Three, a bird like him would just naturally have left behind a long, flaming message. Four, a guy wants to go out, he wants to go right now. Cyanide, yes. Strychnine, no. You linger around for maybe half an hour. You go through sheer hell. It just doesn't make sense."

"He was carrying the capsules himself, wasn't he?"

"That's what it says. But if he'd been taking the Dutch door, he'd have gulped down the whole works. The box was almost full."

We took a tour over the house, and while it was weird and bizarre enough to make a story in itself, we saw nothing that had any particular bearing on the killing. Six bedrooms, each decorated more or less to harmonize with its occupant's nature. The Eagle's room, and a bathroom, were on the first floor, adjoining his study. Another domed room upstairs, like a junior-sized Hayden Planetarium,

was where the Eagle put his clients through the post graduate course. On the top floor was an enormous collection of birds, all covered up for the night.

The body had been taken away; the print men, the photographers and medics were gone; and there wasn't anybody in sight but a couple of detectives waiting for orders from Barnaby. He posted them outside, on the off chance that one of the human birds in the place might do a little night flying, and he and I went down to O'Mara's for a few drinks. The machinery was rolling now, and it would roll all night. Meanwhile, there wasn't much else to do except think. I did some myself. Just before I dropped off to sleep I came up with an idea that made me feel like Little Jack Horner with the plum on his thumb.

The telephone jangled me out of the sleep. It was one of the boys at Homicide. He said Barnaby was on his way uptown in a terrific hurry and would pick me up outside my apartment in ten minutes. It was seven o'clock.

I flipped into some clothes and was standing on the curb when the squad car came wailing up the street, with Barnaby holding the back door open for me. The car slowed, I jumped in, and off we went.

I leaned back in the corner, lighted a cigarette, and pulled out my plum.

"Look." I said. "MacGregor took those capsules under the impression they were medicine, didn't he?" Barnaby nodded. "Well, since he died about half-past nine, he must have taken the capsules at nine." Another nod. "The prescription said two capsules every four hours, which means his last dose before the fatal one was five o'clock, and the capsules were all right then."

"That's right."

"Since he didn't want anybody to know he was taking medicine, he'd have kept them in his pocket all the time. So, whoever switched capsules on him did it some

time between five o'clock and the time he put on that dinner jacket—say between five-thirty and six."

"Yep."

I played my ace. "Who else could have done it but the Raven? She was in her office next to his study. She listened at the door until he went into the bathroom to shave, then she sneaked in, made the switch, and there you have it." I leaned back and waited for the applause.

There wasn't any. He sat there without saying a word, while I got madder and madder. When he did start talking, it was as though I hadn't even mentioned any little theories of my own. He said, "There's a cook up there, you know, an old Irish dame. Claimed to have been at her sister's all day and until early this morning. We checked on it, and she was.

"We checked on that fellow Keith, the Catbird. He was where he said he was—out from four until seven."

"You see," I crowed. "That's the crucial time, and he wasn't even there. And you practically had the finger on him."

"Yeah, I know."

We banged to a stop in front of the Eagle's nest, and Barnaby jumped out. I wondered what the hurry was, because he doesn't usually move fast unless he has to. I was surprised to see a cop standing by the door, and even more surprised to find another one inside, by the bird-cage door. Barnaby pushed right on past him.

I've seen a good many corpses of one kind and another, but this was the most grotesque I ever want to see. She was slung over the golden bar where the slate-gray eagle had been perched, face down, with her legs dangling down one side and her torso and arms down the other. The raven black hair was down to. It fell in a silken mass that was longer than her slender arms. The gold handle of a knife jutted out of her back, just below the left shoulder blade. The Raven was dead.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Fine-Feathered Murderer

**B**ARNABY stood there for maybe five minutes, with his eyes raking over every inch of the room. Finally he quoted, softly, "The Bird of Time has but a little way to fly—and lo, the Bird is on the wing."

I had to admit the quotation was apt, although this wasn't exactly the setting in which you usually place Omar Khayyam.

I asked, "What do you make of it?"

"As you mentioned last night," he said, "you don't know much about birds. Or farmers. A raven is a kind of crow. When a farmer shoots a crow, he hangs him up on a fence post, or a dead tree or a stump, for all the other birds to see. It scares 'em away."

"Just which birds do you have in mind?"

"It could be just a general warning to all concerned. Or maybe someone knows, or almost knows, more than is healthy."

"Think that's why she was killed?"

"It could be."

He walked slowly around the room once, examining the walls, the floor, everything. Then he turned into the study and I followed him. He propped his feet irreverently up on the Eagle's desk and lighted a cigarette.

"Some other things happened last night. That Raven left here about twelve-thirty, carrying a small package. I had the boys outside, you know, and Haggerty tailed her. He lost her. Said she disappeared like a blackbird down a coal chute. That was just a figure of speech, because where he actually lost her was Grand Central. One minute she was there and the next she wasn't. And Haggerty's a good man. He finally came on back here, and she showed up again about two.

"Meanwhile, another bird took off. The Dove. Franklin, the other boy I had on

the job, followed her. She went up to her own house on Sixty-ninth, stayed about twenty minutes and came back here."

"I don't see that that proves much of anything."

"Except that there was an interval of about a half hour when the house wasn't watched. Anybody could have come in, or gone out."

"But not to kill the Raven. She wasn't here then."

"Another odd thing happened last night. After Franklin tailed the Dove up to her house, he found a phone and called me. I went on up. There was still a light, so I rang the bell and her husband, old Frank Hulburt, answered. We had quite a little talk. He says his wife has been acting a little queer lately."

"You didn't have to be told that, did you?"

"He seemed pretty worried about her, especially about her spending so much time down here in the Eagle's nest. But he didn't interfere because he was afraid it might upset her. I got to poking around later and discovered that the money in that family is all hers, which is maybe why the old boy was so solicitous. He also told me something else. He recognized the handwriting on that note."

"Whose was it?"

"His wife's."

That was something of a stunner. *Ask me in a few weeks—I'll beg for it.* I couldn't fit the sense of that note in with what we had seen of the Dove, any more than I could connect the bold handwriting with her remote and misty personality. She didn't have to beg anybody for anything. I said as much to Barnaby.

He shrugged. "Might be a slight schizophrenia, for all I know—one of those Jekyll and Hyde things. She talks like a cooing dove, but some of her ideas are as bold as a hawk's, and that shows up when she writes."

"But she said she didn't recognize the

handwriting. So did the Raven, who would certainly have seen her writing, on a check if nowhere else."

"Interesting thing about that," said Barnaby. "There were two sets of prints on the note. The Eagle's and a woman's. Now we find out that the woman's belonged to the Raven. So she had already seen the note, and she had her reasons for shutting up about it. My guess is that she wanted to have a little quiet business talk with the Dove before she spilled anything."

"What does her husband think of the note?"

"Says it doesn't make any sense to him."

"So I guess we'll have a little conversation with the Dove?"

"Later. None of 'em know about the Raven yet. The cook found the body and told our man on the door. I've kept all the rest of them upstairs without telling them why." He drummed on the desk and stared into space for a couple of minutes, then got up abruptly and went into the bird-cage room.

It was about five minutes before he called for me to come in. A sleepy-looking photographer was banging away with flash bulbs, and the M. E. was yawning in a corner, waiting to get the body down. Barnaby wasn't looking at either of them. He was standing in front of that odd fireplace arrangement that looked like a bird's blue-platé special. There were a couple of brassy fasteners on each side of it, and one of them was swung out so I could see a little compartment behind it. I looked inside and saw it was empty.

"That note has been bothering me ever since we first found it," said Barnaby. "I couldn't figure why we found it where we did. It finally dawned on me that he must have a hiding place over here somewhere. He was going to put it in there, but the strychnine got him before he quite made it."

HE TURNED away and sighed. "It's the old gag of having a hiding place where it's so much in the open nobody dreams of looking for it there. But I thought of it too late. Somebody else knew about it, and whoever it was got into it last night. It was stripped clean."

I remembered something. "You said the Raven was carrying a small package when she left here last night."

"Sure. But it's a little late to ask her what was in it. Or where she put it. We'll comb around and find it eventually, because she didn't have it when she got back here."

"Just like the needle in the haystack, except you don't even know it's a needle you're looking for."

He turned towards the hall. "Let's go upstairs and talk to some of these people."

The second and third floors were dark, with the doors closed, so we went on up to the aviary. There was a little sort of ante-room, and beyond that a big room, almost the length of the house, where the larger birds were kept in individual cages. Beyond that was a smaller room with tiny humming birds, canaries and whatnot.

I preferred to look at the gorgeous creature who was called the Bird of Paradise. She was standing halfway down the big room with Keith, the Catbird who thought he was a falcon, and a big gaudy macaw was stalking up and down his arm, looking at her. Both of them wore long linen dusters, as if they were all set for a turn-of-the-century spin in their horseless carriage. We walked on down towards them and he glared and she turned on that dazzling smile.

Without giving it any buildup at all, Barnaby said, "The Raven is dead."

The Catbird's sandy eyebrows shot up and his bright blue eyes blazed for a brief second. The girl's expression really didn't change at all. She repeated the one word, "Dead?" like a kid who's just been handed a new word he's not sure of.

"Sometime last night. Killed. This time it was done with a knife."

She asked, "Did it have any connection with the Eagle being killed?"

"That's what I'm going to find out. What did each of you do after we left last night?"

"Do?" said the Catbird. "I went to my bed and slept. And there I stayed, as usual, until two hours ago, when I got up and came to feed the birds."

Barnaby looked at Marjorie, and she said, "I went to bed too, but I didn't sleep very well. I woke up some time ago, and there was a policeman at the stairs who said we couldn't come down for a while, so I came up here."

"But you did try to go downstairs?"

"I wanted some coffee, but I knew I could get it just as well up here."

"Neither of you heard anything unusual during the night?"

Both heads shook, hers slowly and carefully, his with one fierce snap.

"Then you don't know that the Raven went out last night?" Again they both shook their heads, and Barnaby went on, "Or that the Dove followed her?"

I was watching the girl. This time she definitely showed surprise.

"But that isn't at all like her. She never goes out, except when she's going to her own home, and she never takes much interest in what the rest of us are doing."

"Likely or not," said Barnaby, "she did go out."

Barnaby asked whether The Dove was up, and Marjorie said, "She usually sleeps late. I'll go call her, if you like."

The three of us walked to the ante-room, where she took off the linen duster and slipped into a black jacket that matched her skirt. The black suit was probably her conception of mourning, but she was a dame that just couldn't look mournful in anything.

We started down the stairs, but Barnaby stopped abruptly. "I just happened

to think of something I have to do. You two stay up here; I'll call you when I want you."

He didn't have to tell me that I had been appointed a sort of unofficial watchdog. Whatever he was up to, I was supposed to persuade these two not to go downstairs. We went back into the aviary, and for the next half hour I saw enough of our feathered friends to hold me for the next several years.

I'll say one thing for the birds in the cages, though. I got more conversation out of them than I did the other two—the Catbird and the Bird of Paradise. He was in a dour mood, glaring fiercely at everything in sight, including me. Her interest in the world had taken flight and flown away from there. I gave up trying to get anything out of them, and just hung around.

When Barnaby came back he said he was sorry to have kept us waiting. The girl asked if he wanted her to call the Dove.

He said, "No, let her sleep. I won't be needing her for an hour or more. But you can come on down to the study with me."

The Catbird flashed him a defiant look and said, "Will you have any need of me?"

"None at all," said Barnaby. "But don't leave the house."

WE WENT down the stairs and into the study. Barnaby picked up a wicked-looking knife with a six-inch blade and a gold handle elaborately carved, naturally, in the shape of a bird. It had a ruby for an eye. He showed it to the girl and said, "That's what killed her. Ever see it before?"

"Oh, yes. The Eagle kept it on his desk. For a letter opener, I think."

"That's what I thought." He dropped the knife back on the desk and sat down. "The Dove told me about that note she wrote," he said. "The Eagle wanted her

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## All-Story Detective

to get a divorce; said her husband was a drag that kept her from soaring as high as she could. What's more, the old boy told her he had all the evidence she would need for the divorce.

"The Dove told me that as soon as he suggested it she knew that she would do it. But she had to do it in her own good time. I guess she had to wait for her spirit to soar up to the right pitch. She knew that after the idea got to working on her she would want that evidence so badly she would beg for it. So she wrote that note. Says she had a habit of writing notes to him.

"I was kind of wrong about her, in a way. She's a little psycho, all right, but she isn't a schizo. She's a masochist—she likes to kick around, in a refined and mental way. She was like the hophead who puts off taking the next pill until he absolutely has to have it."

He paused for a moment, and I thought I heard a faint scuffling noise from somewhere upstairs. Barnaby seemed to be listening, too, but he didn't make a move.

I mulled over what he had said. "You sure you haven't been smoking something yourself?"

"I'll admit," said Barnaby, "if anybody else had tried to sell me that story I'd have said it was a nine-dollar bill. But I think she was telling the truth."

The door to the bird cage room suddenly flung open and people began coming in. It was quite a little parade. First came the Catbird, his eyes blazing defiance. This time he was playing the falcon, all the way. A detective on each side gripped his rigid arms. Another detective behind them was lugging a case that I decided must be a recording machine. A wire trailed from that to the bright-colored statuette of a parrot that the police photographer was waving in one hand while he swung his camera in the other. For the first time I noticed that the par-

rot with the microphone in its bill was missing from the desk.

The photographer didn't look sleepy any more. He said, "What a production! First time I ever had a picture wired for sound."

At the end of the procession was the Dove, very pale and looking as though she had just come back into this world for a change and didn't much like it.

One of the detectives dropped an ordinary butcher knife on the desk and said, "It went off right on schedule."

Barnaby nodded. "Let's hear it."

The photographer and a detective fiddled with the amplifier, and it began talking. The first voice was the muffled, harsh burr of the Catbird.

It said: "So you followed the Raven, did you?"

The other voice was the Dove, and she sounded scared. She said, "Followed—the Raven? But she is dead."

"Then it's possible you've someplace else to follow her if you don't tell the truth!"

"Oh-h!" It was a gasp, a moan, and it was full of shock and fright.

"When the girl left here last night you followed, and without doubt you saw where she put the swag. I came to tell you that you're not to say a word about it to a living soul."

"Please—that knife!"

"That knife will do you no harm, so long as you say nothing, do nothing. If you make a slip—well, the knife will slip, too. Right into your heart."

The sound swirled into a confused babble of noises and other voices.

Our defiant falcon's feathers were beginning to droop, and his sandy complexion was tinged with gray. "What's your charge?" he demanded.

"The charge, Mr. Keith," said Barnaby pleasantly, "is murder."



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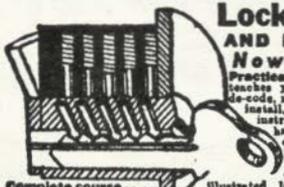
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## All-Story Detective

Some of his defiance came back. "On the strength of that mummery?"

"Oh, no. On the facts. As soon as I realized you had killed the Eagle, I knew you also had killed the Raven—obviously to get whatever she had taken from that secret compartment in the fireplace. You waylaid her when she came in last night, forced her to tell you where she had hidden the package, and then killed her."

"I'll say nothing until I have a lawyer."

"You don't have to say anything. All you do is listen. This morning, when you thought the Dove had followed the Raven, you went down to make sure she wouldn't talk. I knew you'd do that, so I arranged the opportunity for you. I also put some of the boys in the next room, in case you tried to go too far. Maybe the wire recorder was theatrical, but it's good evidence, and saves a lot of trouble."

I SAID, "He had a hell of a nerve, going in and threatening her like that when the house was full of cops."

"Charlie, when that bird said he knew something about the human mind, he wasn't fooling. That kind of treatment was just what the Dove wanted—craved, in fact. She had a lapdog for a husband, and the chances are her money bought her so much deference and kindness she was sick of it. The old Eagle was smart enough to get tough with her, and she worshipped him. Our Catbird was going to take over the Eagle's aerie, so he took over his technique, too."

I looked at the Dove and there was a faint glow of rose beneath the smooth paleness of her skin. I said, "But how do you figure him as the Eagle's killer?"

"I'm always a little suspicious when I come across a perfect alibi." He looked blandly at Keith. "Yours was that. It was so slick it went beyond the obvious fact, the time of death. It covered the time when we would logically figure those

## Vulture in a Gilded Cage

capsules had to be switched. If we hadn't figured that out for ourselves, you'd have pointed it out to us. Another funny thing about that alibi. You very seldom went out at all; it was odd you just happened to go yesterday, and at just the right time. And that you happened to know the exact address of that tavern where you went."

The defiance hadn't left the bright blue eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Try this for size, then," suggested Barnaby. "When we start checking into backgrounds, I don't think we'll find it's an accident that the Eagle had a Scottish name, and you speak with a distinct burr. I think we'll find that you knew each other in Scotland. Grew up together."

A slow flush began spreading into Keith's face, but his voice was steady. "And what would that prove?"

"That you knew more about the Eagle than any of the rest of the flock. They all actually believed that hocus-pocus about illness being a thing of the mind, but you knew better. You knew that he had arthritis, and that he'd been to a doctor and got some medicine for it."

"So?"

"So you're the only person, besides the doctor, who knew he was taking those capsules, knew when he would take them, knew that they were white powder, like that strychnine you had. I think that pretty well wraps it up."

I said, "That's all just dandy, but would you mind telling me just how and when he did substitute the strychnine for the capsules?"

"I thought you noticed that, Charlie. But then, as you will be the first to admit, you don't know anything about birds. Those birds are moulting, shedding feathers like a dog sheds hair in the spring. That's the reason for those linen duster affairs, like we saw our charming Bird of Paradise wearing this morning.

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That washed it up, of course. Even the defiance of a falcon couldn't stand up under that weight. Keith's head slumped forward and he seemed to shrink into himself.

Barnaby stood up and started for the door. "And so, my little Catbird, you have but a little way to fly. Let's be on the wing."

So the Catbird flew into the coop—and I winged on down to O'Mara's.

**THE END**

*(Continued from page 85)*

and the gun dropped away from his limp fingers. I looked at his face, and I shivered. He had slanted the muzzle upward into his mouth before he pulled the trigger.

I left them that way, and walked slowly back to the hearse.

\* \* \*

Dawn was over the town of North Ridge before I finished with the cops, the coroner, and the reporters. I sat in Dr. Dixson's kitchen drinking coffee. He had gone upstairs to shave before making his morning calls. Belinda Starr sat opposite me. She had refused to go to bed until the cops had found Walter's body buried in Caskey's woods, and had seen it safely reposing in a local funeral parlor. Now she looked like a red-headed ghost. I reached out and touched her hand. She gave me a wan smile. "I—I want to thank you," she said, "for what you have done for me, and I want you to keep that check

## A Corpse in Time. . . .

I gave you last night—for yourself. I'll settle with Mr. Blair."

"Hell," I said, "he didn't do anything for you yet—unless you want him to bury your husband."

She shook her head. "I told you last night—there isn't going to be any burial."

Here it came again. I took a swallow of coffee.

"Long ago," she said, "before we were married, Walter and I agreed that we didn't like funerals—flowers, gawking people, cemetery, all the rest—and we made a promise to each other. I've arranged cremation services for Walter. That's what he wanted. Then I'll take his ashes back to Texas, have them with me always." She paused, and lowered her lashes. "I asked Abigail to come to the services, but she refused. There'll just be myself, and the minister, and Doctor Dave. I—I'd like you to come, too."

"I'll be there," I said.

It was noon before I got back to my apartment. I was shaving when I thought about W. Arlington Blair. I called him. Already he had a new secretary with a whispering voice. When Blair came on the wire, I said: "This is Fiske. I thought you'd like to know that I've found Walter Starr's body. I—"

"Yes, yes," he broke in, "I know all about it. Abigail Starr was here."

"Okay," I said. "Brace yourself. You'll have to cancel that photo space for Walter Starr on your office wall. Other arrangements have been made."

His laugh had a nasty ring to it. "The space is already filled," he said smugly, "with a lovely photo of Myra Duval. Abigail made the arrangements. It will be our super de luxe service. Police escort to the cemetery."

I hung up on him. An undertaker always has the last word.

THE END

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## Dr. Scholl's SOLVEX

## All-Story Detective

(Continued from page 65)

Roger jerked. He wiped his lips. He looked up quickly at the sheriff.

"He's sure a tough egg. Slugged a guard with his own revolver."

Gramps pondered. "I recollect, Oley, the time you slugged a bank robber and fractured his skull. Self-defense, you said it was." He paused. "Wonder what kind of guards we have at the reform school."

Roger looked up quickly. He tried to rub the fear from his eyes. He felt inexpressibly bad.

"You've been saying that for fifteen years," Oley said. "Who's arguing with you? But nobody can up and club the law."

"Maybe," said Gramps. "But we should look into it a little more." He put his hand on Roger's shoulder. "Go easy on the lad, Oley. He's a fine boy. He stopped us from being murderers this morning."

Roger blinked. He couldn't decide whether to feel betrayed or relieved.

"Bosh!" said the sheriff. "You haven't a gun in the house with a firing mechanism in it ever since Billy took up scouting Indians." He reached down for Roger.

Anger decided to well up in Roger. "Double crossers!" he spat. He wriggled in the sheriff's strong arm.

Billy and Jeanne came and solemnly joined the group. He saw their faces and stopped struggling.

"How about the upstairs room?" Jeanne said innocently.

Gramps glanced at her. "Upstairs room?" He puffed on his pipe. "Why, yes. Now there's an idea. Billy can't come over all the time to keep me company. Kind of need a young man with spunk around here to perk up the place. Oley, when you get through with the lad, send him back."

Roger walked out into the bright sun with the sheriff, handcuffs on his wrists. Everything seemed washed and clean, he thought crazily.

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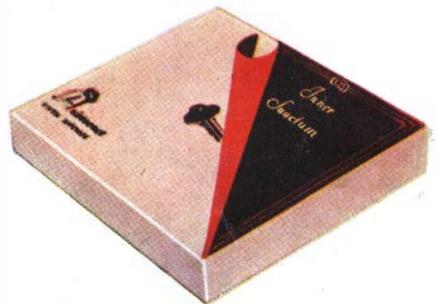
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