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NIGHTMARE**

by **ROBERT C.
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I DON'T BELIEVE I COULD HAVE GONE MUCH FARTHER.

WE'LL TAKE IT EASY. YOU CAN REST UP AT THE FIELD CABIN YONDER



THIS COFFEE IS WONDERFUL!

WHEN YOU FEEL UP TO IT, WE'LL HEAD FOR MY STATION AND RADIO TO HEADQUARTERS



LATER AT HEADQUARTERS

SHE'S PERFECTLY OKAY... JUST TIRED. WE'LL BE DOWN ABOUT DARK ON THE SNOW "CAT"

YOUR DAUGHTER IS IN SAFE HANDS. NELSON'S ONE OF OUR BEST MEN



THINK I'LL FRESHEN UP A BIT WHILE YOU FINISH THAWING OUT

PLEASE DO!



THIN GILLETTES, EH? MUST BE BOB'S



BOB SURE KNOWS HIS RAZOR BLADES. THIS THIN GILLETTE IS PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING



...AND NO MORE MOUNTAIN SKIING ALONE, YOUNG LADY

HE'S SO GOOD LOOKING!

WILL IT BE ALL RIGHT IF MR. NELSON IS ALONG, DAD?

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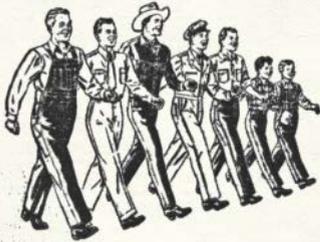
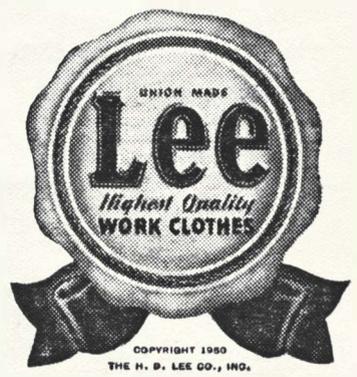
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BLACK MASK DETECTIVE



VOL. 34

MAY, 1950

NO. 8

DRAMATIC NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

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It took murder to convince Tinsel Town—a gone goose lays no golden eggs.

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ALL STORIES NEW

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE MAY 19TH

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COURT OF LAUGHS

By HAROLD HELFER

When a bachelor asked to be excused from jury duty in a St. Louis wife-murder trial because he didn't know much about women, the judge declared: "The court has learned a man knows less about women after he gets married than before."

* * *

Called before the bench on a charge of stealing copper tubing, a Green Bay, Wis., man was asked by the judge whether he wanted an attorney. "I don't know, Judge," said the prisoner. "I never got caught before."

* * *

A Toronto judge gave a truck driver a tough occupational handicap to overcome: He was sentenced to stop swearing for an entire year.

* * *

After meditating over the custody of an automobile owned by an about-to-be-divorced couple, a Tulsa judge gave the use of the car to the wife for weekend shopping and to the husband for business.

* * *

When a lawyer couldn't appear because he was building a house, the judge
(Please continue on page 8)

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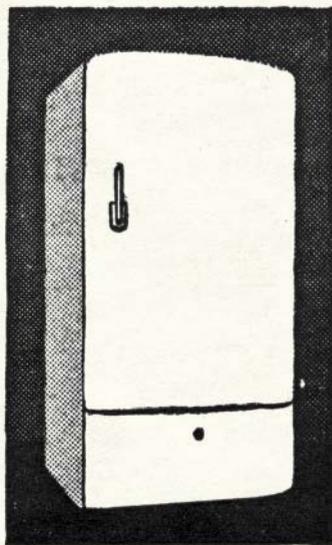


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(Continued from page 6)

sitting in Fall River, Mass., lamented as follows: "I go to Barnstable and the lawyers are fishing, I go to Springfield and they're golfing, I come here and they're building houses. I don't know . . . today nobody seems to care what the judge says."

* * *

Declaring that "anybody's entitled to earn a living," a judge in Oklahoma City freed a strip-teaser of charges that her night club dance was indecent.

* * *

A man charged with fortune telling in St. Louis informed the judge that messages concerning the future were sent to him from the nether world. The judge asked him to predict the outcome of the trial. When the defendant admitted he couldn't the judge said: "\$300 and costs."

* * *

Representing a woman accused of drunken driving a lawyer told the court in Austin, Tex.: "Talkativeness is certainly no evidence of intoxication in the case of a woman."

* * *

A Milwaukee court ordered a woman, suing for divorce, to continue cooking her husband's meals and wash his laundry until the decree is final.

* * *

A New York City judge reduced an ex-convict's sentence from 15 years to three years when he promised to pray every day for the rest of his life.

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FAN FORUM

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Would you like thousands of **BLACK MASK** readers to "lend you their ears?" Then shoot your letters in to the Fan Forum—and we'll see if we can crowd them in.

Dear Editor:

I am a faithful reader of your publication, **BLACK MASK**.

Of particular delight to me is a short story in the January 1950 issue, entitled "Homicide According to Hoyle," by Herb Schneiderman.

I would like very much to contact the author and would greatly appreciate your letting me know how I may reach him.

Thank you.

Very truly yours,
Roy Paley
New York, N. Y.

EDITOR: As you probably know by now, Mr. Paley, your letter has been forwarded to Mr. Schneiderman. This was his first story to appear in **BLACK MASK**—and he seems to have hit the jackpot with it.

Dear Editor:

Before I got a shore job, I was a second mate on a freighter. So you can well

imagine what a kick I got out of Fred Lane's yarn called "Slayer at Sea." I knew just how that Corson guy felt when he hit Frisco and went on a binge—though I admit I never met anybody quite like Anita!

Incidentally, when I was at sea all the guys used to like to kill the long, dull hours with a copy of your magazine. It sure made a long voyage a lot easier. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,
P. J. Smith
New York, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

I've been reading your magazine for years, and always meant to write you and tell you how much I like it.

I have just one gripe—why doesn't **BLACK MASK** come out oftener? When a magazine comes out every month, you can always remember just about when to expect it on the stands. But when it's a bi-monthly, you're liable to get mixed up and get there too late to get your copy.

Mrs. Irma Scott
Reno, Nevada

P. S. I got a big charge out of the Rex Sackler novelette in the January issue.

Dear Editor:

"Swing Low, Sweet Casket" by Frederick C. Davis was quite a story. What a situation to be in! How about some more of his stories soon?

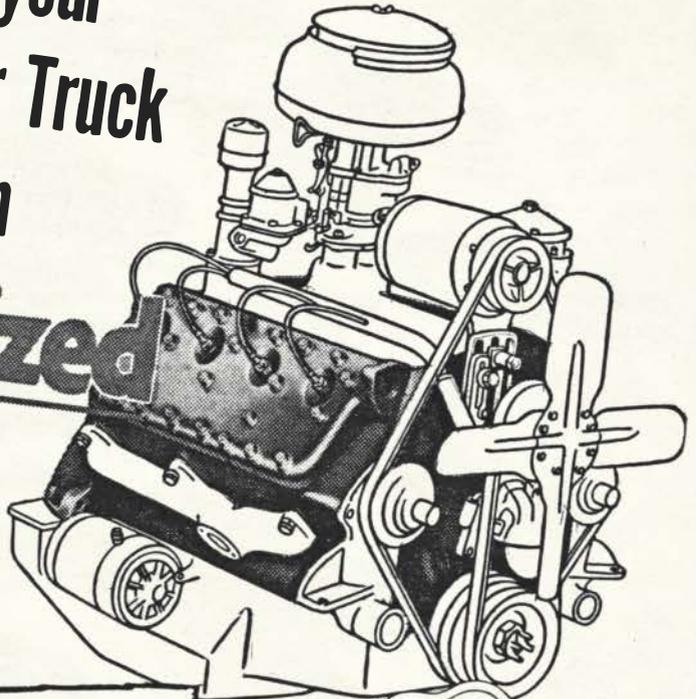
Joseph Patrick
Boston, Mass.

That's the end for this time, folks. But remember there's always another Fan Forum coming up—and the next one may be the one that prints *your* letter.

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THE EDITOR

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LIFTING THE JULY

BLACK MASK



The dapper lad lying on the farmhouse floor didn't need Clint Colby, physician—he needed Clint Colby, coroner! For Richard Raney was one Romeo who'd never roam again—with that lead slug in his chest.



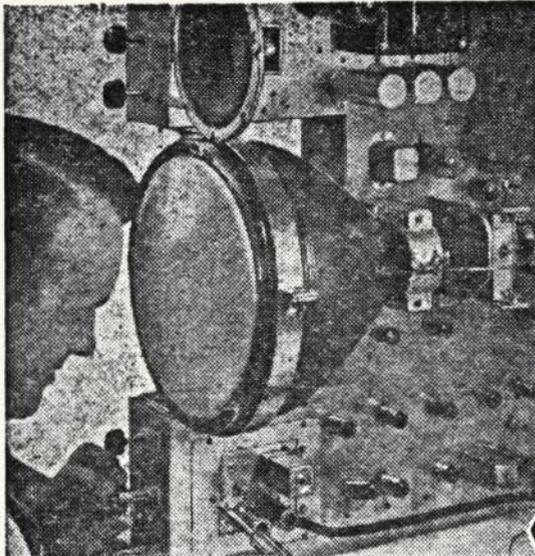
A delectable blonde divorcee named Rita Gentry confessed she'd shot him—trying to pull his wolfish fangs. Colby believed her tearful tale—until a cuddly brunette popped up to claim *she'd* killed him!



Things got really rough for the doctor-detective when the murder bullet disappeared. But somebody else wanted it, too—a masked man who demanded that Colby give him the slug—or get one in the ribs.



Then Rita's ex-hubby rushed Colby with flailing fists—and became Number 3 on the Confession Parade! . . . Robert Martin's complete story, "Lost in the Shrouds," will appear in the July issue, on sale May 19th.



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Glitter

CHAPTER ONE

No Body to Bury

NOW, in the left-over glow of the dead afternoon, the Street no longer glittered. The long black limousines and chrome-plated conver-



By **ROBERT C.
DENNIS**

The glamorous bubble of Hollywood's hottest night-spot was smashed to scandalous smithereens when its playboy owner mysteriously disappeared—and left bouncer Pete Sheffold to pick up the homicidal pieces.

\$ \$

zircons and fake rubies, across a velvet strip of night. But for a little hour this might have been any street.

Even the people looked very nearly like real people, Pete Sheffold thought as he neared the end of his two-mile walk along the Street. Such as the girl standing in front of *Julian's*. Under the sun, her blonde hair would have been improbable. Now the purple after-glow had softened even the tense, artificial brightness of her smile.

A flash of emotion across her face revealed she had been waiting for him. She would have had no difficulty in picking him out of the crowd. He was a huge man, Pete Sheffold, almost a giant. Four inches over six feet he stood, and he weighed nearly two hundred and forty pounds. But unlike most large men past their early youth, there was no fat on him. He was simply big. When the girl slipped between him and the entrance of *Julian's*, she seemed as fragile as spun glass.

"Can you give me a minute, Mr. Sheffold?" The brightness was apparent now. A blue coat was draped over her shoulders and she carried a big red purse. "I'm Laurel Owens."

"What did you want, Laurel?" His voice was grave and not impolite.

She smiled the slow counterfeit Hollywood smile, as empty as yesterday's vows. "Five years ago I wanted your autograph. I saw you play, Mr. Sheffold, and I've always thought you were the greatest halfback who ever lived."

"I was a fullback," Sheffold said, without emphasis. "And it was seven years ago."

The smile faded away. "All right," she said quietly. "The wrong approach. . . . It's about a job, of course. I'm a singer."

"You want to see Julian Mena for that," Sheffold told her. "Or Mr. Bannerman. I'm just the bouncer here."

"I know that. But I was told—" She

looked up at him quickly. Her eyes were deep blue and not yet too wise. Her mouth under the thick lipstick was vulnerable. Scrape off the artfully applied make-up, Sheffold thought, and she was still a nice girl from the Mid-West. "I mean," she said, "Mr. Mena won't see me—and Mr. Bannerman never seems to be around anymore."

People were beginning to notice that, Pete Sheffold thought. Next came the rumors.

"Everybody says you're very close to Mr. Mena. If you'd just put in a word for me. . . . All I ask is a chance to sing for him."

Sheffold's dark eyes were thoughtful. "How long have you been in Hollywood?"

"Nearly a year."

"No picture work?"

She shook her head. "No work, period."

"Why don't you go back home? Forget about it. Maybe you'd never get a job here. And even if you did, it wouldn't be worth it."

Her face was stiff, her chin up. She held the red purse between them like a shield.

"You wouldn't like yourself then," he said gently. "Take my word for it. I've been on the Strip for nearly seven years. The price is too high."

"The sympathetic approach!" Her mouth curled. "Well, maybe I have too much pride and too little money to go home. So help a girl out—she might be grateful."

Sheffold pushed her aside with a hand that was amazingly gentle for one so huge. He unlocked the massive, copper-riveted door. Without looking at her, he said, "Julian comes into the bar every night at exactly twelve o'clock. The cheapest drink here is eighty-five cents. If you have the price, you could be there when he came in."

"I do have eighty-five cents," she said quietly. "Thanks a lot. I won't forget it." Her footsteps started away.

"Laurel," he called, still not turning around. The steps came back. "You don't owe me any thanks," he said, and went inside.

THE empty, shrouded tables were the corpses of last night's gaiety, and the echo of silent, bitter laughter was still there for ears that could hear it. In the dimness the silver and blue appointments were drab gray. It was as glamorous as a garret.

A lonesome bartender pointed a plastic swizzle-stick at one of the blue leather banquettes. "For you, Pete."

A man in a pin-stripe suit lounged there. He had a gray triangular face like an old satyr. His eyes were tired, but he was possessed with a nervous energy that never gave him rest.

"Sit down," he invited. "I'm Lee Krell. Been meaning to get around to you. I figure a guy in your job must pick up a lot of interesting news. I'll give you five bucks for every item I can print. You know the type of stuff."

Sheffold shook his head. "I've never read your column."

"Everybody else has," Krell said without rancor. He leaned forward. "I'll give you the general idea. What's this about Julian's partner?"

Sheffold's face was blank. "Bannerman?"

"I hear he hasn't shown for a week. Not here, not at his apartment, not any place." Krell watched him intently. "A guy like Bannerman doesn't just blow away. What's the story—a doll?"

"Why don't you ask Julian?"

"Julian has been asked." Krell smiled wanly. "He won't talk about it. That's indicative. Now his bouncer dummies up. That's corroboration. You see?"

"I've often wondered how it worked.

Is this why you get so many things wrong in your column?"

Krell grinned sardonically. "I thought you'd never read it."

"Not after the first one," Sheffold said. He got up and walked away. *It won't be long now*, he thought, *now the keyhole boys are on to it.*

He went through the gleaming kitchen and out to the empty asphalt lot at the rear of the club. Jerry Sims, the parking attendant, grinned and unbuttoned his smock. Sheffold got a football from a locker. Without a word he walked to the far end of the parking lot.

Jerry's grin died. He shrugged, but his face was worried as he passed the ball back and forth.

They tossed the ball till darkness closed in and the lights around the parking lot came on. Sheffold's shirt was glued to his tremendous chest with perspiration. Beads of it clung to his coal-black eyebrows. A dull throbbing pain had begun to beat along his spine. He watched Jerry put the smock back on.

"Did you date that girl—Laurel?" he asked suddenly.

Jerry flushed. "So that's what's been eating you! Hell, I was only trying to be a good guy."

"You tried too hard," Sheffold said evenly. "But she just didn't know enough about football. You haven't answered my question."

"She threw me for a loss," Jerry grinned. "So I took five bucks for my trouble."

"It was her last five." That wouldn't make any difference to a sharpshooter. Sheffold said in a low voice, "Don't talk about me again. To anybody. If Julian isn't paying you enough money, see Lee Krell."

"Hell," Jerry laughed wisely, "I've been handing him stuff for a year! You know, I think he'd really up the rate to find out what happened to Bannerman."

Sheffold watched lights blossom along the street.

"We could split a ten spot, Pete."

"It was Bannerman who gave you this job," Sheffold said softly. "How much would you take to sell out a real friend?"

"I got four bucks for it once," Jerry retorted. "But I was new on the Strip then. Today I know an angle when I see one."

"That's what an education will do for you."

SHEFFOLD went back into the club. There was no one around to witness his labored progress up the stairs to the second floor. Every evening he endured the same agony with grim acceptance, as of some empty, pagan ritual. It was not simply the endless struggle against flabbiness but a refusal to concede that even a mutilated spinal column could be a flaw in his vast strength. He was a giant; therefore invincible.

At the door to Julian's private office he paused a moment to iron away the pain creases in his dark face. It was a secret he would not share even with Julian. And of all the fans of that full-back sensation of seven years ago, only Julian had remembered when a broken back had snatched Pete Sheffold from public attention. So that, with his education unfinished, pro-football a hollow dream, and his name-value lost in the glare of a new season's crop of sensational backfielders, Sheffold had accepted the only job offered to him. He became a bouncer in *Julian's*.

A half dozen ledgers were open on Julian Mena's desk. He was a swarthy, brown-eyed man with hair that was thick and gray at the sides, thin and black on top. He wore horn-rimmed glasses in the privacy of his office, and occasionally confessed he had stomach ulcers. That alone was enough to kill all the humor in

a man, but Sheffold had known him before he had ulcers. Nothing could be funny when there was always a dark tomorrow to be faced; and even a daily horoscope was of little comfort.

The green-shaded lamp poured a white glare down on the desk. Sheffold waited silently just outside the rim of light. Presently, without looking up, Julian said, "If you have something to say, Pete, come out with it."

"A girl named Laurel Owens. She's been trying to see you. She needs a job."

"Lots of people need jobs," Julian said impatiently. "Last month it was a hat-check girl. I can't hire them all."

Julian had hired someone that time because the regular check-room girl had quietly walked off during a busy night.

That had been three days after Bannerman was last seen. But Sheffold had already discounted any connection. Alyce Rowland had not been Bannerman's type. She'd been a chemical blonde with too much figure and too little brains. And there was the other side of it: the check-room girl here earned more money over a long period than Julian did. Alyce had not been the type to throw that up for any man. And yet there had to be some answer. . . .

Pete Sheffold said, "This girl is a singer."

"Damn it all, Pete, I've got a singer!"

"You can listen to her," Sheffold said. He gave the impression that he could stand there forever. "Will you talk to her tonight?"

"I pay you to be a bouncer, Pete," Julian said icily, "not an employment agency. Let this girl get her own job."

Sheffold's voice was negligent. "She couldn't get to see you. And Bannerman hasn't been around since the first of the month."

Julian sat utterly motionless but his eyes crept sideways. There was no life in his voice now. "All right, Pete. Tell her

I'll see her. But I can't use two singers." He pulled one of the ledgers toward himself and pretended to concentrate on it.

Sheffold asked softly, "How much did he get away with?"

"I don't know what you're talking about now," Julian snapped. "Bannerman is taking a rest, Pete. He's—out of town. And these," he gestured with sudden anger at the ledgers, "are for my income tax! Harley Bannerman is not an embezzler, Pete. Is there anything else bothering you?"

"Yes," Sheffold said in a low voice. "Mind if I use your shower?"

"You use it every night. Now don't get sore at me," Julian said, almost pleading.

Sheffold walked to the door of the private bathroom and stood there while he took off his damp shirt. His back ached dismally. "This girl Laurel knows Bannerman's not around. The hired help have been buzzing for a week. And now Lee Krell is sniffing at it. I've been on the Strip long enough to know one thing—when something smells as bad as this, somebody didn't bury a body deep enough."

Julian jerked around in his chair. "That's a damn nice figure of speech!"

"I hope that's all it is," Sheffold told him soberly.

CHAPTER TWO

Chloroform with Curves

JULIAN'S had come to life. It had warmth now and music, and the glittering people were there. Laughter, not yet silent nor bitter, sparkled like champagne. It wouldn't turn to vinegar until the chilled dark hours before dawn. And for the people on the Street that was as far away as the future.

By the ten o'clock floorshow at least a

dozen people had stopped Pete Sheffold to inquire about Harley Bannerman. A dozen women. Bannerman was that kind: the handsome, not quite young juvenile; the lady killer, a greater attraction for some than the liquor or the food or the floor show. Julian Mena was the harried businessman; Bannerman the charm boy.

A hand fell lightly on Sheffold's arm. Another one, he thought, and knew instantly this was different.

Her name was Rhoda Richards and she was a beautiful woman in a city where beauty was the lowest rate of exchange. Hair that was deep red and full of mysterious highlights hung to her shoulders, scorning any style dictate. Her eyes, green and faintly slanted, held secret laughter and a promise so hidden it was impossible to know what that promise was. Her dress was the color of wet seaweed with a neckline that plunged. Her exquisite shoulders were bare. She could have been a great star. Instead she was married to a wealthy man who was never seen in night clubs. . . .

"I'll buy you a drink," she said. "In the bar."

Sheffold followed her to a quiet corner and motioned the bartender. In *Julian's* the bartenders didn't need to be told what a favorite customer drank. Pete Sheffold drank ginger ale in a shot-glass.

"Give me a cigarette," Rhoda Richards ordered. She was being cool and unreachable and yet when she steadied the light Sheffold held for her, her hands, white and graceful as calla lilies, were feverish. But not all the tension was in her. Her nearness would affect men of greater reserve than Pete Sheffold. One didn't have to like chloroform to be affected by it. "I don't believe I know your name."

"Pete Sheffold." But a bouncer didn't really rate a name.

"I want to cash a check." She was used to lying and did it glibly, proficiently. "I'd rather not ask Julian. Please get Harley Bannerman for me."

"Mr. Bannerman hasn't been in yet tonight." It was the stock answer; the one he'd given all evening. "I'm sure there'll be no difficulty with one of your checks, Mrs. Richards."

The drinks came. She ignored hers. Pete Sheffold relieved a dry throat with a sip of his ginger ale.

"I want to see Harley." Her voice was brittle. "If he isn't here, you know where to find him. Don't keep me waiting!"

Sheffold said nothing. A remote apprehension was building up in his stomach. If Bannerman's disappearance was connected with a woman, this should have been the one. She was the latest, so late that even Pete Sheffold hadn't realized it until now. The repressed, frightened emotion gave her away.

Julian had denied Bannerman was an embezzler. What was left?

An expression of incredulity had crossed her face. "You won't tell me!"

"I don't know," he said.

"You won't tell me!" Her hand, no longer calla-like, banged the bar-top venomously. "You—hulking moron! A trained gorilla! And you sit there and refuse to tell me!"

Sheffold put a huge hand over her fist. His unsmiling eyes were fixed on her face. "Don't say things like that, Mrs. Richards," he said softly. "You know I couldn't hit a lady and I'd lose my job if I threw you out. But I can sit here and crush your hand without anybody realizing it."

She tried to pull away but she was impotent against his tremendous strength.

"You'd have to wear it in a cast," he said, in a remote voice. "And you wouldn't like that. Once I had my back in a cast for eight months, and I know

about those things. It's not much fun."

"Don't—" she gasped. "Please!"

His hand relaxed slowly, and his head tilted back and then snapped forward like a man who has almost drowned off. His voice changed suddenly. "If there is another woman, where would they go?"

She cradled the tortured hand. "I don't know. Perhaps—there's a cottage above Franklin Canyon. He—goes there sometimes. Why do you want to know?"

"Julian is worried," Sheffold said. "Somebody should tell Bannerman that Julian is worried." He laid a gentle finger on her hand. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I wish I hadn't done that."

Her head came up. Her mouth was still tormented. "I seemed to have underestimated you, Sheffold. If you like, I can drive you up the canyon in my car."

He nodded. "I'll meet you in the parking lot."

HE STARTED through the bar toward the stairs, and then veered off as Laurel Owens entered from the street. She knew how to dress and to wear makeup. She was sophisticated and glittering now, in a gold-flaked white dress. She belonged here. Pete Sheffold wondered how wrong he'd been. This was not a girl from the Mid-West.

"Hello," she said. Her smile at least seemed honest. "I came a little early. I wanted to see you."

"It's all right," he said curtly. "Save your eighty-five cents, Julian is going to talk to you." Her smile was collapsing at the corners as he pushed past her and went upstairs and looked into the office.

Julian still sat at his desk, running an electric shaver over his swarthy cheeks before his midnight descent into his gilded deadfall.

"I'm taking a customer home," Sheffold said carefully. If Julian read into it that the customer was drunk, it was his

own doing. "Mrs. Malcolm Richards."

Julian nodded indifferently; nothing to indicate he might know about her and Bannerman. He shut off the shaver as Sheffold started to close the door. "Pete—do you think I should call the police?"

Sheffold turned back, his hand still on the doorknob. "Not yet. Not tonight. Is that what you wanted me to say?"

"Yes," Julian said gratefully. "Thanks, Pete."

It was the closest he would bring himself to putting his need for help into words. Sheffold looked at him for a long second and what passed for a smile flitted over his lips. Then he closed the door quietly.

Down in the parking lot, Jerry Sims had just brought up Rhoda Richards' green convertible. He tossed the keys to Sheffold and his eyes were bright and wise.

"Sucker," he whispered. "Would you still be high-hat if I told you the ante's up to half of *fifty* bucks?"

Bannerman's cottage sat on the prow of a hill, remote, silent and disowned in the white moonlight. The windows were dark. The odor of sage brush was illicit perfume. A loop of driveway encircled the house, widening in front into a parking area. A tree toad objected shrilly as Sheffold stopped the convertible, and then subsided. The distant murmur of the city was audible only if the hearing reached out for it. Nothing, really, penetrated the stillness.

Sheffold mounted the steps, knocked, waited and knocked again. "Mr. Bannerman!" His voice weighted heavily on the silence. "It's Pete. I have to talk to you."

The night held its breath, and then let it go again. Far off to the left on a taller mountain an airplane beacon winked a red eye at the moon.

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Sheffold said impassively, "Give me your key."

Her hesitation was almost imperceptible, a reflex action. Then she fumbled in a gold-mesh evening bag and handed it to him.

Sheffold opened the door and clicked on a light switch. Trapped, fetid air escaped past him into the night. There had been no ventilation in there for too long. The room was large, luxurious in its furnishings, uninhabited. Two doors, one opening on to the kitchen, the other a bedroom.

Rhoda said, in a muted voice, "There's no one. You can see that from here."

Sheffold crossed the room. The bedroom was empty; the bed hadn't been made up. He glanced into the kitchen. There was a sink full of dirty dishes, and under that, a garbage can that had needed emptying days ago. Somebody had opened a lot of canned goods, mostly soups. There was a row of empty bottles on the floor.

Sheffold, restless, went back to the bedroom and through it to the bath. Outside, a car's motor growled around a steep hairpin turn.

He couldn't find a light switch but he didn't need it. A window framed a square of immaculate night sky with a tinfoil moon pasted in the center, and pale light gleamed without warmth on white tile. Dirty towels were heaped in the bath tub. Beyond that was a stall shower with a thick glass door.

Sheffold stared at the opaque door while he counted slowly to ten. Rhoda, behind him, tried to push past to see what held his attention, but she couldn't move his bulk. Presently Sheffold moved across the room till he stood beside the window facing the shower. One of the faucets hadn't been turned off tightly enough and it bleeped monotonously behind the glass. With his elbow he eased the door open.

"Is there—?" Rhoda's voice was thin as a breath. "He's not—"

Sheffold reached in and tightened the faucet absently. He shook his head. The shower, damp and sour, was empty. Rhoda's hand went to her temple and she swayed.

Sheffold turned toward her just as the glass in the window exploded inward and fiery pain danced along the side of his head. Rhoda screamed once, a brief, smothered sound. The sharp, dry report was a half-beat behind.

SHEFFOLD tumbled forward to his knees, out of range. Something warm and sticky trickled down the side of his face. Mistily he saw Rhoda topple over and wondered how the same shot could have struck her too. He didn't think there had been more than one.

He shook his head roughly and some of the mist floated away from his eyes. He said sharply, as Rhoda's form moved toward him in the darkness, "Stay down! Don't make a target."

"Oh, Lord," she sobbed. "I thought you were dead. What happened? In the name of heaven, what was it?"

"Ambush," he said dryly.

It was flying glass from the window, he decided, that had gashed his head. The shot had missed him completely. Without straightening, he reached into the bathtub and found a towel and daubed at the blood.

Outside, the tree toad was piping its outrage. There was no other sound. A long five minutes crawled away before Sheffold said, "We can't stay here all night. I think he's gone anyhow."

"It was meant for me," Rhoda said drearly. "He was shooting at me."

He put an edge in his voice. "You're over-estimating yourself now. Banner-man doesn't shoot discarded girl friends. He just says good-by." Sheffold pushed

past her into the lighted living room.
 "Then who was it?"

Sheffold didn't speak. They had left the front door open, and a man was leaning against the jamb, a gun held carelessly in his hand. He was medium-sized, but short-coupled and tough, suspicious as an alley-cat—in a two-hundred-dollar suit.

His blond hair was smooth and shiny. Probably he could still get by with shaving twice a week. It was almost a baby-face but ferocious as a baby's could never be. He studied Rhoda and Sheffold lazily, his pale eyes an open insult.

"Maybe I was wrong," he said thinly. The gun made a languid gesture about the room. "Cosy. Very cosy. It isn't quite what I expected to find."

Sheffold's eyes were as empty as a sleepwalker's.

"I followed you here, you know," the gunman told him. "From *Julian's*. It was no trick."

"Danny Pantera," Sheffold said abruptly, as if coming awake. "I thought I knew you."

At his side Rhoda made a brief, startled movement. Everybody on the Strip knew the name, if not the face. It was the coming name in the rackets. Young and tough, a little more ruthless than the present order of hoodlums, he would soon be top man, if a tendency to be trigger-happy didn't short-circuit a promising career.

"And you're Bannerman's strong-arm boy," Pantera returned easily. "Now if you'll introduce me to the lady, we'll all get cosy."

Sheffold didn't speak. Rhoda studied the polish on her nails.

A slow flush tinged the fair skin of Pantera's face, writing his thoughts there. Nice people weren't introduced to the Danny Panteras. Even power and money and two-hundred-dollar suits would never let him forget completely

what he was—what he had always been. And he'd become a proud, bitter young man.

"Throw that purse here," he barked through thinned lips.

Rhoda disdainfully tossed her evening bag on the coffee table. She knew how to handle most men, and Pantera was one of them. His eyes murderous, he snapped open the bag and spilled the contents.

HE FOUND a card that bore her name and address. "Mrs. Malcolm Richards," he read aloud in a voice that was a leer. His lips moved silently over the address and he shot a quick, almost startled, look at her. "Brentwood!"

Wealth and position, those were the things the address meant to him. He was impressed. "So now, where's Bannerman?"

Sheffold shrugged one shoulder. "Not here. You wouldn't have expected him to stay around when you started shooting."

Pantera's eyes wrinkled at the outer corners.

"Says which?"

"You were taking quite a chance throwing a bullet into a dark room. Or was that the idea?"

"Somebody shot at you?" His eyes were slightly shocked. "Not me," he said fervently. "You think I'm crazy? This gun hasn't been fired. Not tonight. You can tell that by smelling it." He put the barrel to his own nose and sniffed it himself. "Not this gun!"

Rhoda said: "Then it *was* Harley! A nice subtle way of telling me that it's over."

"Now this thing is beginning to add up." Pantera looked at Rhoda. "So *you* knew all about this little hideaway, eh? You came looking for Bannerman and brought the bouncer along just for

laughs. Or for the rough stuff, maybe." He shook his head in wonderment and repeated, "Brentwood."

"It wasn't Bannerman," Sheffold stated. "I identified myself before we came in and that shot came too close to have been only a warning. Somebody didn't care what it hit."

"Look!" Pantera growled. "I don't know what gives here, but I don't like it. Harley Bannerman owes me dough. Quite a lot of dough. And in case you hadn't heard, nobody makes a patsy out of Danny Pantera."

"Your petty little economics bore me," Rhoda said icily. "And so do you."

Pantera smiled suddenly. "Don't try to swank me, sister. Let's see how you like these apples. Either Bannerman pays off or I'll be coming out to Brentwood. Maybe somebody out there will take care of it."

Rhoda's white skin had a gray look. The threat had shaken her.

"And for you, big moose, if I had fired that shot, you wouldn't be around now. And not just because you're a big target. Remember that!" He made a cynical gesture of good-bye with the gun and walked out. A car motor throbbed quietly and then the silence overpowered it.

"So now we know," Rhoda said. "He's hiding from Pantera. But where?"

"There was a hat-check girl," Sheffold said. "She dropped out of sight three days after Bannerman turned up missing—quit in the middle of checking a hat. I thought of her but I couldn't buy it. She didn't have enough class for him. But if it was just a hideout—"

Rhoda said bitterly, "He could have come here. No one knew about this place. Instead, he went to her."

"Does that surprise you?" Sheffold asked. "You know the guy."

"Yes, I know him," she said wearily. "He's a rat. Are you going to see him?"

He nodded. "Alone."

"Then tell him something for me. Tell him to pay his debts. I don't want Pantera coming around to my place. My husband is a broadminded man but he wouldn't understand this. I don't care how Harley handles it but tell him to keep me out of it."

Sheffold regarded her somberly. "If he could have paid off, why would he have run away? And if you're thinking Julian will bail him out—don't count on it. Understand this, Mrs. Richards: You're a good customer—maybe you're a fine person, too, I don't know. But you don't mean anything to me. And you don't mean that much to Julian. So if it comes to a choice as to who gets hurt—protect yourself, because I won't protect you."

She snapped out the light and her voice was husky and all the arrogance oddly missing. "You seem less like a bouncer all the time," she said thoughtfully. "As soon as this is over—let's have another long talk."

Like *chloroform*, Pete Sheffold thought. It takes more for some, but anybody can get enough to go under. The Street got everybody, sooner or later; even invincibles. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Red-Hot Tomato

IT WAS now two o'clock in the morning. *Julian's* had closed, but an inner restiveness kept Pete Sheffold from going home.

The reason for Bannerman's absence was clear now, and his whereabouts reasonably assumed. But the whole explanation had the thin, unsatisfying feel of being far too simple. All evening Sheffold had known an alien dread, most strongly felt in the cottage on the hill. Clairvoyance was not a quality usually associated with a man so big, and Shef-

fold did not consider it that. But in that moment before he'd opened the stall shower he'd been overwhelmed with the conviction that Bannerman was dead.

Now he had to verify, with no further delay, that Bannerman was really hiding out in Alyce Rowland's West Hollywood apartment. He'd gotten the address from Julian's desk, and now, standing in the apartment house foyer, he swore with weary frustration. The outer door was locked for the night and there was no night bell. From the brass mailboxes, set in imitation Florentine tile, he knew Alyce's apartment was number 21. But that was all he knew.

A man got out of a parked car on the far side of the street and briskly crossed over. As he came up the steps his eyes flicked casually at Sheffold. He was thin and fair and he wore a black double-breasted suit and a finely-knit black sweater with a turtle neck.

"Forget your key, mister?"

Sheffold nodded, saying nothing.

The man reached for the door, looked again at Sheffold, doubt in his eyes. "No offense, mister, but what apartment are you in? Kind of late, you know, to be letting in people who have—forgotten keys."

"Apartment 20," Sheffold said, expressionlessly. "I'm staying with friends. The Zimormans."

The man shot him a sharp look,

stooped quickly and read the name on the mail box for apartment 20.

"Okay, mister." His laugh was short and insincere. "Just being careful."

He unlocked the door, let Sheffold precede him. They went upstairs together. The building seemed to breathe quietly and evenly like an old man asleep. Halfway down the second-floor hall Sheffold pulled up. "I know the way."

"Sure—sure," the man agreed hastily. "I live right down this way myself."

Sheffold waited, watching him; he held the offensive now. The man was in the position of proving his own right to be there. Reluctantly he went on, stopped before a door, fumbled for a long moment for his key.

He got it into the lock and turned it just as Sheffold, moving with amazing speed and timing, stepped close behind. His great chest crowded the smaller man on into the apartment. As he heeled the door closed, Sheffold's eyes caught the tarnished brass numerals. This was apartment 21.

Alyce Rowland, wearing a wrap-around camel hair coat, appeared from a back room. She was carrying an overnight bag. There was a dark track on each side of the part in her blonde hair as if she hadn't been to her hairdressers recently. Her pretty, mediocre face was lean with fright.

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"Chick—what is it? Who—?"

"Pete Sheffold, Alyce," Sheffold said in a quiet voice. "Were you going—or coming?"

"Pete?" Her face cleared; she was not afraid of the big and silent—therefore stupid—bouncer from *Julian's*. "Late call, Pete."

"People like us," Sheffold observed, looking at the bag, "keep strange hours."

Chick said nervously, "I saw him acting funny out in front. I came over to give him a pitch and he pulled a quickie on me. You know him, baby?"

"Where's Bannerman, Alyce?" Sheffold asked.

"Bannerman?" Her acting was bad enough to keep her a hat-check girl forever. "I don't get you."

"He's been under cover somewhere for ten days. A trigger named Danny Pantera has the heat on him." Sheffold looked toward the back room. "Tell him to come on out."

"I don't think," Chick said loudly, "I like the implication, mister. Alyce is my girl. Do you think she's going to have some guy in the closet with me around?"

"It could be a business deal," Sheffold conceded. That aspect hadn't occurred to him before. "You don't have to play cagey. I work for the guy's partner."

"Bannerman isn't here, Pete." Alyce's tone was for hulking, not-too-bright people. "I haven't seen him since I—I left *Julian's*."

"You got a lot of the hats mixed up that night," Sheffold said remotely. "It caused a lot of confusion among the patrons. Was that to give you a few minutes cover?"

"Of course not. I quit because I—"
Her words lapsed into the general silence of the room for want of a logical reason for throwing away a profitable job. Even with a moron you had to stay logical.

"Mister," Chick said ominously, "I think I'm going to work up a big dislike for you. Suppose you get the hell out of here."

He had a small nickel-plated gun in his hand. His narrow, pallid face was molded in a menacing expression.

"I saw Danny Pantera's gun tonight." Sheffold's voice was far away. "It was bigger than that one. And somebody else almost shot me in the head."

He turned his back on Chick. Then, without looking, he swung backhanded. Like a steel hook his fingers locked on Chick's frail wrist. He jerked up and back, and the smaller man emitted high, nasal squeals of pain. Sheffold turned, almost leisurely, and lifted the gun out of a grip that had gone limp.

And then Alyce hit him with the overnight bag. She couldn't swing it as high as his head and the bag slammed against his shoulder and sprung open. Feminine underclothes spilled at his feet. Sheffold stepped carefully away from the tangle of silk. He weighed the gun in his palm thoughtfully.

Chick was clutching his wrist and flexing the fingers. He said, as if in final rebuttal, "The damn thing ain't loaded anyway."

Sheffold's voice was a quiet monotone. "Bannerman, where is he? Don't make me have to hurt somebody."

CHICK sighed. "Okay," he said wearily. "I'm just a little guy. You can bounce me around till I have to talk. So let's get it over with."

"Chick—" Alyce whispered—"no!"

"It's all right, baby. We got nothing to hide." Chick sat on a low divan and put his hands on his knee caps. "Sure Bannerman was here—once. He drove Alyce home after work. Two weeks ago."

"Ten days," Sheffold said. "That's when he dropped out of sight."

Chick shrugged. "Look, I'm telling you the way it was. If it don't help none, I can't change it. Two weeks ago he gave her a lift home. Then he wanted to come up for a drink. He seemed like a nice guy and he was her boss and—well, what could she do?"

Sheffold said nothing. Alyce was beginning to unfreeze.

"Maybe you know him," Chick went on. "The kind he was, I mean. He gave her a bad time, mister." He looked at Alyce. "I'm sorry, baby, but it's got to come out."

She turned her face away. "Whatever you say, Chick."

"We're getting married one of these days," Chick told Sheffold. "A guy likes having his girl pushed around! He likes that a lot. I made her tell me, and then I went looking for Mr. Harley Bannerman. I'm not a big guy like you, but I went looking. But I never laid a hand on him. Boy, did he weasel! *Let's not have trouble*, he says. *Maybe we can square this. How much would it take*, he asks."

Alyce was watching Chick with fascinated eyes.

"I didn't want money. But how can you hit a guy who crawls!"

"So you shook him down."

Chick leaned back and his face got menacing again. "I don't like that kind of talk, mister. But if you want to call it a shakedown, okay. Sure, I set a price. I made it good—hoping he'd get sore and I could go to work on him. I told him, I says, 'You can't buy *me* off. You got nothing I want. But if a mink coat will make Alyce feel better—okay.'"

"I didn't want Chick to get into trouble," Alyce said suddenly. "I took the coat."

"Twenty-five hundred bucks he gave me," Chick cut in. "Cash. That was the night she quit her job. He gave me the dough and said get her out of his club,

and I said, 'Mister, that's good enough for me.' So I phone and tell her to drop everything." He flexed his fingers and winced. "That's how it reads, mister. We don't know any more than that."

"The night Alyce quit," Sheffold said—that had been three days after he was last seen—"where did you meet him?"

"In a bar on Melrose." Chick lit a cigarette and drew deeply as if it had been a trying few minutes. "He had the money for Alyce. I never saw him again after that—and I'm sure I don't want to."

Sheffold walked around the room; it was too small for him. The heaviness in his stomach persisted.

Alyce began to stuff her lingerie back into the overnight bag.

"Where were you going at this hour?" Sheffold asked suddenly.

Chick's cigarette stuck to his dry lip and left a white fleck of paper there when he pulled it loose. "We were going out. I'm just a little guy, mister. I ain't tough like you. You got the story out of me, didn't you? Well, so will the cops if they try hard enough. And maybe they'll make something out of that little business deal with Bannerman."

"The police aren't in this," Sheffold said.

"They will be!" Chick crunched out his half-smoked cigarette. "I got a few pipelines in this town. I happen to know the *Daily Star* is going to break the story in the morning."

Sheffold's eyes were alert. "What story?"

"On Bannerman. He's been snatched," Chick said. "The *Star* says they're asking seventy-five grand. That's big-time stuff, mister. I'm just a little guy."

"You're a dime-a-dozen grifter," Sheffold said.

The meaning of Julian's ledgers was plain now; the club would fold under a seventy-five thousand dollar rap. Maybe

there were other jobs for bouncers, but what was left for Julian? The waiting was over, though; it would break fast now. Like a once-solid structure collapsing. Outside in the cinder-gray light of the false dawn, the Street waited to tally one more broken dream. . . .

The ringing of his phone pulled Sheffold awake. It was nearly two p.m. He sat up and fought the pull of sleep until his head began to clear. He hadn't been able to reach Julian last night. Stumbling a little, for he slept with the near-stupor of a big man, he crossed to the phone.

"Sheffold?" It was a woman's voice, familiar enough but not for this early. "I want to speak to Pete Sheffold."

"Speaking," he mumbled.

"This is Rhoda Richards, Sheffold. Have you seen a paper today? Harley is being held for ransom!"

"I know," Sheffold said. "Seventy-five thousand. Julian can't pay it."

There was an edge of panic in Rhoda's voice. "Sheffold, listen to me! Pantera phoned my husband this morning and made a lot of insinuations. He knows Harley can't pay the ransom and him too. You've got to do something!"

"Why me?" Sheffold asked. "I can't help you. I told you last night."

"Sheffold, please!" She sounded as if she'd been crying. "You've got to talk to my husband. Pantera doesn't know anything about Harley and me. Except last night. You've got to tell Malcolm it was you who knew about the cottage. You've got to say I just drove you up there." Her voice went on, shrill and uncontrolled in Sheffold's ear.

"All right," Sheffold cut in wearily. "Put him on. I'll lie for you. Once, no more."

"We'll come over," she said eagerly. "Malcolm will believe you if he sees you."

"I'll be at Julian's in two hours," he

said and hung up. He felt very tired.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blackmail Boulevard

JULIAN was studying his daily horoscope when Sheffold walked in. Automatically he slipped off the horn-rimmed glasses, saw who it was, and put them on again. He tried for a smile and couldn't quite make it.

"How long have you known?" Sheffold's voice held a faint reproach. "You should have told me. Maybe I could have done something."

Julian made a wide, hopeless gesture. "What could you have done, Pete?"

"Bannerman has a hideaway up Franklin Canyon. They were either holding him up there, or they had a man staked out. Why, I don't know. You didn't tell what the score was, so I blundered in."

"What—what happened?" Julian's swarthy face had a washed-out appearance.

"They went out the back door, I guess. Down the side of the hill. If I'd known what it was about, I might have broken it up. Maybe it isn't too late."

"Yes. Yes, it is too late. They want the money tonight. If I call in the police they'll kill him. They're sore now because the papers got it—I don't know how it all got out." He took the glasses off again and passed a hand over his eyes. "I can't take that chance, Pete. If anything happened to Harley because I . . . no, I'll pay them off."

Sheffold's face showed blank but his eyes were soft with pity. "Any idea who engineered it?"

"No. But they're well organized, Pete. They held him a week before even communicating with me. They're tough and dangerous and sure of themselves. It's a mob, I'm sure."

"Not Pantera's," Sheffold said slowly. "At least I don't think so. He showed up at the cottage last night, says he followed me. He claims Bannerman owed him a lot of money."

Julian stared at Sheffold.

"Let me take a crack at them. I can make the pay-off and—"

"No, Pete, I've got to do it their way. I told the police the same thing. Somebody will phone me tonight with final instructions." His hand fell on the horoscope. "It's not an auspicious day, Pete. Don't make it worse."

"Even if it ruins you?"

Julian made the same wide gesture. "Harley is my partner. And my friend. What can I do—till I know he's safe?"

"Nothing," Pete Sheffold said, and his voice was gentle. "I'll be careful."

Julian smiled faintly. "Thanks, Pete. I knew you'd understand."

Sheffold went downstairs and through the kitchen to the parking lot. Jerry Sims was already there, sitting on a box, reading an afternoon extra. When he saw Sheffold he grinned and started unbuttoning the smock. Sheffold waited till the smock was off his shoulders and then he caught the front of it in an iron grip, pulling it tight so that it bound Jerry's arms like a straight-jacket. Without effort he lifted the youth up on his toes and backed him into the passageway leading to the kitchen.

"Cut it out!" Jerry tried to squirm. "Quit the clowning, Pete! What's the big idea?"

"Fifty bucks," Sheffold's tone was almost thoughtful. "Krell only offered me five."

Jerry's eyes shifted away from Sheffold's gaze. "Aw, that was just a gag."

"It was Krell who broke the story. He had all the details right. There was only one person who knew all that—Julian—and he wouldn't tell even me. How did a weasel like you get a hold of it?"

"Pete, I tell you I didn't!" Jerry's voice was soothing, persuasive. "You got it all wrong. I don't know anything about it."

Sheffold said, "I'm not expected to think around here. I'm just the guy with the muscle. I get paid to crack skulls and throw drunks out into the gutter. Is that the way it's got to be, Jerry?"

Jerry's eyes were terror-stricken. "No—no! Pete, I'm your friend. You know me, Pete—we're buddies! You wouldn't hurt me. I'll give you half."

"Talk the gorilla out of it," Sheffold said bleakly. His hand twisted the front of the smock, pulling it tight as rope across Jerry's chest. "Go on, Jerry. Reason with me."

Jerry's breath came in agonized gusts. "Stop, Pete, I'll tell you."

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Sheffold untwisted his hand slightly.

"The phone." Jerry pointed frantically at the outdoor telephone set in a box on the wall. "I listened in. You know Julian—he's always worrying that somebody will steal his club away. He's got all the house phones fixed so he can listen in. But it works both ways. That's how I get all my inside tips."

"You heard the kidnapppers call him?"

Jerry nodded violently. "Sure. I didn't hear it all. Just enough to piece it together. And that's the truth, Pete, honest. Let me go."

"Not yet," Sheffold said. "They're going to call again tonight." They'll tell Julian where to take the money. You're going to listen in on that, Jerry. Then you're coming to me. Just me, understand. Not Lee Krell, or anybody else. Have you got that?"

"Sure, Pete, sure. You can depend on me. You know that."

Sheffold let go of the smock. His eyes were hard and bitter. "Play the angles on this, Jerry, and you're finished."

Jerry shuddered. "Yeah, Pete. I understand."

RHODA RICHARDS' green convertible drove into the parking lot. The top was down and the afternoon sun struck fire on her dark red hair. Beside her was a tall, very brown man, thin as a steel rod. His grizzled brown hair was clipped short to minimize the amount of gray. His nose was thin and aristocratic, and his mouth a straight line.

"Darling," Rhoda said nervously, "this is Pete Sheffold. The man I was telling you about."

"You're the bouncer here?" Richards' voice leaped at Sheffold. "What do you know about this man Pantera?"

"He's a racketeer. A real tough boy."

Richards' light blue eyes blinked. "I'm pretty tough myself. Where does he

think he gets off, trying to extort money from me!"

"He's bluffing," Sheffold said quietly. "He knows Bannerman's reputation with women and he's trying to cash in on all this publicity of the kidnapping by threatening to smear your wife. It doesn't mean anything. It could have been any prominent woman. Because Mrs. Richards drove up to Bannerman's love-nest, as a favor to me, Pantera is trying to make you believe she'd been there before."

"I see," Richards' voice was still uncompromising. He was the type who had to be convinced. Sheffold could envision him bounding around a tennis court in shorts, skinny, sinewy, bronzed by the sun. He'd play with a grim concentration, not for the satisfaction of the game but to prove that he was a man among men.

Perhaps for the same reason he had married a young woman and a beautiful one and then must continue to reassure himself that it wasn't wealth and position that had won her, but his own masculine attraction.

To a man like this, Sheffold thought, there could be no greater or more fatal stab than the possibility of his wife's infidelity. "Perhaps I can make you a proposition. If you'll take this pest out of my hair, I'll pay you—"

"No," Sheffold said in a low voice. "I don't hire myself out for strong-man stuff. If you want Pantera worked over, you'll have to get someone else."

"I see," Richards repeated, contempt in his eyes now. It was a losing fight even to compete with ordinary men; the contrast between himself and Sheffold was insurmountable. But giant or not, his gaze said Sheffold was yellow.

He said aloud, "Then I'll handle him myself. My family has been here since the hacienda days, Mr. Sheffold. It is a question of pride with me. I will pay

extortion money to no man on earth."

Sheffold shrugged, said nothing.

"Of course you won't, darling," Rhoda assured him. The look she threw to Sheffold was full of thanks. She made a U-turn and drove back out into the flow of traffic on the Strip.

Sheffold went back into the club. Julian was sitting at a table listening to Laurel Owens sing to the accompaniment of a piano. He motioned Sheffold over.

"She's your protégé," he said, in a lack-lustre tone. "Listen to her and let me know what you think. I'll be upstairs."

Laurel's gaze followed Julian as he left the room but finished the song. Sheffold sat and listened, his face utterly blank. When she came over to the table he stood up and held a chair for her.

"Hello," she said, trying to smile. "My audience seems to have walked out on me. Was I that bad?"

"No," Sheffold said. "You can sing. I'll tell him."

She said eagerly, "Do you think he'll give me a job?"

"I don't know—maybe a little later on."

"Later?" Her eyes were worried. "I need a job now . . . What do you think I should do?"

He shrugged. "Why ask me?"

"Please," she said. "You've been very kind. If you aren't my friend, you wouldn't have helped me this much. I need your advice."

"All right," he said harshly. "I'll tell you. Wash that stuff off your face and let your hair grow in its natural color. Then get on the first train out and go home. Get off the Strip, Laurel, before you're tainted too."

Her face seemed to freeze except for the quivering of her chin.

"It'll get you, sooner or later," Sheffold said. "It gets everybody. Success

is a religion in this town, and its cross is the dollar sign. You can't be a half-way convert. There's no such thing as a little success. You can't take a little and stop because once you stop, somebody else, more ruthless, will club you to death to take what you have."

He looked away from her but his voice went on. "You give a little here, and a little there. One more compromise every day. It doesn't hurt much that way. When it's too late you find out what it was you were trading in—your soul!"

Laurel stood up. "It's nice of you to worry about me," she said stiffly. "I appreciate your interest. Now I suppose you'll tell Julian Mena I can't sing. Go ahead, rearrange my life for me. You can always tell yourself it was your duty. I'd be more grateful, except it happens to be *my* life!"

Pete Sheffold said woodenly, "Go on upstairs. First office to the right. Tell Julian I sent you. He'll give you a job if he can make room."

She didn't move; she stood there looking down at his dark head.

"Pete." She put a hand under his jaw and made him look up at her. "I'm sorry . . . Why don't *you* get away? You think you can't be hurt because you're too strong. But you're wrong. This town is getting you and you don't know it." She took her hand away. "I—thanks, Pete. Thanks a lot."

He sat there looking at nothing until her footsteps faded out, going upstairs. He was still sitting there when Jerry Sims came in, his face pulled tight with emotion.

"Some time tonight," he whispered. "I didn't get it all but he's to drive along the sea road near the big rocks south of Palos Verdes."

"Do you know where that is?"

Jerry nodded, swallowed, and went on: "There is a bus stop and cafe where the sea road comes into the highway."

The rocks are about a mile from the intersection. That's all I heard. I was busy and missed a little of it. I didn't get the time. What are you going to do, Pete?"

"Get me a car," Sheffold told him. "Have it ready in twenty minutes. And keep it under your hat. Understand?"

Jerry gave him the okay sign and slipped away. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Kidnap Trail

THE sea road beyond Palos Verdes was a narrow, forgotten lane with a thin crust of asphalt, the only remaining evidence of some real-estate agent's dream. It followed the curve of ocean with a swiftly falling bank and a strip of beach on one side, and ugly tenacious weeds creeping in on the other. The asphalt had worn away at the edges and it was full of great holes, so that, secluded as it was, even couples shunned it.

At the all-night cafe situated at the intersection with Palos Verdes Drive, Sheffold had asked directions of the proprietor. There was only one way in, he was told, and the high rocks were over a mile down the road.

Now, driving without lights, Sheffold let the car ease along almost silently. An overcast had rolled in from the ocean, swallowing the moon and, Sheffold reasoned, he could see as easily as he could be seen. At what he estimated was half the distance to the rocks, he stopped the car and went the rest of the way on foot. He moved lightly, on the balls of his feet, the sound effectively muffled by the tired crash of the breakers on the shore.

Only now did it occur to Sheffold that he was not armed, but the thought caused him little concern. His confidence in his great physical strength was such

that he didn't consider it a disadvantage. He had no plan as he approached the rocks, and this did not disturb him either. He would deal with whatever situation arose.

The rocks were fully twenty feet high, vaguely resembling old-fashioned loaves of bread, set on end, and not more than the width of two cars apart. A car had been driven off the asphalt and was parked on the hard-packed ground between the rocks. From where Sheffold crouched twenty feet down the road, there seemed to be no one in the car.

It was not Julian's car and there was no way of knowing if he had been here yet. Sheffold waited a long ten minutes, listening to the ancient sound of the sea, and breathing clean salt air into his lungs. There was no other sound; nothing in that weirdly limited, dark world stirred.

Sheffold closed in on the car like a charging line-man, light and swift and practically noiseless. He came up on the driver's side, big hands ready to jerk the door open and take advantage of any surprise. There was still no movement. . . .

But the car wasn't empty. The same heavy sense of dread Sheffold had experienced in Bannerman's cottage closed in swiftly. And this time it was not imagination.

He was there, the same Harley Bannerman, handsome, aging, and characteristically marked about his mouth with lipstick. Without caution now, Sheffold turned on the ceiling light and his eyes were somber as he leaned into the car to study Julian's partner.

He'd been shot in the right temple slightly to one side about where a suicide would do the job. But there was no gun. There was an expression of utter astonishment frozen on his face. It might have been, Sheffold thought, that Bannerman had been shot from the side and

had only a flash of warning that death was leaping at him.

He'd been shot in the act of being surprised. Living, there had been nothing left that could surprise him.

Sheffold touched the body. The warmth of it startled him. It was possible that only the crash and fall of the surf had hidden the sound of the shot from Sheffold's hearing. Bannerman had been dead only minutes.

Sheffold straightened. As he did, he understood the sense of shock Bannerman had experienced. There was a sudden frantic rush as of great wings battling the night, and the sound of something swishing toward Sheffold's head. There was no question of escaping the blow. He took it, giving with the force of it, hoping it would not knock him out.

For even then it did not occur to Sheffold that he was not a match for his assailant, as long as he retained consciousness. The blow drove him forward against the car, his forehead smashing the frame of the window, and it was that as much as anything that dissipated his wits and his reflexes, so that he never had a chance from there on. He heard, rather than felt, the blows thudding on his head, as if he'd pulled his awareness away, and his skull was as lifeless and impersonal as an artificial limb.

He was still hearing the crash of the weapon against his head long after consciousness had slipped away as effortlessly as his assailant. And even later, when he came back to full knowledge of his position, he could still hear it. Only then did he realize it was the methodical drum-beat of the surf he was hearing.

He was lying on the harsh, gritty earth beside the car. The night sky was still concealed by the overcast. Painfully he rose and looked, with eyes that were remote and brooding, at the lipstick that was smeared on the dead man's cooling face. . . .

MIDNIGHT. He'd been unconscious nearly an hour, and it had taken him the rest of the time to drive to Brentwood. Rhoda Richards answered the door after Sheffold had rung for nearly five minutes. She had not been asleep. She wore a satin housecoat that swept the floor. The startling green eyes were fixed and blank.

Sheffold pushed past her into the house. "Bannerman is dead," he said flatly. "He's in his car on a lonely stretch of road beyond Palos Verdes."

"Yes," she said, with utterly no life in her voice. "There was a news flash on the radio a few minutes ago."

"I didn't report it," Sheffold said. "It was someone else. The police will really rock me for that. But there's something phony about the whole situation."

"Is there?" It was doubtful that she even heard him.

"A lot of little things are wrong," he said, his voice harsh now. "But mostly because there was a woman involved. Bannerman had been kissing her only minutes before he was shot. You don't make love to your kidnapper, you know."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know for sure." She was looking into a blank distance, disinterested.

Sheffold took her slender shoulders in his hands, shook her like a doll. "Don't you understand what I'm telling you? Bannerman is dead!"

She looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. "Pantera was here. He came to see Malcolm." She was talking in a hypnotic monotone. "He had pictures. He said they were Harley and me. It was a lie, of course. I know that—but what difference does it make?"

Sheffold was silent now. The weight of apprehension pulled at his stomach. His head ached dully, throbbing off-beat to the grinding pain in his back.

"It was Harley all right. And some woman. Pantera claimed it was me, and Malcolm believed him." She lifted dead eyes to look at him again. "He *wanted* to believe it."

"What did he do?" Sheffold asked quietly.

"He went out. He got directions to Harley's Canyon place and said he was going there to find out. He had to know." She lifted her beautiful white hands in a gesture that would have been theatrical, except she was utterly unaware of it. "I don't know whether he found anything or not. I suppose he did—a handkerchief, my cigarette case—it doesn't matter."

Sheffold's face was tense. "What time did he leave and how long was he gone?"

"He left about nine," she said wearily. "He got back twenty-minutes ago."

"Did you leave?"

She shook her head. "I wasn't out all evening. The servants will tell you that."

Sheffold said, "If your husband was unaccounted for during the last three hours he might have killed Bannerman. I don't know how he made contact—"

"You'd better go," Rhoda said suddenly. "The police will be coming here soon."

"I want to see your husband."

"See him?" She laughed, a horrible insane laugh. "You fool. Don't you understand yet? He's dead. His precious family pride couldn't stand the disgrace. He shot himself ten minutes ago."

She was still laughing hysterically when Sheffold walked out.

Forty minutes later he pulled up in front of Alyce Rowland's apartment. He didn't have any hopes that she would still be there. But some woman had been in the murder car with Bannerman tonight and she was the only other possibility his aching brain could think of.

THE front door wasn't locked this time. A little tug of caution pulled at Sheffold as he charged in. The door should have been locked this late. A thick-bodied man with a long cigar in his mouth leaned against the newel post at the foot of the stairs. One hand was hidden in his side pocket; the other fell heavily on Sheffold's arm. "Where you going, buddy?"

Sheffold stopped, and his face was rigid. "Take your hand off me," he said in a low voice.

"You weren't sort of going up to Apartment 21, were you maybe? I sort of wouldn't, if I was you."

"Why wouldn't you, if you were me?" Sheffold asked softly.

The man grinned past his cigar. "Because Danny said I was sort of to keep an eye out for a big bouncer-type guy and if he did some buttin' in I was to sort of discourage him."

He made the mistake of bringing the gun out of his pocket. He had an earnest confidence in the persuasive power of a gun. A bulge in a side pocket could be anything. A gun was a gun. He never got it clear of the pocket. Sheffold hit him on the corner of the jaw with a fist that hadn't moved a foot. There was a sound like rotten wood snapping. The man didn't even stagger. The punch stiffened every muscle and joint and when he fell, it was like a bag of old bones collapsing to the floor within its own orbit.

Sheffold went up the stairs, and with the length of hall to give him momentum, hit the filmy door with his shoulder. Wood splintered as the lock pulled away. Sheffold righted himself into a crouch.

Pantera was standing spread-legged over Alyce Rowland as she huddled on the floor. The shoulder of her dress ripped, and there were red splotches on her face. Pantera, rigid, looked up,

hands away from his body and tensed to grab for a gun.

"Stay right there," Sheffold whispered. "I could clip you before you get it. Two hundred and forty pounds across your legs could snap 'em in two."

Pantera didn't move a muscle. Sheffold moved forward, catlike, and lifted Pantera's gun out of a shoulder clip. Then he pushed the racketeer away and lifted Alyce to her feet.

"What is it?" he asked. "Where's Chick?"

"Gone," she said, dully. "One travels faster than two. I came back here. There was no place else to go."

Sheffold looked at Pantera. "You've been a busy boy tonight. The shake-down on Richards has backfired. He isn't going to buy!"

Pantera shrugged. "Says who?"

"It wasn't Mrs. Richards in the pictures," Sheffold continued. "It was someone else. Who?"

Pantera shrugged again and kept silent. Sheffold said, barely above a whisper, "You're all alone up here, Pantera. And maybe you're a very tough man, but not in this league. Who *was* the woman in the picture?"

Pantera jerked his shiny blond head at Alyce. "It was cutie," he said sullenly. "She and that little grifter Chick had set Bannerman up for a shakedown. But they lost their nerve and brought

the stuff to me. I figured Bannerman would pay at least fifty grand for it. I bought it for twenty. They didn't tell me Bannerman had dropped out of sight. They thought they had me for a patsy. *Me!*"

Silent fury shook him. He was a proud man with a strong sense of inferiority. He couldn't be a great man in his own eyes when two small-time crooks could make a sucker out of him. "I'm out twenty grand," he said, more quietly. "Somebody is going to pay. Bannerman, Richards, this little tramp. I don't care who."

Sheffold looked at Alyce. "Pack that bag again. You're getting out."

"It's packed!" she said. She ran into the bedroom and returned immediately, carrying the bag. The camel's-hair coat was draped over her shoulders. "Let's go, Pete."

At the door Sheffold said, "It's nothing to me, Pantera, but you'd better pull in your horns. You'll be lucky if you get off losing only twenty thousand. Bannerman was murdered tonight. Then there's Richards—he shot himself. Maybe you're clean on both counts. But some ambitious young cop might not know your reputation and hang it on you."

Then he followed Alyce out and down the stairs. The man he had hit was crawling across the lobby like a dog with

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a broken back. He didn't seem to know them as they went past him.

In the borrowed car, Sheffold said without expression, "Tell me the rest of it, Alyce. You and Bannerman."

"It was Chick's idea," she said defensively. "He figured Bannerman would be good for a squeeze. When you came to see us, Chick made up that whole story just while he sat there. Lord, what a talker he was. A no-good, sneaking rat," she added, "but he could con you right out of your dentures."

"How much did you ask for?"

"Ten grand. And Bannerman agreed to it. He wanted a couple of days to raise the dough, he said. That's when he took a powder. We didn't know where he was, or what he was up to. That's why we unloaded on Pantera—for double. But that little rat Chick lost his nerve. He was always a small-timer. He grabbed the twenty grand and blew. Say," she demanded, "is that true? About Bannerman being dead?"

Sheffold nodded. For the first time he was beginning to doubt his own abilities. Over the years his confidence in himself had built up in direct proportion to the general belief that he was a simple-minded giant. It had become an unquestioning belief that he was almost infallible. Now he was stopped cold by the complexity of Bannerman's kidnapping and murder.

"Pete," Alyce said in a soft voice. "You're going to help me get out of town, aren't you? I got to have money. Chick didn't leave twenty dollars. But you'll help me, won't you, honey?"

"I suppose," Sheffold said, "that I can't let you get murdered. I'll get you a couple of hundred from Julian—if he hasn't fired me for not staying on the job."

"Tell him all charities are deductible," Alyce said.

"Even if the charity is at the point of

a gun?" Sheffold asked her ironically.

"Sure," Alyce's voice was flip. "You can deduct for theft, too."

Sheffold stared ahead for a long minute. "So you can," he said thoughtfully. "I'd forgotten that."

CHAPTER SIX

Street of Broken Dreams

JULIAN was sitting at his desk, staring at something no one else would ever be able to see. He didn't even react enough to remove his glasses when the door opened. After a long moment his eyes lifted and focused at Sheffold. "He's dead, Pete," he said in a voice that was like very old parchment. "Murdered. They found him in his car."

"I heard," Sheffold said.

"I paid them ransom just as they demanded. Why did they have to kill him?"

"I don't know," Sheffold said. "The rest of it I understand. But not the killing."

"Seventy-five thousand dollars," Julian mumbled. "We'll have to close the club for a while. A week or two. But we'll reopen, Pete."

Sheffold waited silently beyond the rim of light from the desk lamp.

Julian's shoulders moved and he collected his thoughts. "What is it, Pete? What's on your mind?"

"Will you write something for me?"

Julian nodded and picked up the desk pen as if the request were perfectly normal. He pulled a sheet of paper from the drawer. "All right, Pete."

Pete Sheffold said: "Write this: In full possession of my faculties and without duress, I make the following statement: I killed Harley Bannerman tonight on the sea road south of Palos Verdes."

The pen scratched across the paper, paused once, went on scratching.

"The reasons for my act were as follows: Bannerman was being subjected to an extortion attempt, first by a former hat-check girl, Alyce Rowland, and her accomplice, a man known as Chick—last name unknown—and later by Danny Pantera. In order to raise the money to pay off the extortionists, Bannerman planned his own kidnapping. He disappeared, using a cottage owned by himself as a hideaway. The only other person who knew of this cottage was a woman named Mrs. Malcolm Richards, who had no knowledge of the fake kidnapping."

The pen was silent now, but Sheffold went on talking as though he had not noticed.

"Mrs. Richards went to the cottage on the suspicion that Bannerman was there. Bannerman managed to slip out the back door, and after firing a random shot to pin down any pursuit, he escaped down the side of the hill. I did not, at this point, know of Bannerman's real need for the money. I cooperated because half of the seventy-five thousand dollars of supposed ransom was to be mine. It could be deducted from the fund set aside to pay my income tax, since money lost through theft is deductible."

"Pete—" Julian said. "You don't have to continue."

"Yes," Sheffold said. "It's the only way. . . . Write this too: While it has no direct connection with Bannerman's murder, his disappearance set in motion certain events which led to Mrs. Richards being blackmailed by Danny Pantera. Because of this, her husband committed suicide, and I am morally responsible."

Sheffold went into Julian's private bathroom and ran water into a plastic glass and drank it. When he returned, Julian had not moved an inch.

"After his near exposure at the cottage," he went on in a dead voice, "Bannerman was on foot, and scared. He phoned here and insisted a car be brought to him on the sea road. This could also be used as part of the kidnapping scheme, involving the pay-off. Part of this conversation was overheard by the parking lot attendant. I took a car to him, but for reasons of my own. I shot him in the head. I anticipated that suspicion would fall on the non-existent kidnappers."

JULIAN looked down at his hands. "I want you to know the rest of it, Pete. I was afraid for the club. That's why I killed him. We were operating so close to the red we could have gone under. The seventy-five thousand would have been a buffer, but when you told me this afternoon about the extortion, I knew I'd never have any peace as long as he was here. But I never planned it. Bannerman put the idea in my head. When you went up to his cottage, he thought I'd sent you to kill him. He could see that it was made-to-order."

Sheffold said nothing.

"When he phoned early this evening," Julian went on quietly, "he accused me of it. He wanted the car, but he insisted I leave it for him and go away. Instead I hid in the turtle-back and I shot him."

"I didn't hear the shot," Sheffold said. "And I was awfully close. I nearly caught you. So you hit me and ran."

"I'm sorry, Pete," Julian said. "Sorry for everything. . . . If you had just stayed out of it! You were my friend, Pete."

"Yes, we were friends!" Sheffold's voice was suddenly harsh. "So you sent me out for Bannerman when all the time you were thinking 'big stupid Pete will never find anything!'"

Without haste, Julian opened the desk

drawer again. His hand came up with a small, black gun. "I'm not going to let you turn me in, Pete. I want your word you'll forget what you know."

Sheffold stared at the gun with eyes like a hurt animal. He didn't speak.

"Pete!" Julian's voice rose. "Don't make me have to kill you!"

"You gave me a job seven years ago when everybody else forgot." Sheffold was talking only to himself now. "I owed you a lot for that. Anything that was good for you I would have done. But I won't fix a murder for you."

"Then I'll kill you!"

The corners of his mouth were white. "I guess you would," Sheffold admitted slowly. "I didn't think of that. All I thought of was what you might do to yourself if the ransom ruined you. So today I jimmied your gun."

Quietly Julian put it away. He seemed vaguely relieved.

"I guess," he said, "I will call my lawyer."

Sheffold walked to the door, then turned. "You gave that girl a job, didn't you? Laurel—"

"Yes." He didn't look at Sheffold. "She's downstairs now."

Sheffold closed the door and went down the stairs. It was after closing now, and Laurel waited alone, in a banquette in a far, dark corner.

Sheffold sat down beside her. "You wouldn't listen," he said. There was no recrimination in his words, only an ineffable sadness. How do you like yourself? How high is the price now? Was it worth murder, Laurel?"

Laurel sat motionless.

"Bannerman was frightened," Sheffold said. "He wouldn't let Julian come near him. So he had to be decoyed. That's the way it happened, wasn't it?"

She nodded, but she couldn't speak.

"Julian told him he would have you

drive the car out there. Bannerman didn't know you, but all Julian had to do was give a description. Bannerman would do the rest."

"Oh, Pete," she sobbed. "It was terrible. He was like a madman. He tried to kiss me. I got away and ran. Then I heard the shot. I didn't know where it came from—I still don't. I went back to the car. He was dead. And there was no one around."

"He was hiding in the turtle-back," Sheffold told her.

"I ran down the road," Laurel said. "I thought I'd lose my mind! I don't remember how I got to the bus stop."

She put a hand on his wrist. "Pete—you were right. The price is too high. I'll go home now if it isn't too late—with the police I mean."

"It's okay," he said. "Julian didn't mention you to me, so he'll cover you."

"I'll have dreams," she whispered. "The rest of my life. I'll see him there, dead, and my lipstick on his face!"

"Go home, Laurel. You'll be all right. And some day you'll forget."

She stood up quickly, then hesitated. "What about you, Pete?"

"I'll have to stay till the bitter end." He didn't look at her. "I'm a material witness—against my best friend!"

"Thanks for all you've done. I always seem to be saying that, don't I?" She bent suddenly and pressed her cheek against his hair. "Good-bye, Pete."

Sheffold called, "Laurel." The footsteps came back. "Where's your home?"

"Aglers, Illinois. It's a nice little town. Pete, you'd like it."

"Maybe I would," he agreed. "One of these days I might come through."

"I won't be a blonde then," she said, in a voice so low he could hardly hear it. "Maybe you won't know me."

He smiled at her. "Honey," he said gently, "I'll always know you."

HOMICIDE HONEYMOON

*"Aggie!" he whispered
hoarsely. "Aggie—"*



By **TEDD THOMEY**

Rookie cop Mario Giovanni thought married life was swell—until his loving dove flew the nest . . . and left a dead Romeo in her place.

TWO of them were lying there. Two silent people with arms outflung. Two people lying in a small room where the only motion was a wilted lace curtain, breeze-blown, lazily stroking the sill of the open window.

In the alley below that window, a pair of tanned six-year-olds were lagging little steel balls at a line scratched in the blond dirt. They wore loose swim trunks and squinted against the morning California sun. One of the four unwashed hands was folded around the crushed brass tube of an orange lipstick.

Both boys looked up briefly when the sound of a bell split the air above them.

Up in the bedroom, Mario Giovani reached out a firm, hair-forested hand and shut off the alarm clock's metallic stutter.

He stretched, and muscle roamed idly along his chunky bare arms. He didn't open his eyes, but he yawned. He combed fingers through his hair. Black hair, thick and naturally oily. He grinned suddenly, and there was a flash of straight teeth contrasting whitely against the dark olive color of his cheeks and strong jaw.

He grinned because he'd been married only four days and everything was swell. This wasn't like it had been with his mom and dad—all that fighting and name-calling in Italian. This made you feel good in the morning, even if you had gotten home at 2 a.m., even if you had to keep on working instead of taking a honeymoon.

"Hey, Aggie!" he said. "It's five to eight!"

No answer. That was Aggie for you. When she did a thing, she did it right. When she slept—she slept.

Mario yawned again. He wiggled his toes against the warmth of the sheets.

"Aggie, you'll miss the bus!" Heavy-lidded eyes still comfortably closed, he sent a hand groping across to the other twin bed to tousle her yellow hair.

But instead of long, soft strands, he felt stubble and heard the wiry rasp of it as his fingers passed over a round chin.

Mario snatched away his hand as if it had been burned. He jerked to a sitting position.

He stared at his wife's bed.

A man was lying there. Bob Hern. He was covered by a pink wool blanket, one arm hanging down limply to the faded leaves and flowers of the old rug.

Mario's arm whipped aside his blan-

kets and his bare heels thumped against the floor. Swiftly, he glanced around the bedroom.

"Aggie!" The word crumbled to dust in his throat.

Mario Giovani saw the large blot—so dark red it was almost black—on the blanket above Bob Hern's chest. He tore away the blanket.

Hern was fully clothed. He wore a rumpled gray flannel suit, a white shirt and a shamrock green tie with a design of gray whorls. The chest of his coat was blood-soaked. His pinkish hair was mussed, but the familiar pink was gone from his cheeks. They were gray except for the coppery glinting of one day's worth of whiskers.

Hern was dead. He had been dead for several hours. Mario could tell without touching him.

In his job, he'd seen death before. This kind of death, sudden and violent. But never had it been so close at hand, catapulted at him like this.

Mario stood still, his broad hands clenching his thighs through the thin cloth of his pajama pants. He stood there for a half-minute that was thirty separate, drawn-out ticks.

Turning quickly, he sped into the tiny bathroom. The cracked white tiles were sharp and cold against his feet. She wasn't there.

"Aggie!" Panic was tugging at him, but he kicked it aside. She was safe. She had to be safe.

He ran through the tidy kitchen and out to the living room. Aggie wasn't there either. He sprang onto the sway-backed davenport and his fingernails sank into its green cotton slip-cover as he looked behind it. She wasn't there.

A twist of the glass knob and a yank of the redwood doors showed him that Aggie wasn't in the small bed that folded into the living room's east wall. Only one other place was left. Mario sprinted

back to the bedroom and yanked open the closet door with the narrow, full-length mirror on it. His arms beat at the colorful dresses, the sport jackets and the extra blue serge patrolman's uniform hanging there.

Slamming the closet door, he dropped to his knees and glanced under the twin beds, half expecting to see Aggie lying there as silently at Hern.

She wasn't.

He got up and his eyes went automatically to the dead face on his wife's pillow. Thoughts were tumbling and crowding into his mind. Thoughts he hated. Bob Hern and Aggie had been engaged once. Bob Hern, tall and good-looking, junior executive at Hennessey's Department Store. He'd nearly married Aggie, until—

The thoughts went skittering crazily from Mario's brain as his dark brown eyes fell upon the open bureau drawer. The lowest one. The gun—his extra .38 revolver—was gone. The holster was lying on the pile of balled-up socks. It gaped at him emptily

MARIO went quickly to Hern's side. Working nimbly, his fingers tugged at Hern's green tie, unbuttoned the white shirt and spread it open.

A .45 slug hadn't made that size hole. And it was too large to be the work of a .25. The best guess was that a .38 had put it there. Patrolman Mario Giovanni's .38.

Without realizing what he was doing, Mario put the chair back on its four mahogany legs and sat down. There was no expression on his face. He stared at a nail hole in the sky-blue wallpaper.

He didn't believe it. He absolutely didn't believe it. But the facts were there—long, finger-like facts pointing in one direction.

Aggie had hated Bob Hern. She'd

killed him and then run away, taking along the murder gun. The revolver of a man she'd married only four short days ago. . . .

For a long time, Mario Giovanni stayed there on the blue-velvet seat, listening to the sounds of kids playing marbles in the alley.

Abruptly, he got up. His eyes were blazing. He swore at himself for being nothing but a rookie—a seven months' cop who couldn't tell a clue from a hole in the ground.

Aggie couldn't have done it. She wasn't the type. She was gentle and feminine. She hated guns, hated the fact that Mario had to wear his service .38 whether in uniform or not. Maybe it was just a coincidence that she wasn't here. Maybe she'd decided to spend the night with her mom and dad in Compton.

Mario started back to the living room. In the bedroom doorway, he paused. His bare toe had touched something sticky on the rug. An orange-colored blob. Reaching down, he poked it with a forefinger. He sniffed it. It was lipstick, slightly perfumed. Aggie must have dropped it.

Returning to the living room, Mario picked up the phone. As he dialed a number, he wondered how in the hell Bob Hern's body had gotten into the apartment.

"Hello?" said Mrs. Haagensen, Aggie's mother.

"This is Mario." He tried to keep the concern from his voice. "Did Aggie stay over there last night?"

"Why, no. Wasn't she with you?"

Mario hesitated. He didn't want to upset Mrs. Haagensen. "I thought she was, but I guess I was mistaken. I was on the beat till two this morning and when I got in I went right to bed without putting the lights on. I—"

"I don't understand. . . ." Mrs. Haag-

ensen's voice trailed off. Mario could visualize her standing in her kitchen, a small plump woman. Her brown hair—once it had been blonde like Aggie's—was fixed in a tight shiny bun, and she almost had to stand on tip-toe to reach the wall telephone's black mouth.

"It's nothing to worry about," added Mario. "She probably left me a note. That's it—there's probably a note around here some place."

He knew there was no note. And he also knew that Mrs. Haagensen could tell he was lying. When he was nervous like this, he couldn't tell even a small lie without his tongue tripping all over itself.

"I don't like it," said Mrs. Haagensen. "You two married only a few days and all." She paused. "Have you phoned Vivian? She used to stay nights with Vivian sometimes."

"No," said Mario. "But I will right away. Thank you. Good-by."

He put the phone down quickly, feeling sick to his stomach. With a dry tongue, he licked his lips. Everything was worse now. More and more it looked as if Aggie had run away.

Again he lifted the phone. He knew he should dial the homicide inspectors and tell them all about it. But he couldn't. They'd start a city-wide search for Aggie. Her picture would be in all the papers, and radios would crackle with her name. Agnes Giovani, killer-bride of a cop. And when they found her and arrested her, she'd be scared. She'd say the wrong thing, get herself in deeper and deeper.

No, he couldn't phone the inspectors—not till he'd tried to find her first himself.

HIS forefinger spun the dial wheel again. Six, then seven times, the receiver rang metallically in his ear before Vivian Mason answered.

"Yes?" she asked in her silken tone.

"Hello," he said. "This is—"

"You don't have to tell me!" cut in Vivian. "I'd know your voice anywhere, Mario. Such a nice voice. . . ."

Mario swallowed. Vivian always made him feel uncomfortable. Like Aggie, she was blonde, but prettier—quite a bit prettier. Her eyes were nearly violet, and she wore the brightest lip rouges, the highest heels, the lowest-cut blouses. He'd liked Vivian a lot—until he met Aggie. Aggie was more fun. She got a kick out of baseball and tennis and wasn't afraid to get her hair wet at the beach. She was more real—at least he'd thought so until this morning.

"I was wondering," said Mario. He hesitated and at the same time heard a small thumping sound at the other end of the line.

"Sam!" shouted Vivian. "Get down from there! Excuse me a minute, Mario."

The phone clattered as Vivian set it down. She returned after a moment.

"Sorry, Mario. That damn cat was up on the mantle again after the goldfish and knocked down a book. Now what were you wondering about?"

"Did Aggie spend the night with you by any chance?" Breath tight in his chest, he waited for her answer.

Vivian laughed. "Well, the honeymoon's over already! What did she do, Mario, run home to mother?"

"No!" he said angrily. "I had to work last night and she probably got scared being by herself!"

"I don't know," laughed Vivian. "Sounds like Reno to me!" Her voice softened, becoming almost husky. "You know, Mario honey, I'm still carrying a big torch for you. I'll be home tonight if you'd like to—"

"Thank you, but I'll be busy." Mario let the phone drop to its cradle.

As he replaced it, the doorbell rang

with the high nervous tone of a spoon striking a glass of water.

He didn't want to answer it. He had enough on his mind. But he knew whoever it was out on the small porch had seen him through the glass of the front door. He went over and opened the door.

Standing on the porch, revolving a faded green felt hat in his big-knuckled hands, was George Contrera. He didn't say anything. He just looked at Mario.

Mario scowled and passed his hand impatiently across his forehead. "Sorry, George. Can't go with you this morning. Something's come up."

Anger sprang into George Contrera's eyes. They were oily brown eyes looking out of an oily brown face. Contrera was in his late thirties. He was tall and his hair was cut so short it stuck up like iron-gray pins. His thin denim shirt and pants had been washed and mended many times.

"You said you'd go!" he accused. "I need that job. And you promised!"

"I know, but we'll have to do it tomorrow or some time."

Contrera began to whine. "Look here, sir! If it hadn't been for you I wouldn't be out of a job. You arrested me, so I sat in that jail for one hundred and eighty-three days. You—"

"Shut up!" barked Mario. "It wasn't my fault you tried to rob that gas station." He started to shut the door. "I'll

get in touch with you later about the job."

"Yes, sir!" There was little respect in the word and much bitterness. Narrow shoulders slumping, Contrera turned and went down the long flight of steps.

Mario closed the door.

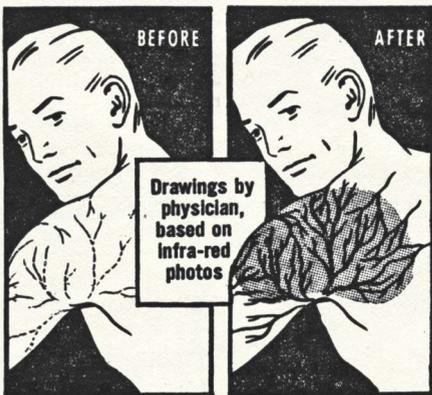
He returned to the bedroom, the silent bedroom with the silent figure on his wife's bed. Glancing briefly at Hern's gray face, he picked up his tan gabardine slacks. His mind was made up. He'd have to go out and find her. Because until he could talk to her, until he could see the expression her blue eyes and hear her voice—not until then would he know for sure whether Aggie was guilty.

And all he could allow himself was an hour. He couldn't delay phoning the homicide inspectors for more than an hour. He swore.

A short, rotten hour. One hour to find his wife in a city of three hundred thousand. One hour to find evidence to clear her if she wasn't guilty. One hour to save her life and his.

STEPPING into the slacks, he yanked up the zipper and adjusted the stiff new leather holster containing his service .38. Down in the alley, somebody screamed.

Mario sped to the open window. Two yelling boys in swim trunks were clap-



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ping their small hands across their mouths and performing an Indian war dance around a rusty trash barrel. Their faces and skinny chests were streaked with orange war paint.

Mario started to turn from the window—and then from the edge of his eye he saw her.

Aggie.

At the narrow mouth of the alley, half a block away. But she wasn't coming home. She was walking quickly away.

There was a thick roaring in Mario's ears as he poked his bare feet into his shiny cordovan oxfords and grabbed the blue shirt up off the rug. He ran through the kitchen, his left arm stabbing the air, trying to find the shirt sleeve flapping out behind him.

Down the front steps he went, taking them three at a time. He ran along the narrow concrete path past the purple dahlias and yellow nasturtiums and past the fat garbage can that was brown with running ants.

She'd crossed Twenty-third Street and was walking in the alley beyond. Stuffing in his shirt tail, Mario sprinted over the rutted earth.

When he was a hundred yards behind her, he shouted. "Aggie!"

She didn't stop. She walked even faster, the paper shopping bag swinging in her hand.

His lungs were hot and heavy in his chest by the time he caught her elbow and yanked her to a stop.

He blurted: "Aggie!"

And then he felt as if he'd been slugged across the eyes with a night stick.

The girl wasn't Aggie. This blonde had small brown eyes, a bump on her nose and a small, angry mouth.

"Say! What d'you think you're doing!" She tore away from his grasp.

"Sorry," said Mario. He took out his black leather wallet, fumbled it open and showed his identification. "Police

Department." he muttered. "Made a mistake. . . ."

Turning, he walked slowly back down the alley, his sockless feet sliding around in the untied oxfords. He felt sick. From the back that girl had been a dead ring-er for Aggie. She walked the same way, held her shoulders in the same erect manner. He should've known by the hair-do and the clothes that it wasn't Aggie. But he'd wanted so desperately to believe it was her that his eyes had run away with his brain.

He went back to the bedroom and stood beside the dresser, his hands deep in his pockets. He'd been a fool. An apple-green rookie. Instead of thinking things through calmly, the way an experienced cop would've done, he'd bolted out of here like a scalded dog.

He glanced at the crystal face of his wrist watch. It was eight-twenty and he'd discovered the body nearly half an hour ago. By nine-fifteen at the latest he would have to phone headquarters—and they'd be sure to grill him about the delay. Hell, they might even figure he'd killed Bob Hern.

He forced himself to think slowly. There were two ways of looking at it. Either Aggie had killed Hern, or somebody else had. She didn't like Bob Hern, there was no doubt about that. But did she hate him enough to kill?

He was one of the assistant managers at Hennessey's where Aggie had worked in the cosmetic section. They'd been engaged, but Aggie had broken it off. She said Hern was too immature, too headstrong. He'd proved that later by having her fired for some small thing. Hern was quite a power around the store. Anybody could be a power if his father was the store's vice president.

Thoughtfully, Mario scrubbed his fingertips through his thick dark hair. Hern's body must have been in the bed all night. It was there when Mario came

in. If he hadn't been so careful not to wake Aggie, if he had put on the lights, he would have discovered the body then.

IT HAD been a grim joke—hardly the sort of thing Aggie would do.

Maybe it was somebody else's idea of humor. Someone with a funny sense of proportion, funny enough to know what a shock it would be when Mario found the body beside him in the morning. It would have to be someone with a grudge against me, he thought. Someone who, at the same time, had a reason for wanting Hern dead.

What about George Contrera? He was a strange character, odd enough to pull such a trick. Contrera was the first guy Mario had ever arrested. Three days after he was sworn into the Department, Mario had caught Contrera robbing a gas station. It had been Contrera's first offense and he'd gotten off lightly. After serving his time, he couldn't get a job. Mario felt sorry for him and made arrangements to introduce him to the boss of a lumber yard this morning. But he hadn't realized before what a character Contrera was. For that jail sentence Contrera blamed, not himself, but Mario.

The war-whooping was still going on down in the alley. Mario stepped over to the window and watched the small boys who were now throwing sticks that were supposed to be flaming arrows. He wondered, as he stood there, if Frank Dutton could be mixed up in Hern's murder.

Dutton was the only other important arrest that Mario had made. It was Dutton's fourth arrest for picking pockets and he'd drawn a stiff sentence. There'd been hatred in his eyes when he left the police station for the trip to San Quentin. Hatred for Mario Giovani. Two nights ago Dutton and some others had escaped from Quentin. Was it possi-

ble that Dutton, wanting revenge, had—

For the first time, Mario really noticed the color of the war paint the six-year-olds had daubed on their tanned bodies. Orange. He turned and went back to the bedroom doorway where he'd stepped on a blob of color right after finding Hern's body. The two shades matched—and it was the kind of lipstick Aggie used to wear.

Returning to the window, he shouted down: "Hello, there, fellows. What're you supposed to be—Cherokees or Navajos?"

They stopped throwing sticks. One said: "Naw, we're Indians!"

"Oh," said Mario. "Where'd you get the paint?"

One of them held up a crushed brass tube. "Found this in the alley."

"I'll give you a quarter for it."

The boys immediately forgot they were Indians and became financiers. "Cash?" one asked.

Mario tossed down the coin. The boys tossed up the brass tube. Stepping away from the window, Mario examined it. It was orange lipstick, all right, and the tube had been smashed, probably stepped on, explaining the stain on the rug.

He felt excitement pulling at him. The tube was evidence, damned important evidence. Hurriedly, he slipped into a conservative brown sport jacket, which concealed the holster at his hip, and went out the front door. He wasn't sure, but there was a good chance now that Mario Giovani finally knew where he was going. . . .

Rattling from rut to rut in his 1934 coupe, Mario kept thinking about the lipstick and a dark, warm California night about a month ago. He and Aggie had stood together on the outermost rim of Rainbow Pier, a tremendous bow of soft-colored lights which pushed out into the ocean south of Long Beach.

They'd held hands and watched the white manes of the waves breaking against the rocks below. He didn't remember exactly what started it, but they began criticizing one another in fun. Blue eyes impish, Aggie said she absolutely couldn't stand the green necktie he was wearing. She said it looked like a piece of anemic celery.

Mario laughed and said he didn't like her orange lipstick because it was the same kind Vivian wore—and he didn't think she should go around reminding him of former girl friends. So they had a little ceremony. Mario took off the tie and dropped it into the black waves. Aggie took the brass tube from her purse and tossed it in. And he'd spent the next ten minutes kissing off the rest of the orange lipstick.

He was sure Aggie hadn't bought another one. So how had the orange lipstick got on the rug? Maybe Vivian would know. Maybe Vivian put it there.

Vivian lived in a small yellow-shuttered white cottage on East Tenth Street. A long ambulance and a black and white police car were parked in front. Mario slammed his old coupe against the curb and was stepping out before the wheels stopped rolling.

As he strode up the flagstone path, a man in a white jacket came out the front door—an ambulance attendant.

"Somebody sick in there?" asked Mario.

"Yeah," said the attendant. "A crazy dame practically committed suicide."

"Blonde?"

The attendant nodded and Mario hurried onto the porch. That crazy Vivian, he thought. Why in the hell would she want to kill herself?

He went through the open front door and into the living room. Standing in one corner, talking in low tones, were two patrolmen in blue serge and—

Vivian Mason.

Mario heard himself yell. "Vivian! But you—I thought it was you!"

She ran toward him. She was wearing a long, tomato-red negligee with lace froth at the wrists and throat. Her straight yellow hair was pinned back with gold buckles. Tears glistened wetly in her violet eyes as she tumbled against him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"It's Aggie!" she cried. "It was awful. There was a bottle of sleeping tablets in the medicine cabinet—"

Mario unstrapped Vivian's hand from his neck and twisted around. As he bolted through the bedroom door, his blood seemed cold thin water in his veins.

His wife of four days was lying on the rumpled, unmade bed in the nightgown he'd given her for her birthday. Mario shouldered the attendant aside and bent over her.

"Aggie!" he whispered hoarsely. "Aggie!"

HER eyes were closed and droplets of perspiration clung to her dark eyelids. Her face was an oval as pale as paper. There was no color to her lips, but her long hair, unbrushed, was a tangle of brilliant gold fanning across the crumpled hump of the pillow.

She lay there as motionless as the blankets.

"Good lord!" Mario yelled at the attendant. "Is she all right?"

"I don't know," said the attendant, placing shiny instruments in a brown leather bag. "We pumped out her stomach. . . ." He took Mario's arm. "You keep out of here for a while. I'll let you know when you can come back."

Mario walked stiffly out to the living room. He dropped into the first chair that brushed his leg. The .38's holster caught in the upholstery and pressed awkwardly against his hip but he hard-

ly noticed it. Hands jammed across his face, he sat slumped forward.

After a while, he heard Vivian talking to the two patrolmen. Her voice was calm, but had a taut undertone.

"I've known Aggie for years," Vivian said. "And her husband."

She paused. "That's him over there. He's a policeman, too."

"You say she phoned you last night?" asked one of the patrolmen.

"Yes. Around midnight. Mario had to work last night and she was afraid to stay by herself. So she asked if she could spend the night here with me and, of course, I said fine. When she came over she was terribly nervous, but I thought that was natural because she always was afraid when she was alone."

"What about this business with the gun and the man she says she shot?"

Mario looked up sharply.

"I'm getting to that," said Vivian. "She couldn't sleep, so I fixed her a sleeping tablet. Then this morning she suddenly woke me up yelling about Bob Hern and how she'd shot him last night. She opened her purse and there was a gun in it and everything—and I, well, I just didn't know what to do."

The patrolman pointed to a gun lying on an end-table. "That gun?"

Vivian nodded her yellow head. Mario didn't have to look twice to know it was the extra .38 he'd kept in the lower bureau drawer.

"She was hysterical," added Vivian. "She kept crying that she'd killed Bob Hern because he was going to tell Mario that she and Bob were still—were still in love."

Vivian was marching nervously up and down, the red hem of her negligee sweeping the rug. "I calmed her down," she explained. "At least I thought I did. I went out to fix breakfast. When I went back to the bedroom, there was the empty bottle of tablets and I couldn't

wake her up. I even slapped her. And then I got scared and phoned the—"

The bedroom door was pulled back and the white-jacketed attendant crooked a forefinger at Mario. "You can come in."

This time Aggie was awake.

Taking her moist hand in his, Mario said softly, "Thank God!"

"Hello . . ." whispered Aggie. "Gee, do I feel—funny?"

With a corner of the sheet, Mario blotted the perspiration from her forehead. He didn't want to question her; he didn't want to cause her any more pain—but he had to know.

"Aggie," he said gently. "Did you take the sleeping tablets?"

The blue eyes blinked. "Tablets?"

He nodded. "Did you take some?"

"No. Just the milk Vivian fixed for me this morning. It—tasted funny."

"Milk!" Mario gripped Aggie's hand. "Can you tell me the rest—everything that happened last night?"

She nodded. The words came slowly, half-whispered. "Vivian phoned me last night. She asked would I like to spend the night with her. She knew I didn't like to be alone. I told her about the gun in the bureau, but I was still a little afraid so I said yes. I wrote you a note and took a cab—"

Mario interrupted. "I knew it! I knew you must have left a note!"

"Yes," said Aggie weakly. "Well, when I got here Vivian and Bob Hern were drinking. Bob was as stiff as the bottle. I excused myself and went right to bed. This morning when we got up, Vivian fixed me the milk. I drank it and then the phone rang and—and it was you, Mario, but—"

Aggie shook her head drowsily. "I got so sleepy I dropped the glass. And that's all—that's all I remember. . . ."

Mario straightened up. "It's enough, honey."

He returned to the living room and introduced himself to the two patrolmen. Then he turned to Vivian and his voice was steady.

"Vivian, were you over at my apartment last night?"

"No. Why?"

"You're sure, absolutely sure?"

"Of course. You think I'd lie to you?"

In reply, Mario drew the crushed brass lipstick from his pocket.

INSTANTLY, Vivian's hand snatched at it. "Where'd you get that! I threw it out the win—" She snapped off the sentence, realizing she'd said too much.

Mario kept his voice low, but there was a cutting edge to it. "You killed Bob Hern, Vivian. And you fed Aggie the sleeping tablets, trying to make it look like she tried suicide after shooting Hern. You got Hern drunk and took the keys from Aggie's purse after she was asleep. You took Hern to our place and shot him with the gun Aggie mentioned was in the drawer!"

"No!" Vivian's slim fingers seized Mario's arm. "Don't say such things!"

Mario yanked his arm away. "You dropped the lipstick in our bedroom and it got stepped on, putting a smear on the rug. So you tossed the broken tube out of the window."

He strode back into the bedroom and yanked open the closet door. A dozen pairs of feminine shoes were in colorful rows on the floor.

On the sole of a green alligator pump he found a smear of orange.

"That proves it, Vivian," he said.

She glanced at the shoe—and her lower lip trembled. "I know, Mario. I—I was such a fool. That Bob Hern—I hated him! He thought I was swell to have fun with, but when it came down to marrying me—" Her voice broke.

As Mario stood watching, she clamped her arms around his neck. "Anyway, Mario, I never loved him. I've always loved you! I couldn't stand it when Aggie got you—and I thought if I killed Bob Hern then I could marry you!"

"A hell of a lot of sense that makes!"

"It's true!" she cried. "I loved you so much I didn't want to kill Aggie because I was afraid they might accuse you! That's why I called the ambulance right after she took the milk. I was sure they would arrest her. And Mario—"

Mario spoke through tightly closed teeth. "You didn't want to save Aggie. You waited as long as you could before calling the ambulance. You knew when I phoned you that I was trying to find her before I reported the murder. And you wanted to be sure I wouldn't have a chance to prove Aggie was innocent!"

"Yes, Mario." Vivian's warm, perfumed lips brushed his cheek. "Mario," she whispered anxiously. "You're a policeman. You can think of some way of getting me off, can't you, honey?"

He broke away and shoved her against the door. "No!" he exploded.

Vivian's mouth became warped. She was suddenly a snarling, scratching she-cat. She threw herself at him.

He caught her wrist and held the shuddering, shrieking weight of her off at arms' length until the two patrolmen got handcuffs in place.

They led Vivian to the door. She brushed a strand of yellow hair from her forehead. She slipped a hand inside the arm of the younger patrolman, the handsome one with the neat mustache.

"I like policemen," she said. Her violet eyes looked up at him softly. "I'm going to especially enjoy riding to the station with you. . . ."

But Mario didn't hear her. He was sitting on the edge of Aggie's bed, holding her hand and smiling down at her.

Always Leave 'Em Dying . . .

By JIM T. PEARCE



"Shut up," I snapped, "You want to send an innocent man to the chair?"

★ Vincent, top dog in a murdered gang-czar's pack, was slated for the Sing-Sing dog house—unless he could persuade a hotsy honey to toss him a bone. ★

WHEN the desk clerk gave me the message, I knew it was trouble. "Mr. Bradford wants to see you," he said. "He wants to see you in his room at three o'clock. You better go up now. It's three already."

"Don't worry, Jack," I said. "I'll get there."

I would too. The way things stood in the organization now, it wasn't smart to play hard-to-get when the boss called. So I got back into one of the elevators and said "ten" to the boy.

Boss Tom Bradford's suite was on the tenth floor. The Little Man and I had apartments on the ninth. Beefe was on

the fifth. Shultze and Ransy, two strong-arms, had basement apartments. Bradford's girl, Helen, lived in a bungalow on the outskirts.

I stepped out onto the thick green carpet on the tenth and walked slowly toward Bradford's door. I was in no hurry for the bad news. A small-time racketeer, Chip O'Brien, was trying to muscle in. The police were cracking down. Bradford was suspicious of all the boys. Only no news could be good news.

I rapped lightly on Bradford's door. It swung open a bit. I pushed it a little further and stuck my noggin around the edge. I was right. Trouble sprawled across the center of the heavy, yellow rug.

Bradford lay face down, hands at his side, palms up, and feet wide apart. He must have fallen like a bag of cement. The cause was a small, dark hole in the back of his graying head.

I settled back on my heels and closed the door a little. I didn't want to go in. Beefer, Little Man, and I were Bradford's top men. Of late, Bradford hadn't been feeling at all kindly toward any of us. I didn't want to be the one to find the corpse.

On the other hand, the clerk and the elevator boy knew I was up here. I shoved the door open and walked in.

Bradford was a well-built man in his early fifties. He had probably been a pretty husky, tough youth. Later he had picked up some fat, and his hair started to go gray. Once he had been as tough and wild as they come. But he had gotten away from that and started using his brains, of which he had plenty.

Six years ago, this city had been a hodge-podge of small gangs striking inefficiently at each other. The strongest of these gangs was under Beefer Logan. Then Bradford moved in with his two thugs, Shultze and Ransy, and a com-

plete system of blackmail. He soon had nearly complete control of the city's underworld. The key to his tightly-knit organization was his phenomenal blackmail file. Bradford never told any of his men where he kept it.

I bent over his body and felt his wrist. He was dead all right. But he was still warm.

I stepped around the body to see if there were anything else unusual. I looked about the room. Everything was in place. It was a neat room done in light colors. Soft, heavy green easy chairs, a matching sofa, yellow pine tables and bric-a-brac were tastefully arranged about the room.

I looked at the telephone, which I'd better use. I looked at the open door. Captain Haskin and Lieutenant Brix of the police force stood there watching me.

"Bradford told me this would be a surprise party," said Haskin. "But I don't think this is what he meant."

Haskin was a tall, lean man with straight gray hair. He had a set, almost sullen mouth and sharp, bright eyes. He walked into the room, all the while keeping his eyes on me. "Frisk him," he said to the lieutenant.

"I don't carry a gun." I said. Haskin said nothing, and the lieutenant frisked me.

Haskin looked at the body and felt the wrist. "Been dead maybe about five or ten minutes," he said to the lieutenant. "Maybe just before we got off the elevator."

He turned toward me. "Where's the gun, Vincent?"

"I don't carry a gun," I snapped.

"Look for a gun," Haskin told the lieutenant. Then he saw Beefer in the hall. "Come in, Logan," he said.

Beefer trudged in. He was a tall, husky man who had run to fat. He looked at me. "Who did it, Rick?"

I shrugged.

"Any ideas, Logan?" asked Haskin.

"I don't know. Maybe one of Chip O'Brien's boys." Beefer shrugged his thick, soft shoulders.

The lieutenant was fishing behind the sofa. He caught a tiny black .22 automatic with hand-inlaid silver. I had seen that gun before. It was one of Beefer Logan's.

"You carry a pretty gun," Haskin said to me.

"It isn't mine," I said.

"We'll see." He picked up the phone with a handkerchief and dialed a number. "Hello," he said, "is this Bill? Well listen, Bill, I've got a little automatic here." He gave the serial number. "See if we've got anything on it, and call me right back." He gave Bradford's telephone number.

There was a knock on the door, and the Little Man peeked in. His jaw dropped a horrified two inches when he saw Bradford.

"Come in here!" Haskin shouted.

Little Man came in. He was about five-foot eight. He had small, slender hands and a sharp, half-boyish, half-impish face. It was from this, rather than from his size, that he got his name. He was trim, muscular and spoke in a quiet, commanding tone.

Haskin glared down at the Little Man from his rangy six feet. "Who're you?" he growled.

Little Man looked up at him. "Who're you?" he said softly.

Haskin pulled out his wallet and badge for the first time and glowered down at the newcomer.

Little Man looked at it slowly. "My name, Captain Haskin, is Robert Hill. I'm—was—one of Mr. Bradford's salesmen."

That was the truth, too. I was Bradford's accountant. I kept the books in as legal a manner as possible. Beefer had

been the small racket organizer in the city five years ago. He had found it wise to go in with the boss. Little Man Hill was a smooth talker that Bradford had hired several months ago to talk nice to the big customers and the new ones. When Little Man's nice talk failed, tough guys like Shultze and Ransy took over under Beefer to apply pressure.

I WAS feeling better since the lieutenant had found Beefer's gun. Ordinarily I'd have been sorry for Beefer. But now it had to be one of us, and I didn't want to be the one.

The telephone rang. Beefer didn't wink a muscle. Haskin picked up the phone.

"Hello," he said. "Speaking. . . Yeah. . . Yeah. . . That's all? Okay." He hung up. "The gun was stolen from a Longview home over a year ago."

I knew then that I was back in some very thick soup.

"Captain Haskin," Little Man said half apologetically, "we're all employees of Mr. Bradford. We were all called up here for a meeting. Couldn't you tell us the nature of this situation?"

"Okay, Hill. Bradford called me about noon. He said that he had found out that one of his employees was wanted by out-of-state police for something big. He said if I would come up here at three, he would turn the man over to me. It seems that our man got here before us." His eyes glittered at me. "I'm taking you in," he said. "Don't any of you leave town."

I was stuck. It wouldn't do me any good to tell them Beefer had pulled the stunt. Only Beefer and I knew it was his gun. They wouldn't believe me. Beefer certainly wouldn't tell them.

"Let's go," said Haskin.

The five of us, with me in the lead, marched over the carpets toward the elevator door. The lieutenant rang the

bell and then he stepped back again.

There were three ways to get down from Bradford's apartment: the fire escape, the inside stairway, and the elevator. I am six feet and weigh two hundred. Until ten years ago, I used to earn nice dough around the stadiums by boxing some nights and wrestling others. I still have fun in gyms surprising young suckers. At thirty-five, I am a lot trimmer than some people would think. I figured the elevator would be my best bet.

When the elevator door slid open, I turned to face the others. Haskin and the lieutenant were now following the rest close behind. Beefer was closest.

"Look, Captain," I said, "if you want to know the real story behind the whole—" I rammed Beefer. He flew, arms flailing, against the two officers.

I slipped back into the cage and pushed the button for the eighth floor. I grabbed the elevator boy and threw him in front of the closing door just to remind Haskin not to shoot, and we were on our way.

The elevator boy was a big, tough kid, and he saw that I didn't have a gun. He came up from the corner fast. He dived at me swinging. I stepped to the back of the cage, grabbed the back of his collar as he went by, and helped him butt into the metal wall. I straightened him with an uppercut, brought his face down on my knee, and put the side of my hand hard and fast against the back of his neck.

I knew he wouldn't give out any information for at least ten minutes.

The door opened at the eighth. I pushed the button for the basement and stepped out. At the end of the hall, I slid the window up slowly and quietly and stepped onto the fire escape. I heard hurried footsteps clumping down the inside stairway past the floor.

I had to move fast. As soon as Haskin

got to the elevator, he would guess that I hadn't been on it all the way down. In short order, this city block would have a dragnet around it too fine for a stunted gnat to escape.

On the ninth floor, I slipped into my own apartment. I tipped over an easy chair and ripped out the bottom. From it, I took a .38 revolver and a shoulder holster that I had hoped never to use again.

I slipped out of my door and ran to the fire escape. At the seventh floor, the fire escape on the next building crossed with mine about six feet away.

I took off my jacket and tossed it across the space. I stepped over the railing and didn't look below. I pushed off for the next building. My feet missed the grating, but my hands grabbed the iron railing. I bent up, got my feet under me, and clambered over.

There was an open window on that landing. I pulled on my jacket and slipped through. The noise my feet made hitting the floor awakened the chubby, tousled blonde in bed.

She propped herself up on one arm, exhibiting an abundance of soft, white flesh. Surprise plastered her lipsticked face. She peered at me through bleary eyes.

Just my luck, I thought. Just when I'm in a hurry.

The blonde pulled the blankets up to her shoulders. "Hey," she said sleepily.

"New house-manager," I said. "Lost my way."

In the little hall inside her apartment door, there was a telephone. I ripped the wires out of the wall and ducked out into the hall.

By now, Captain Haskin would have a call into headquarters. I hit the inside stairway and followed it to the basement. I ran to the delivery entrance. No one was in the alley.

I raced through to the other side of the

block and grabbed a taxi. "Take your next left and go straight out," I told the driver.

THE light was green at the next crossing, but we had to wait while a patrol car, siren screaming, went through. Then we went on. I straightened my jacket, lit cigarette, and leaned back in my seat. I flicked my thumb at the disappearing patrol car.

"The desk sergeant must have sent the boys out for a pack of gum," I said.

I switched taxis twice and then took a stroll to think things over. The two torpedoes, Shultze and Ransy, had been with Bradford from way back. They would consider breaking my head in for revenge a matter of professional and personal pride. I had to get the evidence on Beefer before Shultze and Ransy, Beefer, or the cops got me.

I could not do it alone. There was one man I could bargain with. That was Bradford's small-time competitor, Chip O'Brien.

I hailed a taxi and told him, "Palace Casino." That was the crummy little alley-dive where O'Brien hung out. Before I went in, I stopped nearby and had hamburgers and coffee.

Then I slipped the .38 into my coat pocket and strolled down the alley into the Palace Casino. Nobody was at the bar. A newspaper woman nursed a beer

on one ringed table. Her big sack of papers leaned against her chair. At the back, playing set-back with three sour-looking characters, sat a small, seedy man. This was Chip O'Brien.

None of them looked at me, and they didn't lay down their cards. But they stopped playing. Nobody said anything.

I walked toward them, keeping my hands away from my pockets.

"O'Brien," I said, "I want to talk to you. Alone." He didn't look at me. "This is big business, O'Brien. You're getting your chance. Take it or leave it now."

O'Brien tilted his head the way they do in the movies, and his friends stationed themselves at the front of the bar.

I sat down. "You know Bradford got it this afternoon," I said.

He nodded.

"I was Bradford's top man."

He nodded.

"If they get me on the rap," I continued, "the organization will fall apart."

O'Brien smiled.

"Then Beefer Logan and you will fight for peanuts."

O'Brien's face went straight. "Maybe," he squeaked.

"I can make you a better offer than that."

"Yeah?" said O'Brien doubtfully.

"Beefer killed Bradford because the boss was going to turn him in on an old

**BROKER
NO
JOKER**



EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill.—
"I mean it when I ask for Calvert," says Max Adelman, insurance broker of this city. "I switched to Calvert long ago, because I like its better taste. And with me it's the taste that counts."

count. You call Haskin at five o'clock and tell him that you heard the murder weapon was a little black .22 automatic with hand-inlaid silver. Tell him that you and a couple of your friends have seen Beefer carry it and that it is his." I paused.

"I'm listening," said O'Brien.

"After you've done that, I'll also turn in Bradford's evidence on Beefer. That will supply the motive and put Beefer into more hot water. With Beefer out of the way, I cut you into the organization."

"Now, O'Brien," I continued, "the racket's not my type of business. So when everything is under control, I'll sell the whole thing out to you."

O'Brien had to think a minute. He wasn't the smart businessman Bradford had been.

"Come on, O'Brien," I said. "Other customers are waiting."

"Okay," he said, "it's a deal."

"I'll see you later," I said and left.

I wasn't bluffing about getting Bradford's evidence on Beefer. Somewhere in the city, Bradford kept his file on all the key men in his outfit. Under each name, he had enough info to cook each man's goose for a long time.

Sometimes he got the info through the grapevine. Other times he got it as an admittance fee into his organization. There was stuff on my embezzlement that would be good for at least ten years.

Other than that, there were no spots on my record until this murder rap. Whatever Tom Bradford's businesses had been, my association with him had been free of scandal.

My next move was to get my hands on the file. There was one person who did know where it was. That was the one person whom Bradford trusted enough not to get anything on—his slinky, tight-lipped girl-friend, Helen.

She was a small brunette with a shape

strictly for connoisseurs. As I flipped the little knocker on her bungalow door, I wished I could be in a position to be more friendly.

She opened the door, and I shoved inside. "Be quiet, Helen," I said.

She looked at me out of deep, dark eyes wide with fear.

"Now listen, Helen, get this straight." I held her by the shoulders. "*Beefer* is the guy who killed Bradford!"

"I don't believe it!" she said, her eyes watering a little. "The police found you right there." She almost shouted, "Get out of here, you—get out of here before I call the cops!"

I shook her. "Listen, will you? I saw the gun. It was that little silver inlay job. You know that's Beefer's. But the cops don't know it. That's why they think I did it."

I continued, "I'm in a jam. I've got to work fast. Where did Tom keep his private files?"

She stiffened. "Oh no. No, you don't get those!"

"Helen," I pleaded, "everything's cracking up. The whole set-up will go to pieces if I don't get those files! You'll be out in the cold if that happens."

"No, Tom took care of me. And he said never to tell."

I had to remind myself of what she really was before I could do it. I slapped her hard.

She'd have fallen if I hadn't braced her by the shoulder. I backhanded her across the mouth and then went over it again. "Shut up," I hissed. "You want to send an innocent man to the chair?" I rapped her a couple more times. "Where are they?" I rasped.

"Go to hell," she mumbled.

I BIFFED her hard and let her slide to the floor. I got a pitcher of water from the kitchen and woke her up. I worked her over again with the

same results. When I came back with the second pitcher, she was sitting up with her back against the front of an easy chair.

"Okay," she gasped through swelling lips, "you win."

"Where are the files?"

"The Columbia. Apartment 201."

"If you aren't telling the truth, I'll be back, you know. And don't call the cops, or they'll get the files."

"I ain't dumb," she whispered. "But I'll get you for this, Vincent."

I left her sitting there.

I'd never known that Bradford had an apartment at the Columbia. It was a ritzy place. An apartment there would be an expensive—but entirely secret—safety-deposit box. On the way, I picked up a screw-driver, a bit and brace, and a couple of cheap jack-knives at a hardware store.

As I feared, there was no fire escape near any of the apartment windows. I would have to go in through the door. When I got to the second floor, there was no one about. I went to work with the tools and shortly was able to roll the door and lock so that the lock came out and I could get in.

I swung the door back against the wall so the jammed lock couldn't be seen from the hallway and turned on the light. The little apartment contained a bed, mattress, a couple of chairs, and a bureau. It smelled musty. A casual prowler would think that the room wasn't even rented.

I tried the bureau first. The bottom drawer was filled with clean, folded sheets and blankets. These I dumped on the floor. I took out the thin brief-case that had been under them.

With one of the jackknives, I sawed the leather away from the lock. In the case, there were paper folders for every member of the organization except for Bradford, Schultze, and Ransy.

My folder contained only one sheet of paper, but it was a complete history of my embezzlement.

When I pulled out Beefer's folder, there was a heavy little package attached to it by wire. It was another automatic. According to the folder, the gun had killed two pawn-shop owners six years ago. But this one was registered in Beefer's name.

One folder was thicker than all the rest. It was the Little Man's. There were histories of his past record. What made it thick were the numerous reports by people in Bradford's organization on Little Man's activities. His career under Bradford had been filled with many unexplained absences and suspicious movements. He had often been followed to the Palace Casino. Bradford had concluded that Little Man's real boss was Chip O'Brien.

Little Man was the one whom Bradford had meant to turn into the police! He'd have saved himself a lot of trouble if he hadn't kept it quite so much a secret.

I slipped the folders back into the case. I started for the door. Two men stood there.

One was short and made of oily fat. His black hair was greased flat. He kept one hand in a bulging jacket pocket. His name was Shultze.

The other was Ransy. He was short too. But his chest and shoulders were as thick as any two men's. Heavy, calloused hands hung at the ends of his long, bulging arms. His face looked like a flat, yellow pansy that someone had pushed into the mud.

I had been dumb. Helen hadn't needed the cops. She had just put in a call to Bradford's faithful torpedoes. These boys would take the files back to Helen, and nobody would ever know what three trucks hit me.

Shultze stepped inside and brought out

his .45 automatic. "Give the case to Ransy," he said. Ransy took the case and handed it to Shultze.

Shultze looked quickly up and down the corridor. "Work him over," he said to Ransy.

They were going to do it the slow way.

Ransy smiled and came in. I danced back and dusted his nose with a left. Ransy stopped, looked at Shultze, and smiled again.

He stepped in and swung one of his hams with enough force to floor a pony. I slipped to one side and clouted him on the ear. He kept smiling.

He turned. I ducked his two swings that whistled over my head. I sunk two solid ones into his gut. I got a left against his Adam's apple and brought an uppercut from my knees to his chin. He stepped back.

Then my brain exploded and the floor hit the top of my head. Ransy had connected.

Shultze's voice drifted through to me. "Okay, Ransy. I'll finish it."

I rolled onto my stomach and shook my head. I could see light again. Shultze's feet shuffled beside me. I got my hand under me, pulled out my .38, and rolled over again.

I saw Shultze hovering above me as if through a muddy window. He was swinging his heavy automatic behind his head. I pressed my trigger and the butterball flopped backward.

I pointed my revolver at Ransy as he came into focus. "Don't move!"

He didn't. I picked up the brief case and backed through the door.

A GAIN I took the inside stairway down. My right eye was closed by the time I left the basement. I knew that my face, in general, looked like a half-eaten steak.

I kept my head down as I walked along the crowded street and watched

for cops. After a half a mile I dropped into a drugstore pay-station. I phoned the Palace Casino.

"Yeah?" said the hoarse voice at the other end.

"Put O'Brien on."

"Who wants him?"

"His godfather! Put him on."

There was silence, then the shuffling of chairs. O'Brien's squeaky voice came over. "Okay, this is Mr. O'Brien."

"Vincent," I said. "What did Haskin say?"

"What did he say when?"

"When you told him about Beefer's gun, you sap."

"I didn't bother."

"Why not?"

"Because I found out just in time that Beefer has a perfect alibi. He was in front of the apartment house talking to the doorman for fifteen minutes before three. Haskin even saw him when he went in. Vincent, you're hot. Don't call here again!" The phone clicked off in my ear.

That rocked me. The Beefer idea was a blind alley. But who else could it be? Then it hit me—the Little Man. He was even more logical than Beefer because he was the one Bradford had been after.

The solution was clear. If O'Brien could swear that the gun was Beefer's, he could just as well swear that it was the Little Man's. But it would be harder this time.

There were no taxis in sight when I came out of the drugstore. Some pedestrians looked quizzically at my swollen face and closed eye. Once a cop came by, but I kept my back to him, and he didn't appear to notice me. I finally flagged down a cab.

The taxi driver looked at me questioningly. But when I gave him the Palace Casino address, he looked as if that explained everything.

As soon as the taxi left me at the dive,

I switched my revolver to my jacket pocket again and stepped through the doorway. I had the brief case under my left arm, my right hand on my gun.

It was the same as before, except that the newspaper woman had left. O'Brien and his three henchmen started to jump from their chairs at the rear of the hall. I jiggled my pocket, and they sat down.

I walked to the table, keeping the bartender in sight. "These guys okay?" I asked O'Brien.

"They're my very good friends," said O'Brien. "You're not."

"The deal is still on, O'Brien." I laid the brief case on the table and faced them squarely. "In this case are the goods on every important man in Bradford's organization. This is what holds the big set-up together. There's stuff in it that clearly shows that Little Man Hill was the one who killed Bradford. All you've got to do is to tell Haskin that the gun that killed Bradford belongs to the Little Man. Then I turn the case over to you."

"No. You almost burned me once today. How do I know the Little Man hasn't got an alibi too? No thanks, Vincent. You're a bad penny."

I stepped back from the table and pulled out my revolver. "O'Brien, get on the phone!"

I'd forgotten the bartender. A full quart bottle of burgundy hit my wrist. The gun bounced and skidded underneath the table. The bartender's big mitt grabbed the back of my coat. His knee hit the small of my back.

I slid around him, rammed my elbow into his stomach, and broke loose. I yanked the brief case from the table and sprinted for the door. But my luck was running out.

Five men came in the door. Two were big, rangy men, one was little, and the two behind were cops. Captain Haskin

and Lieutenant Brix caught me, one under each arm.

They walked me backwards to O'Brien's table. They frisked me and found the empty shoulder holster. That cop at the drugstore had recognized me.

I saw that the third man in civilian clothes was the Little Man. "Well," I said, "I'm glad to see you picked up Little Man, Captain. Now you know who really did Bradford in."

"Yeah, we know."

"I can help you out. I've got it in Bradford's own writing that he was going to turn Little Man in to you. Just before the meeting, Little Man walked up one flight of the inside stairway, stepped into Bradford's apartment, and shot him with that stolen automatic."

"You've got it partly right," said Haskin. "You're right that Bradford was going to try to turn Little Man in. He guessed right that Little Man had another boss. But, Vincent, here's where you slipped up. When the murder was committed, Little Man was at headquarters with us. Little Man is really Police Lieutenant John Murphy on loan to us from another city. He has been watching your gang and reporting to us for the past six months. *You* were the one who walked up one flight and shot Bradford in the back of the head."

I sat down on a chair. "Captain, you're right. You're perfectly right. I—I—"

My lunge for the .38 under the table didn't succeed. Haskin's and Brix's service revolvers roared one after the other. I crumpled onto the dirty floor. My .38 was a shadow a foot from my nose. All I could do was look at it.

After a long time Haskin's voice swam in a whirlpool:

"Hand me that brief case, Murphy. There should be something very interesting in it. And Brix, call the doc. I want to save this crumb for trial."

CHAPTER ONE

Boardwalk Bier

IF I hadn't been such a wise guy and tried to finagle the boss out of a holiday in the mountains, I wouldn't have gone to the beach and ended up with a beautiful but dead blonde in my lap. I know that sounds a little paradoxical—but then murderers don't pay much attention to the English language, either.

The boss is a cunning old guy named Mike Hartley who looks like a sweet old gent but is really a louse. He's got a small office down on Nassau Street with a sign outside which says *Insurance*. For six weeks now, I've been working for him and I've yet to write my first policy—except one with my name on it which the old man insisted I take out, "just in case you drop dead or something."

A rule of the firm, he called it. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be at all surprised if somebody had insured Mike



A curvaceous cutie spoiled insurance-salesman Len Martin's holiday—when she let her throat be cut to prove. . . .

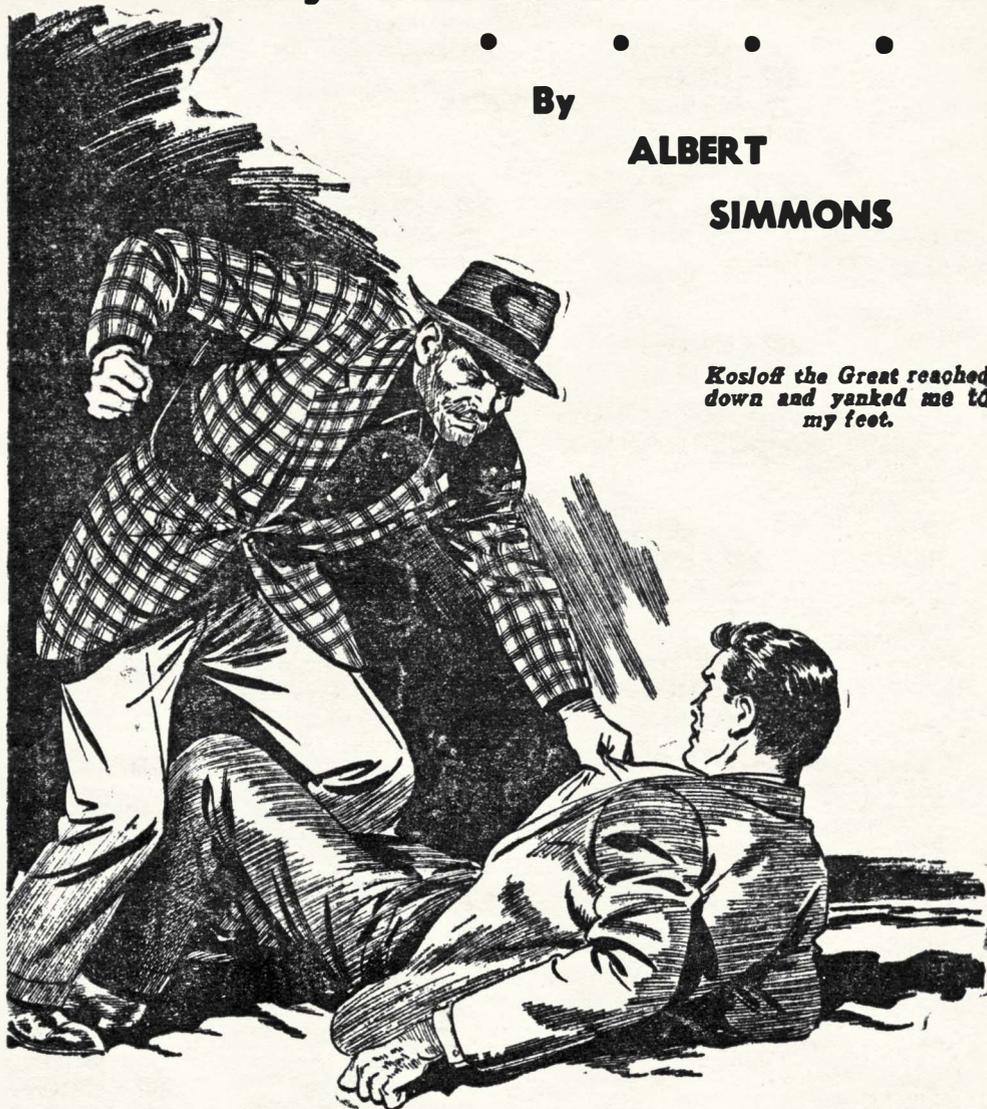
MURDER IS THE BEST POLICY

Exciting Novelette of a Violent Vacation

By

ALBERT

SIMMONS



Kosloff the Great reached down and yanked me to my feet.

Hartley against insurance, because I haven't seen a signed policy cross his desk yet either.

Where the slimy old guy gets his cash I've yet to figure out, but as long as he keeps paying me the green stuff once a week, why should I care?

"Look, Mr. Hartley," I blurted out rather bluntly, "I gotta have a vacation—I need it."

Mike Hartley's cold eyes slithered

over my hundred and ninety pounds, all six feet of it; his smile was crooked but he looked pleased.

"So poor over-worked Len Martin needs a holiday, huh? Well, young feller, I was just thinking the same thing."

I had expected a fight. I just looked surprised and said nothing.

"Tell you what, Martin—hop on the bus and run down to Atlantic City for a few days."

"Atlantic City!" I cut in. "Who wants to go to the beach? I was thinking about the Catskills."

"Since when do I pay you to think around here, Martin?"

It was a rotten crack, and he knew it. But it was true just the same. That's the way he wanted it. He did the brain work—I did the leg work. But he also did the paying. So it didn't bother me—much.

I started to get up, and then his voice took on the sound of No. 40 oil running down the drain.

"Now listen here, Martin, as long as I'm going to pay all your expenses, why should you care where you spend your vacation?"

That picked me up a lot, so I didn't stop to think that it was way out of character. I mumbled. "Hey, you've got something there."

Then he slipped a thick sealed envelope out of the desk drawer and handed it to me like it was the answer to the atomic bomb.

"Now *you've* got something there, Martin," he grunted. He squinted at my open mouth. "Just a little something you can do for me," he explained, "while you're on vacation."

I might have known there was a catch. It was going to be a vacation with pay all right—but with work, too.

"Just a couple of policies for a client," he said. "All you have to do is get her signature. There's nothing too difficult about it."

I took the envelope from him and eyed the red sealing wax all over the back of it.

"What's in it?" I asked sarcastically. "Radium?"

The old man shifted a little uneasily. "I just told you—policies to be signed."

I pointed at the sealing wax. "What's the secret? What am I supposed to do, wear dark glasses when she signs 'em?"

"Oh that!" He laughed nervously. "Well, this client is a little—er, peculiar. She wants to keep this strictly between herself and the insurance company."

"And you," I added.

"Naturally. I'm her broker."

"What am I supposed to do?" I sung out again. "Look away while she's signing them? And what if there are questions to ask about the policy? How am I to—"

He cut off short with a wave of his pudgy hand. "There won't be any questions, Martin. And besides, I'm just following her instructions. After she's signed the policies, you can read every line for all I care. But remember—" he wagged a forefinger at me sternly—"I want those policies signed. And call me when you get there."

"Dames!" I muttered disgustedly to myself and looked at the name written on the envelope. Then I promptly came alive. It read: *Miss Ethel Winters, Boardwalk Hotel, Atlantic City*. If she was the gal I had to do business with, maybe a vacation at the beach might turn out to be just that.

I remembered her all right. She'd been in to see the old man only a few days ago, and this wasn't the kind of a gal you forget easily. She was a sweet-looking blonde with short hairdo and long legs.

It didn't take me long to pack, and after phoning the Old Man what time I was leaving, I grabbed a taxi to 50th Street. Four and a half hours after I got on the bus, I arrived in that vacation paradise, Atlantic City.

MY FIRST stop was the Boardwalk Hotel, and after I registered—with a little assistance from a ten spot—I showered and changed.

"Call me when you get down there," the Old Man had said. So being the

kind of a guy who follows orders—it was a throw-back to my army training, I guess—I called him.

After a while I heard him pick up the receiver at the other end, and his squeaky voice said, "Hello."

"Hello, Mr. Hartley," I started to say, "I just got down—"

"Don't bother me—I'm busy," he grunted and slammed down the receiver.

I banged the phone down and kicked the waste-paper basket half way across the room. Then I picked up the phone again.

"Connect me with Miss Ethel Winters, huh?"

"Who's calling, please?"

I tossed my name into the mouthpiece and got a surprise.

"Oh, Mr. Martin. She's expecting you, sir. She left word for you to go right up, just as soon as you came in, Room 412, sir."

I clicked the receiver back in its hook, but nothing clicked with me. The Old Man hadn't said that she was expecting me. I tucked the sealed envelope into the inside pocket of my sports jacket, and with a final tug at my tie and an approving glance at the mirror, I opened the door and walked out into the hallway—and smack into the biggest guy I've ever seen in my life.

He just stood there, his little pig eyes boring right through me. Did I

say big? This guy was a cross between Gargantua and Mr. Joe Young. I didn't like the way his brown fedora sat on the back of his bullet-shaped head; or the flat gorilla nose; or the long arms that hung almost to his knees, with the hairy hunks of meat at the end of each of them. I started to close the door, and then he spoke.

"Never mind that, bud. Get back where you came from."

Now if he had meant New York City, I'd have been glad to oblige. But he didn't. He meant my room.

"What's up?" I asked. "What's the beef?"

His huge fists clenched, and his eyes got harder—if that was possible.

"You're up, bud, but not for long. And when I get through with you, you're going to be the beef, 'cause that pretty face of yours is going to look like hamburger, get me?"

I got him all right, and I started to back up.

"You ain't gonna mess around with no more women," he said. Then his voice got low and came out through his teeth. "You've made a sap out of your last dame."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I didn't care. I knew his intentions. I turned around and walked into my room. Just as I crossed the threshold, I reached out and flung the



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heavy door back behind me with all my strength.

It caught him flush alongside his big head, and he dropped as if he'd been hit by Joe Louis. I slammed the door shut, jumped over his rolling body, and took off the way I used to every Saturday afternoon when I had a pigskin tucked under my arm. I didn't know what the big ape wanted, but just then I wasn't stopping to ask.

I didn't apply the brakes until I got to Room 412. The door wasn't quite closed. I knocked a couple of times and there was no answer. I figured maybe Ethel Winters wasn't there, but as long as she was expecting me, I walked in.

She was there, all right—propped up in bed, wearing a nightgown and a big grin. Only the grin was in the wrong place—it was in her throat. Her neck had been slashed so savagely that it had practically taken her head right off her shoulders. An army trench-knife was still imbedded deep in her pink flesh. I looked down at her beautiful body—then at the bedspread soaked red with her blood, and I knew that if I didn't get out of there fast, I was going to be sick.

For the next couple of hours I walked up and down the boardwalk, taking deep drags on cigarettes and the much-advertised Atlantic City air. Neither seemed to do me much good. Every time I thought of that blood-spattered bed, my stomach started playing pat-a-cake with my Adam's apple.

IT WAS quite dark when I got back to the hotel. The lobby was crawling with cops, so I knew that they'd discovered Ethel Winters' body. I started to do what I should have done in the first place—tell the police what I'd found when I walked into that room. I got over to the desk, where the small cluster of men was standing. Half of

them were in uniform and the others wore plain clothes.

A thin hawk-faced man, with piercing black eyes, was doing the talking. The others just listened.

Then the desk-clerk looked up, saw me, and said something to them. All of a sudden I'd never seen so many eyes at one time before—and they were all looking at me.

"Who's in charge here?" I asked.

"Why?" said the little sergeant with a roly-poly stomach and eyes to match. "Something on your mind?"

"I want to report a murder."

"You don't say?" he mouthed. "Now ain't that interesting?"

The tall man with the piercing eyes silenced him with a motion of his hand. Then he turned to me.

"I'm your man," he said. "Lieutenant Repetti, Atlantic City Homicide. You were sayin'?"

"My name is Len Martin," I told him. "I'm from New York."

"Now tell us something we don't know." He tapped the small notebook he held in his hand. "That, I've got."

"Yeah," chimed in the sergeant, "why not tell us about this here murder you're so anxious to report?"

Anxious was hardly the word, but I told them why I was in the resort city and what I had found when I walked into Ethel Winters' room.

"And what have you been doing since?" queried the sergeant suspiciously. "Don't tell me you've been walking up and down the boardwalk getting the sea air."

"Yeah, that's just what I've been doing."

"Oh no!" groaned the sergeant. "You hear that, Lieutenant? Why do these guys always pull that sucker routine?"

"Hey, wait a minute," I protested. "Don't get any ideas that I had anything to do with this."

The sergeant slapped the side of his head and looked disgusted. Lieutenant Repetti poked a long forefinger into my chest.

"You should have come right to us when you found the girl's body," he barked. "Why didn't you?"

"For Pete's sake," I fired at him, "I didn't want to get mixed up in a murder."

The sergeant laughed harshly, and now it was the lieutenant's turn to look disgusted.

"And besides," I went on, "I felt sick. I just wanted to get out of there and get some air."

The lieutenant started to walk away from me. Then he turned suddenly as if he'd forgotten something.

"Were you in the Navy?" he asked.

"No—Army," I told him. "First Division."

"Infantry, huh?" mused the sergeant. "And you mean to tell me that a little blood makes you sick?"

"This is different."

"I'll bet."

"But this was a girl," I remarked. "She was beautiful."

"Aw, come now, Martin," yapped the sergeant pointedly. "You can speak plainer than that."

"Shut up!" I yelled, and I felt like planting my fist in his fat face.

"Cut it, sergeant!" Lieutenant Repetti's voice snapped like a whip. Then he looked over his shoulder at me. "Stick around, Martin. I want to ask you some questions about that insurance. I'll send for you when I need you."

I watched them walk away, and then nearly jumped a foot when the desk-clerk tapped me on the arm.

"Don't let that fat slob of a sergeant get your goat, Mr. Martin. He's a louse."

"Yeah," I agreed. "He sure sounds like it."

"Now that Lieutenant Repetti—he's a real nice feller, Mr. Martin." He grinned.

"Well, just so long as he doesn't think I had anything to do with this, I'll believe you."

"Oh, he doesn't think that, Mr. Martin." The clerk ticked the bottom of his rimless glasses with his finger. "As a matter of fact, they know who killed her. Some great big hairy bruiser the maid saw running out of Miss Winters' room."

CHAPTER TWO

What's in a Name?

I WENT back upstairs, stuck the key in my door, and walked in.

Just as I reached over to the light switch, the door banged shut behind me, and something hard and round jabbed me between the shoulder blades.

Now, I'm no cop or private eye. I'm just a guy trying to learn the ropes in the insurance business; but I didn't have to be told that it was a gun sticking in my back. I figured I couldn't afford waiting to find out what the guy was going to do.

So I spun around, bending low to the ground and leaned to the right. My left arm pawed out with a sweeping motion, and the gun went flying across the room. I heard it land with a satisfying thud on the carpet. I came up out of my crouch and threw a hard right just where I thought his belly would be. It was there, all right, because my fist felt like it went in about six inches.

There was a low moan as the air whished out of gasping lungs, and although it was so dark that I couldn't see the gunman in front of me, I sensed something falling forward. I stuck out my hands and grabbed. But the body suddenly went limp, and it felt all soft and feminine under my touch.

I reached out and found the light switch. My eyes didn't make a liar of my sense of touch. It was a gal, all right—out cold. The way I'd hit her, she'd probably have a sore diaphragm for days to come.

I picked her up and put her on the bed. By the time I got the Army .45 off the floor and shoved in into my pocket and brought a glass of water from the bathroom, she was coming to.

She moaned a couple of times and her hands went to her midriff. I guess it hurt plenty. Then she spotted me bending over and her eyes looked frightened. She started to get up. I put my hand out and pushed her back on the bed.

"No you don't, baby. You stay right where you are."

"Please—please!" and she looked even more scared than before. "I must get up."

"Uh-uh." I shook my head. "If you get up now you're going to be sick, and I've got a very sensitive stomach."

Her hands were rubbing where I'd hit her, and I laughed a little callously. "You, too, eh?"

She didn't reply, but just stayed there, taking long, deep breaths. I gave her the glass of water, and after she'd taken a few sips, I sat down beside her.

"Look, kid," I said, "I'm sorry I slugged you so hard, but you shouldn't go around pulling a gun on a guy. Now what's it all about?"

I gave her a chance to answer, but she just bit her lips and looked at me through narrowed eyes. Then I got sore.

Here a dame sneaks into my room, sticks a .45 in my back for no apparent reason at all, and here am I sitting there like a sap, playing twenty questions with her, just because I'm sorry I hit her and because she's built like the Taj Mahal.

I grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and pulled her up towards me.

"Look, baby, you've got some talking

to do, and you'd better switch it on right now."

Well, she switched it on all right. The tears flowed out of her beautiful eyes like the breakers rolling up on the beach outside my window. I just sat there like a dope, scratching my head, wondering what it was all about and wishing I'd never asked that stinking old boss of mine for a vacation.

After a while she got up and flexed her arms over her head, and I couldn't help noticing that she had what every gal has—only more so.

"Why don't you leave my sister alone?" she demanded. "Leave her alone, I say!"

I guess my mouth must have flopped open like a trout coming up for bait because she piled it on. "And you needn't pretend that you don't know what I mean, either."

"Look, baby," I replied slowly, "this may be a shock to you, but I don't know what you're gabbing about."

I read surprise all over her face, so I kept talking. "I don't know you and I don't know your sister. And if she's anything like you, it's okay with me if I never run into her."

Her lips started working and I thought for a second that she was going to cry again, but she didn't. Instead, she blinked her lids at me and didn't answer.

Then she showed me the back of her head as she walked over and stood looking out of the window. I must have convinced her all right, because she turned around and said hesitantly: "I—I must be wrong."

"That sounds like a song title, baby," I quipped. "But you sure are. Why pick on me?"

"I thought you were the heel messing up my sister's life, so I decided—"

"Hey, wait a minute," I cut in. "Do I look like a heel?"

"No," she conceded with a half-smile. And then bit off, "But I didn't know the rat's name. And besides, the man at the desk told me that my sister left word she was expecting you. There wasn't anybody else. Don't you see? That's why I thought that you. . ."

She left the sentence hanging, as the expression on my face gradually sank in.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"And your sister's name is?"

Even before she answered, my intestines dropped two stories because I knew what she would say.

"Ethel Winters."

I DON'T know where I got the guts to tell Janie about her sister, but I did. Believe me, it was worse than D-Day on Omaha Beach, and she took it plenty hard, too. But she listened to everything I told her, just sitting there with that stricken look on her face.

"Oh, Ethel!" she moaned. "My poor darling."

She dabbed a bit of lace furiously at her eyes. "But not Kosloff," she cried. "It couldn't be—the police must be mistaken! He loved her. He couldn't kill Ethel."

"Kosloff?" I exclaimed. "Who's Kosloff?"

She tossed her head impatiently. "Kosloff the Great. He used to be a circus strong man."

"Oh!"

"But he loved Ethel. Why would he kill her?"

I didn't know the answer to that one, but at least I knew the name of the guy who was to make my face look like something you serve between a roll.

She told me that this Kosloff the Great had known her and her sister since they were kids and followed them around like a huge protective dog, particularly Ethel. I guess he'd made the same *sauz pas* that Janie had made and

thought I was the guy playing Ethel for a sucker.

Janie stood up slowly, her eyes rubbed red.

"I must see her, I've got to!"

"I'm afraid you can't do that," I protested.

"Why not?" she flung out, her eyes stabbing me.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Ask the police."

"The police, the police!" she almost screamed "They think poor Kosloff killed her! Why don't they find the real murderer? Why don't they?"

She began pacing up and down the room like she was determined to wear out the carpet in nothing flat.

"It's that rat who wouldn't leave her alone—he killed her!" She looked at me but I registered absolutely nothing. She moved towards me and put a warm hand on my arm. Her voice

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was irresistibly soft and appealing. "Help me find him, please," she pleaded.

Well, like I said before, I'm no cop. What little talent I have is directed into other channels. Just the same, it was plenty tough to say no to Janie's vibrant voice and soft, red lips, but I did just that, wishing all the time that Lt. Repetti and his roly-poly sergeant were there.

Well, I got my wish, because just then a set of hard authoritative knuckles were laid against my door.

I opened up and in stalked the lieutenant with his fat sergeant right behind him. They pulled up short when they spotted Janie.

"Who's the dame?" asked the sergeant.

I told him and his eyes bugged out.

"What's she doing here with you, huh?"

I ignored him and spoke to the lieutenant. "Miss Winters wants to see her sister's body, Lieutenant."

He looked thoughtful and said quietly, "That can be arranged."

The sergeant butted in harshly, "You got an army trench knife, Martin?"

I shook my head. "No." Then suddenly I remembered the one I'd brought home with me from overseas. "Wait a minute," I added quickly, "Yeah, I have one. Why?"

The sergeant flashed a look at Lt. Repetti, but the lieutenant's keen eyes never left my face for a second, although his voice sounded casual and quite unconcerned.

"What did you do with that knife?"

"It's on my desk at the office, Lieutenant. I used it as a letter opener, but I don't see—"

The next words refused to come, although my mouth tried real hard. Because, all at once, I *did* see.

It had been an army trench knife that

I had seen sticking out of Ethel Winters' throat.

I felt my cheeks burning. "What are you guys trying to pull?" I yelled. "I don't get it."

The sergeant made noises in his throat. "But that blonde babe in 412 got it, Martin—right smack in her beautiful neck."

WHAT I saw in their faces gave me the willies. I glanced at Janie and she reminded me of a cat about to spring. Her lips formed a thin hard line across her white face. I tried to keep my mounting hysteria out of my voice.

"Millions of guys brought home trench knives, millions of them. Why pick on me?"

"Because, young fellow," the lieutenant snapped, "your name is Len Martin."

I waited helplessly, knowing that something terrible was about to happen.

The lieutenant continued, "And because the initials cut into the handle of the murder weapon are *L. M.*"

Then all hell broke loose. There was a sudden movement as Janie threw herself on me, scratching and screaming like a wild thing. I guess I was too stunned to do anything but just stand there wiping the flecks of blood from my face, as they rushed her out of the room.

I touched my cheek and it felt sore. I guess her fingernails had really dug in. I turned to the lieutenant.

"This is screwy. Why would I kill her? I didn't even know the dame. And you're all wet about that trench knife, too. It's not mine." I spread my arms out in front of me. "How can it be?"

"Did you put your initials on your knife?"

"Sure, I did. So what?" I challenged. "That doesn't make me the murderer any more than it makes it my knife."

"We'll see," he muttered quietly and nodded his head at the sergeant.

The fat guy came over and patted my pockets, and pretty soon Lt. Repetti was holding the sealed envelope my boss had given me and the gun I'd taken from Janie.

I told him about the gun and the man Janie was looking for. The sergeant laughed out loud, but the lieutenant looked interested and made some notes in that little book of his.

"Here, sergeant, catch!" He tossed the .45 across the room and I watched the fat boy grab it in the air and put it in his pocket.

The lieutenant fingered the envelope and looked at the sealing wax.

"What's that for?" he grunted.

I started to explain but he had already opened the envelope and didn't seem to hear what I was saying, so I shut up. He examined the policies briefly then looked up, waving them in the air.

"Policies to be signed, huh?"

"Yeah."

"And you don't know what's in them, huh?"

I shook my head. "That's right." Again I started to explain, but he stopped me cold with a movement of his hand.

"You didn't know these were signed, huh?"

"You're nuts," I told him. "How can they be?"

His eyes darted from the policies he held in his hand to me. "Look," he said and his bony finger pointed at the signature lines.

I looked, and I guess my eyes must have popped. Even from where I stood I could plainly read Ethel Winters' signature on both policies.

Lt. Repetti whistled sharply and it brought me up short.

"They're both for \$10,000," he was saying. "Her sister, Janie Winters, is

the beneficiary on one. And the other—" He stopped and threw a quick glance at his fat assistant.

I saw the sergeant pull a .38 calibre pistol out of his holster and hold it loosely in his hand.

"Guess who gets the dough on the other one, Martin?" the lieutenant queried softly, and he held it up for me to see.

I took a step towards him and the sergeant's gun made an arc in my direction. I strained to see the name typed under the word *beneficiary*. The blood drained out of my face and I got jelly in my knees, because the name written there was mine . . . *Len Martin*.

CHAPTER THREE

Rough Stuff

I MUST have looked like a sick dog because when I told them I was going to throw up, the sergeant shoved me roughly towards the bathroom.

"Get in there, mac."

Just as we got to the door, I kicked out hard and my foot caught him wickedly in the right shin. He went down yelping with pain, grabbing his leg with both hands. Before they came alive I'd banged the bathroom door shut and snapped the lock. I opened the small window and went down the outside of the two-story fire-escape, hand over hand.

It had happened so fast that they didn't have a chance, but I just had to have time to think. The way I figured it, a two by four cell in the city jail wasn't going to accelerate my mental processes to any great extent.

I shuffled along with the crowd milling about the boardwalk for a while. Then I cut over to the main street and stopped in at a large drug store on the busiest

corner. I ducked into a phone booth at the rear of the store and called the boss at his home in New York.

Right off the bat he asks smugly, "I presume you got those policies signed?"

"Who are you trying to kid?" I snapped into the phone. "You knew they were signed all the time."

"That's right," I heard him say calmly.

"What's the big idea?" And before he had a chance to answer, "And how the devil did my name get on there as beneficiary?" I tossed at him.

"Well, you should know by now, young fellow."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"That's the way she wanted it," and now he sounded a bit impatient. "It's for me to follow instructions, understand?"

"What are you talking about?" I barked.

"Oh, come now, Martin." His voice was ringed with ill-concealed amusement. "You don't have to pull my leg. Obviously you and that girl must have been very close—uh—friends."

"What?"

He laughed softly to himself. "Although it is somewhat of a mystery to me why she wanted to keep that policy such a secret from you," he continued. "Sealing wax!" He clucked knowingly. "Women are such sentimental fools anyway."

"Now, look here, Hartley," I demanded. "I want to know—"

He interrupted me in a voice that was cold and biting. "If you've got any more questions about that stupid policy, Martin, I'd suggest that you take it up with your lady friend. Good-by."

I tried to get him back but he wouldn't answer the phone.

I got me a belly full of panic and I wanted to bolt for the nearest depot, grab the first bus out and keep going

until I was a thousand miles away. But I didn't because I knew I was a fool. I hadn't been thinking right from the first moment I walked into that hotel. Somebody was playing me for a sap, with the electric chair as the payoff. Besides, by now Lt. Repetti probably had me on the teletype and I had as much chance of getting out of town as if I had my name in neon lights on my back.

"Maybe," I conjectured. "if I could locate Ethel Winters' guy. . . ."

That gave me an idea and I phoned Janie at the hotel.

She really gave me a rough time. Here was a gal who had convicted me of murdering her sister before I'd even had a trial. She didn't seem to be interested in the other guy any more. But somehow I sold her a bill of goods and she agreed to meet me an hour later. I suggested a deserted spot on the boardwalk at the northerly end of the beach. She told me she'd be there and I believed her.

After I hung up, it occurred to me that maybe persuading Janie to meet me had been easier than I had expected. Could be that she wasn't sure after all that I was the killer.

I went to the far end of the beach and waited. There wasn't a soul around, and the only sound was the crashing of the waves on the sandy beach coming with monotonous regularity.

I chain-smoked like mad and watched the moon throw indistinct shadows on the boardwalk as it ducked in and out of dark masses of clouds. After a while I could see Janie coming. She was alone. I stood there and let her flashlight pick me up. Then it winked out and she walked right up to me and said, "Well?"

I started to answer but the words got only as far as my lips. Too late I sensed something moving behind me and turned just in time to catch a huge hairy fist under the right ear.

The beach tilted sharply and I lost my footing. I rolled over, spat the sand out of my teeth and looked up.

JANIE seemed to be dancing in front of me and she was grinning.

I shook my head vigorously and took another look-see. She wasn't dancing but she was still grinning. Kosloff the Great reached down and a big paw grabbed my shirt and yanked me to my feet.

"This time there ain't gonna be no door, bud!" he growled.

Something crashed into my jaw and suddenly it was D-Day on Omaha again and all the guns in the world were going off in my face.

Now I know what they mean when they say he went down like a poleaxed steer. That was me—and there was almost as much blood. If I'd had any sense, which I hadn't, I'd have stayed down after the fourth time, but I kept rolling to my feet and coming up for more. And I got it.

After a while the sand wouldn't hold the weight of my body and I started falling through space. It must have been a very deep hole because I don't remember getting to the bottom.

I came to fighting for breath; it felt as if I were drowning. I was lying face down on the wet beach and the waves were lapping at my head. I tried to get up but I couldn't—something was on my back. It was a foot, a big heavy number 12.

"He's coming to now," said Kosloff's deep voice. "He can take it, so I give it, yes?"

"No. That's enough just now."

It was Janie's voice, but the sound of it was so strident that I could hardly recognize it.

"Bring him over here," she told him.

Kosloff picked me up and flung me over his broad shoulder like a side of

beef. He walked for a few moments, then dumped me heavily into the sand. I didn't move for a few seconds because I couldn't. I ached all over and I felt tired and sleepy, but I forced myself to sit up and take stock.

I tried to talk, but my bruised lips never got past the unintelligible muttering stage.

Then Janie started laughing. After a while I caught on that she was laughing at me. It hurt. I was still being played for a sap and I couldn't do anything about it.

Finally she stopped laughing and said, "Things catch up, Mr. Martin, don't they?"

"Yeah, bud, that's right," boomed Kosloff. "First we work you over but good, and then you end up on the cops' door-step. Pretty, huh?"

Listening to the strong man's heavy voice and looking at Janie's grinning face, I was beginning to get some crazy ideas. I rolled over to my knees and sat there like Buddha for a few minutes, trying to take stock. At last I blurted out what had slowly been taking shape in my mind.

"You killed her, didn't you, Janie?" I said harshly. "You murdered your own sister!"

I caught the stunned look on Janie's face and then Kosloff grabbed me, jabbering something about finishing me off. Short jarring blows poured down on me like a heavy rain, but it didn't bother me any more. I didn't even feel the storm because I was swimming in a nice warm pool. Only it kept spinning around faster and faster and faster, until I knew I couldn't keep above water very much longer.

At last I let go, and as I went under, I saw Janie tearing at the big man's arms, and heard her screaming. Only I didn't know what she was saying. I was floating . . . floating . . .

MY BODY felt hot and heavy with soreness. My mouth was dry and filled with millions of sharp little needles, but there was something about my head and eyes that was deliciously cool and soothing.

A small soft hand was tenderly stroking my brow. I was stretched out on the sand, my head resting in Janie's lap, her fingers gently massaging my forehead. She had been crying and the sound of her voice was still filled with it.

"You'll be all right," she soothed. "Just rest, please."

I tried to move and waves of nausea rolled over me. I swallowed hard and stayed where I was.

"I'm a fool," whispered Janie. "I thought you killed Ethel. But when you accused me, I knew you couldn't have done it or you wouldn't think I had."

I sighed wearily. "What difference does it make? I'm tired of running."

"No, no." There was a catch in her throat. "You're tired, hurt. . . . It was that terrible beating—that brute, Kosloff."

"What was he trying to prove?" I asked. "How much punishment a man can stand?"

"It's my fault," she murmured. "I was glad when he was doing it."

"That's nice to know," I muttered bitterly.

"We were sure you had murdered Ethel, and he was going to half kill you and then turn you over to the police." She rung her hands. "It makes me sick when I think of it."

I managed a thin smile. "Makes *you* sick?" I touched my battered face and shuddered.

"Oh, I'm sorry, so terribly sorry," she said. "If there was just something I could do. . . ."

There was, and after what had happened to me I didn't hesitate to lay it on the line. "You're going to help me

catch the real killer, baby," I said.

Forty-five minutes later we got out of Janie's car and went into a small diner twenty miles the other side of Atlantic City. I ordered sandwiches and coffee for both of us and there we sat, the two people who had every reason to benefit most by Ethel Winters' death—ten thousand reasons a piece and all of them with a dollar sign tucked in front.

Only I hadn't killed the gal—and if I was to believe Janie and follow my masculine instincts, neither had Janie.

"There's nobody," she said in answer to my question about her relatives. "Ethel was all the family I had." She shook her head sadly from side to side and I looked thoughtful.

"The same goes for me," I volunteered. "So I guess I can't pin it on some guy who'd get the ten thousand dollars if I got the chair."

Then suddenly I tingled all over. I snapped my fingers sharply under Janie's nose and she jumped with a start.

There *was* someone who would benefit if I was stashed six feet under. Mike Hartley, my boss! There was that insurance policy he'd made me take out when he hired me, and Hartley, Inc. was the beneficiary. *A rule of the firm*, he'd insisted, and I do mean insisted. I needed the job so I let him write me up. Had he also written my ticket to the death house? I told Janie what I was thinking.

"But how was he mixed up with my sister?"

She was alive with the expectant excitement that she had caught from me. I tried to think slowly and clearly, but I couldn't find the answer to her question. All I knew was that Mike Hartley had written Ethel's policy and had been instrumental in sending me down to Atlantic City. Also that he had access to the trench knife on my

desk. I was a sap for not seeing it before and I became inflated with the thought of my success.

Then all at once the air went out of my tires.

"Mike Hartley isn't the murderer."

"But he must be," argued Janie. "It all seems to fit."

"Yeah," I agreed, "it jells all right except for one thing. The old stinker wasn't in Atlantic City today."

"How do you know?"

"Because, baby," I replied evenly, "I phoned him when I arrived in Atlantic City, and he was still in his office in New York."

"Then he's not the one?"

"That's right," I grimaced. "I'm still it."

And that was just the moment that Janie got the idea that my boss might know something about the guy who had been playing around with her sister.

Well, it was just an idea, but you know how it is when a gal gets a notion like that. I was sure that the Old Man couldn't give us a lead to Ethel's boy friend, but like I said, Janie had an idea. Trying to buck her was like trying to swim the English Channel with your arms wrapped in tin foil.

Five minutes later, Janie was accelerating her sleek buggy past a road sign that read: *New York, 115 miles*—only I didn't see it because I was snoring my head off on the seat beside her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wrong Number

TWO o'clock in the morning is no time to go calling on the Mike Hartley type of man, especially when he's your boss. But if I couldn't find the boy who's made a corpse out of Ethel Winters, I'd be out of a job anyway. So I left Janie in her car out-

side the Old Man's apartment and went on up.

Fifteen minutes later I was again sitting next to Janie with my head flung back against the leather upholstery. I let her light a cigarette for me and the smoke felt good going into my lungs.

"It's no use, Janie," I said slowly, "Mike Hartley can't help."

"You mean he won't!" she spat angrily.

"No, baby," I rolled my head wearily, "he can't. He doesn't know a thing about the other guy. But he'll be glad to testify at my trial as to my character and—"

"Trial!"

"Yeah. His advice is to turn myself over to the police."

"Oh, no!" She reached out and took my hand and I held on.

"I'm afraid he's right though," I said. "I'll try to get me a good lawyer and then I'll just pray."

"But how about the man who was chasing Ethel? Doesn't Mr. Hartley know—isn't there something?"

I shrugged my shoulders and blew a puff of smoke at the windshield.

"If there was such a monkey, I don't know him and neither does the boss. He can't figure who took the trench knife off my desk either, any more than he can account for your sister wanting him to write me in as the beneficiary on her insurance policy." I cleared my throat. "The old goat had the idea that I've been running around with your sister—that she was my girl."

It was as if I dropped a bomb. I felt Janie's body stiffen next to mine and she slipped her hand out of my fist and gripped the steering wheel hard.

"Was she?" Her voice was quiet and full of edges. "Tell me—was she?"

"No!" I hastened to reply. "Of course not." And I made sure that my voice had the sharp tone of finality about it.

"The only time I ever laid eyes on your sister before today was when she came to Mike Hartley's office about three days ago."

I glanced at the slim, tense figure beside me. "You believe me?" I asked.

She turned and smiled wanly. "I believe you," she said and her small hand found mine again. She was quiet for a moment, then she said, "Anyway, I'm sure I wouldn't like your boss."

I laughed grimly. "Who does?"

"He was a real louse on the phone," she said. "He hung up on me."

"Hung up on you? When was this?"

"A few minutes ago, when you were with him," she replied.

"What was the idea?" I asked and I felt annoyed and probably sounded it.

She stuck her head out of the car window and looked up and down the street.

"There's been a car cruising in front of the house," she said in a worried tone. "I was scared. It looked like they were watching us." Her voice picked up. "Although I haven't seen them for quite a while now."

I looked over my shoulder; there was nothing in sight. "Who was in the car?"

"I couldn't see," she told me. "But whoever it was must have seen you go into the house. That's why I tried to get you."

I looked around again but still didn't spot anything.

"You're just getting jittery, kid." I remarked. "Forget it."

But I couldn't forget it. Something bothered me and I couldn't quite lay my hands on it. Then, just like that, I remembered.

Mike Hartley hadn't answered the phone while I was with him!

"You must have called while I was on the way down, huh?" I prompted.

"Oh, no," she answered. "You were with him because he said he was busy."

The muscles in the back of my neck got all tight and started to do tricks.

"Are you sure it was my boss you talked to?" I asked.

"Don't be silly. I even called the second time after he hung up and he did the same thing again—told me he was busy and slammed the phone down."

Then the harassed lines in my brow smoothed out. "You must have gotten the wrong number."

"I did not," she bit off indignantly. "I got the right number. I took it out of the phone book in the lobby. Here, I even wrote it down." She handed me a small hunk of notepaper.

"It's the right number all right, and I certainly didn't—"

SHE chopped off the words suddenly because I was sitting there, staring at the piece of paper in my hand with eyes that wouldn't believe what they saw.

The number she'd written down was Mike Hartley's telephone all right, but it was his *office* number, not his home. I whirled on Janie almost savagely.

"Can a man be in two places at once?"

She arched her back against the door. "W-what do you mean?"

I didn't speak but flung open the door of her car and strode back into the lobby of the apartment house.

I slipped into the telephone booth and dialed a number. I listened, then I cradled the receiver roughly and flinging open the creaking door, grabbed Janie by the arm and side-wheeled her back into her car without a word.

I parked Janie across from the building on Nassau Street where I played at trying to learn the insurance game, and told her to wait.

The office where I worked was on the second floor, and as I climbed the short flight of stairs I couldn't help noticing what a dark, crummy place it was. I

put my office key in the door that said: *Hartley, Inc.* and walked in.

I didn't see my trench knife on the small desk I called home but I did see something else in the room.

Mike Hartley had one of those new wire recorders connected to his telephone. I sidled over and examined it closely. Then I knew how the Old Man could be in two places at the same time. It had the automatic attachment that raised the receiver when the phone rang. A previously recorded message played into the mouthpiece.

I raised the receiver slightly and Mike Hartley's recorded voice filled the room: "Hello . . . Don't bother me, I'm busy."

I dropped the receiver and slapped my fist into the palm of my hand. "So that's how it was done."

"Yes, that's how it was done."

I whirled around and faced Mike Hartley standing in the doorway. And for the third time in a few hours, I knew what it felt like to have a gun pointed at my body.

"Why?" I asked and it was a shock even to me to hear how calm my voice sounded. "Why her and why me?"

He laughed foolishly. "She didn't count. You shouldn't be concerned about her—that young lady was going to commit suicide anyway."

"You must be nuts!"

HE SIGHED and rubbed his head with his left hand but his right didn't move. "She was a little fool, such a little fool. She got herself all involved with some Romeo and then she wanted to die. She wanted to die, but she wanted to leave her sister provided for." He chuckled again. "She made a mistake, though. She told me about it and I capitalized on it."

"Naturally," I agreed. "And—"

"I persuaded her to take out a second policy."

"Persuaded!" I snorted.

"Call it what you will," he shrugged. "I just convinced her that if her intentions became common knowledge in insurance circles, she'd never get a policy. It was fairly easy."

"But why me?" I asked.

"I couldn't have *my* name on the policy, now could I?" he explained tersely. "It might prove collusion and then I couldn't collect the money. No. You were my *stroke* of genius, young man. I could collect on you."

I nodded my head slowly but my brain was moving at a frantic pace.

"You're lucky, you know. I was going to kill you. But then that little fool changed her mind. She wanted to live, she said, didn't want to kill herself." Mike Hartley gestured at me. "I had no alternative. I had to have that ten thousand dollars. I need it."

"Need it enough to kill Ethel Winters and frame me," I said bitterly.

He bobbed his head at me and pointed at the wire recorder. "Clever contraption, that. It enabled me to use the suspect as my alibi. . . ."

He raised his gun and I knew what he was going to do, but I couldn't move. There was a blinding flash of light, and the deafening roar of thunder.

Something grabbed at my chest and knocked me over backwards. Then there was another flash and another peal of thunder, but this time it seemed to come from behind me.

Then I didn't care any more. I was back swimming around and around in that nice warm pool of water again. I caught a glimpse of Mike Hartley's face distorted with hate and pain. Then I saw the fat ugly features of the sergeant from Atlantic City and the long, gaunt figure of Lt. Repetti.

But the last face I saw belonged to Janie. It was white and scared and her

(Please continue on page 128)



CHAPTER ONE

Sorrel-Topped Siren

LARK ANDERSON sat rigidly in the over-stuffed chair, hands gripping the arms, head tilted back. Cotton pads hugged his eyes, secured by a gauze bandage around his head. The blackness was constant, maddening. . . .

The stillness in the bungalow gave way to the sound of pacing steps. Mentally he followed them, visualizing the dusk seeping in through the screen door, the whirring of insects blundering against fine mesh. The steps turned, came back, swinging around the piano, made a muffled turn on thick carpeting, plodded off again toward the door. He began counting. One, two, three. . . .

The steps paused. A strained voice said: "Stop mumbling, Lark. You give me the jitters."

"Huh? I give *you* the jitters? Hell!" He fumbled for a cigarette in the pocket of his shirt. "What time is it, Mac?"

"Almost eight. The doc will be here soon. Then you get your eyes back."

Lark thought about it. He wet his lips, aware of a shaky feeling in his stomach. He longed for something green. Strangely, all during the four, endless months,

A KILL

The slap-happy smoothie who'd stolen Lark Anderson's fabulously rich and enchanting dream-girl had yet to learn he'd groomed himself . . . for the swankiest slab in the morgue.

Suspense-Packed

Crime-Adventure

Novelette

By

ROBERT P.

TOOMBS



he'd wanted to see something green.

He stuck the cigarette between his lips. He heard a thumbnail scrape on a

FOR THE BRIDE

"You won't get the redhead now!" Varden snarled.



match head but there was no glow, just a sputtering hiss in the inky void. He sucked in quickly. The smoke tasted flat. He inhaled anyway, letting it dribble out slowly. "So I give you the jitters, huh?"

Silence.

He removed the cigarette from between his lips, trying to hold it without a quiver. It was hard to be patient . . . to wait for an answer in the darkness, each second an eternity, while to the person with eyes a combination of many seconds was only a pause.

"I just say things like that to get you going, Lark. Like last week. I told you business was falling off at the garage and that we ran out of gas in the pumps on a rush night. Boy, were you burned! Don't deny it now. We argued about it, didn't we? And then—"

"You're made of cellophane, Mac."

"You mean you were wise all the time?"

"Sure. But those lies of yours helped. When I stop to think about it, you've practically carried me through these four months on your shoulders. You—and hate. Thanks to you both, Mac."

The steps began pacing again. "Don't talk like that. It'll be over when the doc takes off that halter. Boy, what a kick!"

"Hate," Lark whispered. "It can eat out a man's insides. It can find me the rat who— See this?" He fingered the fresh scar on his left temple. "Sure. You've stared at it for four months. I've never seen it. But I can feel it. A .45. It wasn't meant to just graze me. It wasn't meant to paralyze an optic nerve. What was it meant for, Mac?"

"You're getting all worked up. Take it easy."

"What was it meant for, Mac?"

The steps stopped. "We've been over that. Everybody in Elgin likes you fine. The cops figured it was a stray bullet. Now quit talking hate. You've got a nice

prosperous business, and a nice, well—"

"You almost said a nice *girl*, didn't you?"

"No. I meant—you're on the way up."

"Didn't you?" Lark shouted. He lurched upright. "Jeri and I—the richest heiress in town in love with a two-bit operator like me! And it *was* love, Mac. We used to argue about her dough. I didn't want any part of it. It *was* love."

"Shut up and sit down."

"Why did she marry Gabe Vardon on the afternoon of the very night I got shot? She never cared for him. He was her father's secretary. Can you figure it? And has she been to see me? Not once! Four months—and she's never even come up those steps outside." Lark stopped. He reached behind him, fumbling, found the arms of the chair and sank down. "What time is it now, Mac?"

Liquid sloshed in a glass. Ice clinked. "Here. Take it."

Lark brushed the hand away irritably. "Call Doc Webber. Tell him to get up here."

"But he knows about it. A lot of things could have delayed him. It's only five after eight."

"Call him!"

A sigh; steps plodded toward the dining room; the double doors slid closed.

LARK chewed on his cigarette, listening. Mac's low tones were difficult to catch. The conversation dragged out. Doc Webber was a good man, a specialist. Why hadn't he kept the appointment?

The doors scraped open.

Lark pushed up. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"He was called out on an emergency. That was his nurse. *I'm* going to take the bandage off. Nothing to it."

"He isn't coming?"

"He left her instructions. She was just going to phone. You're not supposed to

use your eyes too much at first. When they start watering, close 'em. Wear dark glasses during the day. All the lights out when I take off those pads. And—"

"Well, come on! Come on!"

"And no jolts or jars. No blows about the head for a long time."

Lark tugged at the bandage. "Come on. Let's see your ugly mug!"

"Hold up! I'm doing this."

Lark felt his head turned from side to side. Scissors began cutting and pruning. The light chain on the table-lamp clicked.

"It's real shadowy in here now," Mac warned. "Don't let it worry you."

"Nothing's worrying me," Lark gritted. His muscles were in knots, fingers digging into the palms of his hands.

The pads were lifted away.

He opened his eyes slowly, winced. Pain stabbed him. Things came crawling out of the dark, sluggishly—a long rectangle of grayness in the opposite wall; the doorway—a fuzzy shape before him, moving, bending down; Mac's wide, good-natured face, plastered with a frozen grin; coarse, close-cropped hair standing up like a yellow brush. "You— you all right?"

Lark reached out and gripped his hand. "I'll have that drink."

Mac gave a shout, running toward the dining room. "I'll phone the boys. They've all been pulling for you!"

Lark cleared his throat huskily, relaxing a long moment, feeling the tenseness flow out of him. Then he got up, moving through the dim room, turned on a floor lamp, keeping his eyes squinted, head averted. Staring in the mirror above the mantel, he discovered he wasn't a million years old after all. His blue eyes stared out of a face that had yet to see thirty.

But there was something that matched well with the iron set of his jaw—the scar. It gave him a new toughness. No more friendly claps on the back. People would hesitate, think twice about it.

Mac came back. "Here—your glasses."

He took them, put them on. The dark lenses glistened. He was something out of a Martian Fantasy. But then, he wasn't used to himself yet.

He went out into the twilight and stared at the lawn hungrily. June. Green grass. A sprinkler throwing delightful clouds of sheer spray. Was there anything better than this? He could see!

His face hardened. He could see—to strike back at the person who had struck at him.

"The boys want me to bring you down tomorrow," Mac was saying from the top of the porch steps.

"I'll drive you down tonight. How's that?"

Mac chuckled, but his eyes were wary. "If you think I'm going to let you overdo at the beginning—"

"I'm getting into my glad rags as soon as I check up on every blade of grass in this lot."

"Now listen—"

"Save it. I've waited months for this night!"

Mac spread his hands helplessly, turning.

"Left my cap inside," he mumbled. "Go ahead. It's your funeral."

* * *

She had looks but no brains. He ditched her and found another. In a small town where you knew everybody and everybody knew you, there were always others. He looked different. He felt different. Cynical, maybe? They wanted rings on their fingers and a slice of his gas station. He wanted a few drinks, a few laughs, and then he turned sour, thinking about Jeri—who hadn't loved him at all. The night wore on. And Lark Anderson called it quits.

Sober as a deacon and twice as lonely, he walked into the garage office, dropped

into the swivel chair and propped his long legs on the desk; shoved his white Panama to the back of his head.

Mac eyed him, rubbing oily hands on the front of his coveralls. "I don't like it."

"What?"

"That's the chair you were sitting in when you got shot. It gives me the creeps. Sit over here—away from the window."

Lark slumped back, staring out that window into the dark field at the rear of the station. The glass had been replaced. "Maybe this is the place to start. Just like it was that night."

Mac snorted. "Someone said they saw you in Jake's Bar, the Elite Grill, the Pavilion. You nuts?"

"The glasses help. My head aches a little."

Tires whined outside on the highway. Almost midnight, and traffic was still heavy.

The phone rang. Mac picked it up. He said yes a couple of times, turned laconically, still holding the receiver. "A wreck down the road. Your girl. . . ."

Lark's feet hit the floor.

"Now take it easy," Mac spluttered. "Nobody's hurt. She's alone. Just needs a tow." He turned back to the phone. "Be right there. Yes. About five minutes, Jeri." He hung up.

"My girl," Lark began thickly.

"Sorry," Mac stammered. "I guess you are pretty sore. But—why don't you go? Maybe things will clear up a little for you."

"Shut up!"

Mac swallowed, turned and hurried out, climbing into the big wrecking truck.

Lark swore under his breath. His eyes gleamed behind the glasses with a bitter light. He jerked a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his blue sports coat, spilling one on the floor. What was she doing running around all hours of the

night—and yet she had never come to see him? The town was going to be too small, the world too small!

He strode outside. There were four "islands," twelve pumps, three grease racks—a super, with garage attached. The blue neons drew 'em in like flies from the V intersection outside of Elgin on the Chicago pike. Three attendants worked briskly this hot night, but the lanes were full, cars lined up waiting.

Removing hat and coat, he tossed them in the office and lent the boys a hand. He saw their surprised smiles. They evidently got a kick out of him—the first night like this. He drove himself hard. Ten, twenty minutes passed. He paused, wiping the perspiration from his forehead on his sleeve. It was hot, sticky. . . . Could she have been hurt and not told Mac?

He went out back in the field and prowled around. What a target the office made! But the silence, and the stars overhead, told him nothing. The only clue he had was Mac. Mac was acting strangely. It was almost as though that phone call from Jeri had been pre-arranged.

BY ONE a.m. business tapered off. He moved restlessly toward his coupe but couldn't make himself leave. Be there in five minutes, Mac had said. That was an hour ago. He dragged a bottle out of the coke machine; let the stuff slide down his throat. Then he saw the red light coming down the highway.

The big tow-buggy eased up into the driveway swinging a sedan with a smashed front wheel. A slight, familiar figure sat beside Mac on the high seat. As the truck growled in a half-circle, the blue lights of the station washed over straight, chiseled features, coaxed streaks of flame from her hair.

Stiffly, Lark paced into the office, shrugged on his coat, picked up his hat.

He looked at Mac as the other entered. "What kept you? Trying to sober her up?"

Mac's glance was straight. "You shouldn't talk like that. Maybe there're a few things you don't understand."

Lark slapped on his hat viciously. "So? Take her home then. What the hell do I care?"

Mac frowned. "Come off it, Lark. You've been through a lot. I talked her into coming here. I said you'd—see her. It's about her husband, Gabe Vardon. Something she has to tell you."

"You've got a lousy nerve. Jeri marries another guy—never comes near me when I'm hurt. And you—"

"She's been waiting. We didn't think it was wise for her to see you—until now. There's a lot you don't know."

Lark stared incredulously. "You and she? What is this? You've been in touch with her all the time?"

Mac scrubbed his hands on a piece of waste, ears growing red. "I sort of let that slip. She wants to tell you all about it. She—loves you, Lark."

Lark spat. "She loves me—so she marries *him!*"

"Vardon's put on a model-husband act for the town ever since they've been married, but—they live in different parts of the house. He knows how Jeri feels about you."

Lark took off his glasses wearily, eyes squinted. "I didn't think you'd hold out on me, Mac. All these months. You know who shot me too, don't you?"

"Maybe. There's not a shred of proof. Right now it's her I'm worried about. If you let her go alone, she may be too dead to come back!"

"Go alone—where?"

Mac stuffed a wad of chewing gum in his mouth, eyes hard and bright. His jaw moved rhythmically. "Ask her."

Lark shoved him to one side, walked out front, his gaze probing around the

parked tow truck, searching for her.

She was standing in shadow, irresolutely, half-turned to flee. At the sound of his approaching steps she snapped a lighter to her cigarette in a little gesture of bravado. The tiny flame wavered, blew out. A clinging, black suit left her face and hands a pale blur without substance or reality. Then he caught the perfume and remembered—many things. It gave him a choked up feeling. Four months. He had anticipated seeing her when he recovered his sight, around town. Golf course, drug store—but not close. Not like this.

"Lark?"

He knew that husky catch in her voice. It was always there.

"Lark? Mac told me you—your eyes—?" She snapped the lighter again. Her hand trembled. As she slipped it away in her shoulder bag, he caught a glimpse of an automatic hidden among feminine odds and ends of junk.

"I've got 'em back," he said coldly. "Wide open too. How's things, Jeri? How's your husband?"

She flinched back as though he had struck her. "Please, Lark. Don't be bitter. I—"

"Where'd you get that gun?"

"Mac gave it to me."

"Oh? Simple as that. Mac gave it to you."

"You've got to understand," she said quickly, "that Mac has been helping both of us—you and me. If you'll only listen to me."

He opened her shoulder bag, plucked out the automatic, a .32, and laid it on the floor of the truck.

She started to protest, clamped white teeth into her lower lip instead.

"Get in my car," he heard himself saying. "We'll cruise around awhile."

He felt her tremble as he guided her to his coupe.

She lifted her dark eyes just once,

searchingly. "We shouldn't be seen together."

"Why not?"

"Someone tried to kill you, Lark. You know that."

He opened the door for her. "Sure I know it. Get in, Red. Get in before I change my mind. This is a bad night to run into you. Don't ask me why."

She caught her breath.

He remembered then that he was the only one who had ever gotten away with calling her Red.

CHAPTER TWO

Flight to Nowhere

HE DROVE four or five miles down the river road toward St. Charles, pulled into a marshy clearing, snapped off the ignition and the lights. "Now," he said, "Mac's worried about you going somewhere alone. Give it to me straight."

"It's Gabe. He'll be leaving tomorrow for a real estate convention in Omaha, to be gone two days. He's done that for four months—always on the second Thursday of the month. Only—" she hesitated—"he doesn't go to Omaha."

"No?"

"I've checked. His real estate office here in Elgin is just a blind—something to make people think he works for a living. He doesn't sell enough property to pay the rent." A tinge of color swept her cheeks.

"Where do you think he goes then?"

"I don't know. Last month I hired a private investigator. He lost the trail. Tomorrow I intended to follow Gabe, but Mac thought—he said you would say it was too dangerous once you understood all that has happened."

"Uh huh." Lark drummed on the wheel, swallowing his anger at this inference that he should feel responsibility

for another man's wife. "Why would he disappear on a certain day? The second Thursday of the month. I don't get it. You suspect another woman, of course. You're jealous. And you want me to—"

"No!" She whirled fiercely to face him. "Don't you understand, darling? I despise him! As soon as it's safe I want a divorce. Our marriage has been a sham. He was after my money . . . But I was helpless. I—I never even pretended to think that Gabe could ever mean—" She choked. Tears clung in the thick lashes and she winked them back. "It was always you, Lark. But you're so darn bull-headed—sitting there glaring at me. How can I tell you what it was like when Dad lay dying?"

"The day I was shot?"

"Yes. And Gabe came out from Chicago—"

"I remember," Lark growled. "Quite a boy, Gabe Varden. He can talk rings around me. Well, he's ten years older. He's had the experience. Forty, isn't he? And he's got soft hands, like a woman. You're sure busting my heart, Red. After four months too. Four months of sitting without eyes, trying to get you out of my hair."

"Lark!"

"Oh sure. What do I do now? Break out in a rash? Not me, baby. You and your easy money and your stuffed-shirt husband and—"

Her swiftly indrawn breath warned him too late. He turned his head and caught the stinging flat of her hand against his cheek. Pain cut across his eyes. For an instant things swam. A blurred flash of red hair and she was out of the car, running toward the road. Her stilted, red heels tripped, and she fell, picked herself up and went on, limping in the direction of town.

He fingered his cheek, listening to the damp frog chorus echoing thinly from the marsh. At that moment he wished

Gabe Varden's plump throat was here between his two good hands. He kicked the car to life, snapped it back on the road, turning on his lights. He waited, blinking, as a gray fog swirled in front of him, slowly ebbed away. When he came along beside her, she took to the grass and weeds. He leaned toward the open window.

"Now listen, Jeri."

She must have found a path, her figure melted so quickly into the darkness.

Alarmed, he jammed on the brakes, leaped out, stumbling in the underbrush. The dark glasses didn't help. He snatched them off. "Jeri!"

Far away that marsh pulsed and throbbed. He put the glasses away and inched deeper into the brush. He found her finally, huddled on the ground, and lifted her up roughly. "Why did you marry him? Why?"

"I prefer to walk!" she said coldly. "Please let go of me, Mr. Anderson."

Sighing, he picked her up in his arms and dumped her on the seat of the car.

AS SHE scrambled up indignantly, he grabbed her, holding her while he crawled beneath the wheel. "It was Gabe who shot me that night, wasn't it?"

"You seem to have everything figured out—including me," she said frigidly.

He looked at her. Her face was averted, pert little nose tilted angrily.

"You *did* plan that accident with your car tonight. Why?"

She turned furiously. "You couldn't possibly guess that I wanted to see you—that I *had* to see you, without arousing suspicion in case I was being trailed? Mac phoned that you were all right, that you could use your eyes. We trumped up the accident. It would help to disrupt Gabe's plans tomorrow too."

"Does he drive to Omaha?"

"No. I think he goes ten miles to

Geneva to catch the Chicago and North Western. He'll probably go to the office as usual and then take a cab."

Lark headed the car once more toward town. "Let him go his own gait."

They rode for awhile in strained silence.

"Of course," she said abruptly. "Just forget the whole thing. Gabe could be rather dangerous. It didn't take him long to shake that private investigator last time."

"Oh shut up," Lark said irritably. "I'll be on his tail."

They were coming into the outskirts of Elgin. Overhead street lights hung, one to a block, casting yellow puddles of light. Heat lightning flickered on the horizon, highlighting clumps of trees and occasional houses with grassy lawns.

Her voice sounded remote. "We're not far from the house. It would be wiser to take a cab, don't you think? I see one on that side street."

He nodded, pulling the wheel sharply. The cab was just drawing away from the curb. At his arm signal the driver stopped with squealing brakes.

She had the door open, but he caught her arm. "What would be the best way to get in touch with you from out of town. Phone—telegram? Can you trust the servants?"

"I told you to forget it! I wish I'd never—"

"I'll phone you," he interrupted decisively. "And, Red—why did you marry him?"

Color mounted high in her cheeks. "Do you care?"

His voice softened. "Tell me."

"Dad made me promise. He always had Gabe picked out for me. He was dying, Lark. I—I married Gabe that same night while Dad watched from his bed. It was—horrible." She shivered.

"But—you never came near me!"

She put her soft fingers over his lips.

"Let me tell you in my own way. Gabe knew I was engaged to you. When he found out I'd have nothing to do with him, he blamed you—threatened to kill you if I ever tried to see you.

"The butler follows me everywhere. It's been like a prison. I never knew you'd been hurt that first week. When I found out, I rushed to the station and Mac heard what I'd been going through. You couldn't help me then, and we decided to wait until your eyes were all right. And we had no proof that Gabe—" she reached up, gently touched the scar on his temple—"did that."

He caught her hand so tightly she winced. "Proof? What do I care about proof! He did it, Red. Tomorrow I'll get the dirty—"

"Lark! Not like that. He's up to something. Find out what it is. Lark, promise me you won't—"

"I don't know. I'll see what shapes up as I go along."

She jumped out, slamming the door, stood gripping it so tightly her knuckles went white. "Be careful," she whispered. "Please be careful."

He almost leaned toward those cool, red lips. Resisting the urge he sat stiff and motionless, one foot jazzing the accelerator.

She was gone, running toward the cab. He watched her climb into the back. The cab shot away—a red dot of light winking, growing smaller.

SUNLIGHT slanted in through the doorway of the tobacco shop where he lounged. Outside, people were moving sluggishly along the walk. It was nine in the morning and the door of Varden's ground-floor office across the street had opened and closed once, admitting his big, well-dressed shape, lugging a brown grip.

Clayt Fenlow, the proprietor, tossed a bag of peanuts across the counter. "Here,

try some. Hot, ain't it? Wish we'd get a good rain."

Lark munched stolidly, his eyes on that distant door. He'd already told Mac he might be out of town a few days. Heat danced above the red brick pavement of the street, illusive, vague; then again as tangible as Jeri's slim, curved body hovering like a mirage—a dream unfolding behind his eyes. He was right back where he left off four months ago. He turned, realizing suddenly that Clayt had spoken twice.

"I asked if those glasses were really doing you any good, Lark. What's the matter? I never seen you woolgathering so much."

"Oh? Yes, they help, Clayt. How's everything with you?"

The other planted his elbows on the counter, waving a pencil airily. "Business? Just fair. Now you take that feller, Varden, that came out a second ago. He can afford to ride in cabs. Marrying a gal who's pa left her just about half the town—"

"He came out!"

Clayt's mouth fell open. "What's eatin' you? Varden climbed into a taxi. You were lookin' right at him. It headed down Fountain Street."

Lark ran out front. The cab was turning a corner, heading west. He spun around, ploughing into a group of people, running toward his car parked on another street. He fell in beneath the wheel, jabbing his key at the ignition, crashed a stop light, heading on a short-cut for the Geneva road.

He made open country and tromped on the gas. With luck he'd be at the Chicago, North Western depot before Varden arrived. If Varden went somewhere else? Well, then he had lost him before the chase began. Blistering down the highway at eighty miles an hour, he cursed himself for an addle-brained amateur in this game of man-stalking.

The tires sang a mad song during those few minutes it took him to hit Geneva's outer limits; then he was forced to a more moderate pace. Traffic hedged him in. He swore. There was nothing he could do about it. He ditched his car finally and was running a short block toward the depot when he saw his man.

Gabe Varden walked swiftly on the other side of the street, swinging his grip. He wore a gray-checked sport coat, gray crush hat, gray gabardines; and he moved in a fast stride, looking neither to right or left. Once he glanced at the watch on his left wrist, pulled a white handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat, wiping pale, plump cheeks. Abruptly he turned into a small clothing store.

Lark loitered at a news stand. He could see a clerk stirring behind the plate glass window. Varden was purchasing a pair of black gloves, trying them on, smoothing them down over his fingers. He paid for them; opened his grip and tossed them inside. Emerging as abruptly as he had entered, he headed once more toward the depot where a heavy passenger train had already ground to a stop.

Lark quickened his step. This bird worked with split-second timing.

He began to worry about Jeri. What had happened since that moment last night when Jeri returned to her lonely estate? Had Gabe been waiting for her—suspicious? Chill urgency goading him, he longed to dash for a telephone, but there was no time. He maneuvered, took his place in the ticket line, ears alert.

Varden's low, precise voice carried quite plainly. There was the word "Omaha," and "club car." The man was moving briskly away.

When Lark's turn came, he bought an Omaha ticket too, but chose a day coach. Redcaps dove for his grip but he shook his head.

The wheels clacked monotonously.

Sprawling behind his paper, hat tilted well down over one eye, Lark stared out at the Lincoln Highway paralleling the track like a white snake, darting in and out, disappearing in hollows, plunging over bridges. On his last trip of exploration he had spotted Varden in the car ahead, intent on a magazine.

Fifty miles down the line they stopped briefly at Dixon, Illinois, again picked up speed after taking on a few bedraggled passengers, munching ice cream cones, and carrying their coats on their arms. The heat was oppressive.

Another hour dragged by. Lark rose, stretching, moving casually toward the other car. The rumbling sound of the wheels hurt his ears as he traversed the jolting, metal pathway between doors.

Varden was gone.

H EEDLESS of the fact that he might be instantly recognized if he bumped into the man, he ran through the car, shouldering his way into the men's rest room. Empty!

He tucked his glasses away, working back through the train car after car. Varden could have gotten off at Dixon, fifty miles back. Groaning aloud at his stupidity, he made his way through the last car, fumbling at the door leading out onto the observation platform.

Wind and cinders swirled into his face. He struggled outside, closing the door after him, turned, grabbing at his hat.

It was that unforeseen, instinctive act that saved him. The descending black-jack smashed against his wrist instead of his skull.

He threw out his arms, grappling wildly. He saw Varden's eyes, black slits, staring between small mounds of puffy flesh. Varden had wedged his hat down over his ears to keep it from blowing away. His full, red lips beneath the eye-brow mustache drew back in maniacal fury. "You interfering pup!" He

lunged, one knee ramming Lark's stomach. The blackjack cut down viciously once more.

Lark had him by one arm, whirling him around. They crashed into the railing, momentum carrying them half over. He tried to tear at Varden's face, but one hand was pinned, his spine grating against the brass. He felt a hand gripping his ankle, lifting. Varden's mouth was wide open as he strained, finding the purchase he needed.

"You won't get the redhead now, Anderson!" The man braced himself—heaved. . . .

A sickening sense of flying off. Then something like a thousand tons of dirt fell on Lark's body. He was in a gigantic cement mixer, rolling over and over with white hot, blazing lights shattering to bits inside his skull. Varden had won, he kept telling himself. Varden had won so easily. . . .

And then, just as suddenly, he was staring at a hot, blue sky with a hawk floating on outstretched wings. No sound—just floating. And then there was sound—the distant grind of a receding train!

He sat up, fell back weakly, and sat up again. A high, grassy slope led up toward the tracks. There was a long, level stretch of weeds before that slope began—a matted path leading straight to him.

He shivered. How a man could live and hurtle eighty or ninety feet from a speeding train?

A figure was running toward him. A short, rotund individual, hat in hand, eyes wide and staring. He came from the direction of a highway where a car was drawn up. The man leaped a log, veered around a boulder, and stopped, horrified, as Lark staggered upright.

"You—you alive?"

"I'm able to navigate," Lark said, "if you'll give me a lift." Only he didn't say

it all at one time. He spat out a tooth, and said it in easy stages.

"I saw you fall off the rear of that train! It's a miracle!"

Lark felt blood running down his wrist. He took a few experimental steps, fumbled for his handkerchief, touched it to the right side of his face. It came away red. His glasses were ground to bits in an inner pocket.

"Here!" The man took hold of him gingerly. "Let me get you in the car. I'll take you to Deerfield to a doctor. I never saw such a thing in my life. I almost drove off the road!"

Lark gritted his teeth as a leg buckled, but he kept moving. The knee began to loosen up by the time he crawled into the front seat of the car. His eyes—that was the miracle. No hard blows, Mac had said. But somehow Lark could still see.

The salesman drove fast, casting anxious glances. "Don't pass out on me, mister."

"I'm okay. Does that train stop in Deerfield?"

"I think it takes on water there. You better rest—not talk."

"Could you catch that train?" Lark asked grimly.

The other looked at him blankly. "I'm doing seventy now. You've got to get to a doctor. How did you ever fall off that observation car? I saw someone trying to help you."

Lark smiled grimly, reached for his wallet and discovered his coat was minus a sleeve, but the wallet was intact. He took out two twenties. "Here. Put this crate into high gear, will you? What's your name?"

"Jones." The other shook his head, pushing harder on the gas. "I don't want your money."

Lark sat back, staring at the road. "I'll remember you for the rest of my life, Jones. You're okay."

CHAPTER THREE

Too Many Brides

THEY rolled to a stop in the public square. Deerfield seemed lively enough, overflowing with farmers at the noon hour. Trucks lined the curb. A small depot was plainly visible, squatting beside the double line of tracks, but there was no sign of the train.

"I'll help you find a doctor," Jones offered.

"Never mind. A druggist will do. And—thanks." He climbed out, limping off with a wave of his hand, leaving Jones with his mouth open.

His coat he left on a bench. A friendly prescription clerk took him in hand, rendering first aid on several deep cuts. The drugstore smelled of soap and anti-ceptic. He bought new glasses, ordered a coke, found out that the town contained two hotels. He drew a blank at the Emporia, went directly across the street to the Alcazar and hit the jackpot.

The diminutive bell-hop sized him up from shrewd blue eyes and grinned crookedly. "A guy wearing gray? I might a seen him."

Lark parted with five dollars.

"I saw him." The blue eyes brightened. "I took his grip up to 24 on the second floor. He registered about a half hour ago. His name's Simpson. I don't know where he is now. He left."

"Been here before?"

"Lemme see . . . Yeah. Last month, about this same time. You a dick or something?"

"Uh-uh. Salesman. He's been cutting in on my prospects. Don't tip him off that I'm wise." Lark wadded another five into the other's hand, getting a sharp salute in return, and a wink.

On the way out of the lobby he drifted past the desk. The last name on the fly-specked registry book was in a bold

scrawl. *A. T. Simpson, Buffalo, N. Y.*

A clerk without any teeth started ambling toward him. Lark waved cheerily and walked out.

He bought a hat, shirt, sport-coat and a cheap grip. Back at the Emporia he took a room on the second floor front, ordered beer, and settled down to watch the entrance across the street. The sun was blistering, curtains rustling in the steamy breeze. This was a better hotel than the Alcazar. He thought with longing of the cool cocktail lounge downstairs just off the lobby, and here he was, aching in every joint, plastered grimly in a rocking chair with shirt and tie hanging on a bedpost!

He put a long distance call through to Jeri, propped the dresser mirror just right so he could recline on the bed and still see across the street, and waited, chain-smoking one cigarette after another. The phone failed to ring. The fan on the small table droned monotonously. He nodded, jerked upright.

At 5 p.m. he finally got connected with someone or other, probably a maid, who informed him that Mrs. Varden had gone out, and would he care to leave a message? He hung up, feeling a bit easier. Then he called the room clerk and ordered his dinner sent up.

Darkness found him still waiting. Ten p.m. Varden could have pulled the oldest gag in the world; simply gone on his way, leaving his grip in an empty room. He might be hundreds of miles away by now. But then again—he might walk into sight any moment. Doggedly, Lark determined to stick it out. . . .

He woke up at eight a.m. the following morning, still in the rocking chair, a bunch of painful knots cramping his lean body. What a hell of a flop he was! He staggered stiffly, getting into his new shirt, hobbled down the stairs as fast as he could make it, jolting through the lobby out into the sunlit street. It gave

promise of being another sizzling day.

He dodged between traffic and eased into the Alcazar. A blast of sluggish air met him head on. There was no one behind the desk; only one man seated in the lobby buried behind a newspaper. The key of room 24 was in the box. Moving fast, he walked behind the desk, plucked up the key and continued casually, mounting the stairs.

In the hall he hesitated. The second floor creaked as various guests moved around in their rooms. He slid the key in the lock of 24, turned it, and pushed gently.

The brown grip sat in the middle of a patched carpet. The bed hadn't been slept in. The air was stale. He slipped inside, closing the door. Sick with the certainty that his man had flown, he leaned down and unsnapped the grip. Shirts, socks, handkerchiefs—that was all. The black gloves were missing.

LARK squatted back on his heels, forehead wrinkled. Gloves—in the heart of a blistering, June heat wave. Why would Varden lug them around with him?

Then steps sounded in the hall. He jerked off his glasses, pushing them down in his inside coat pocket, threw things back in the grip, closed the lid and straightened, tip-toeing to the door. A floorboard creaked protestingly. He winced, holding his breath.

The knob was turning. He remembered, then, that he had left the key sticking conspicuously in the lock on the outside. He brought his doubled fist up to his lips, kissed it expectantly, tensing his back muscles.

The door opened an inch, kept moving wider in short, cautious jerks. A hoarse, stage whisper floated in. "Hey, mister—?"

He reached around, grabbed a handful of brass buttons and yanked the tiny

bell-hop inside. "What the hell are you up to?"

The little fellow threw up a protecting arm. "I don't think yer no crook, mister. Honest! I seen you sneak that key. But you ain't got no right by-passin' me. If yer playin' a trick on that other salesman I'm yer boy." He managed a wink. "You been pretty generous with yer tips. You don't need to go by-passin' me."

"Uh huh, I get you." Lark released him. "Smart boy, huh? Student of human nature. What's your name?" He pushed the door closed.

"Jimmy. You musta scared Simpson bad. He ain't never come back to his room. I don't like that guy."

Lark took off his new hat and dragged a handkerchief around inside the band. "Why not?"

Jimmy shrugged. "He's oily. Don't like his looks."

"Uh huh. I've got a better reason. He married the swellest girl in this world—for her dough. You see, I'm trusting you, Jimmy."

"Your girl?"

"That's right. I tailed Simpson here, and now I've lost him. Got any ideas?"

Jimmy scratched his head. Flies buzzed vainly against the closed windows. He slid a cigarette from beneath his monkey-coat, stuck it over his ear, eyes screwed shut in thought.

"Mailmen get around all over town. Start checkin' with 'em. Then there's garages. We got three or four. Iver's rented a '41 Hudson yesterday to some guy. Heard one of their mechanics talkin' about it down at the cafe. They don't rent a car very often in this burg."

"Ivers? Where is it?"

"C'mon. I'll show you." He opened the door, looked out into the hall, and beckoned importantly. "It's clear."

Lark put on his hat and his glasses and stepped out.

Jimmy twisted the key out of the

clock, grinning derisively. "Mr. Anderson, yer an amateur."

"How'd you know my name?"

The other snorted. "Any time you hand a hop ten bucks you got him practically in the family. I got connections across the street."

Lark shook his head, following this little wise-guy down the stairs.

In front of the hotel, Jimmy paused, pointing out a garage sign in the distance. "You want I should get on the ball at the post office? I know most of the guys."

"Sure, go ahead."

At the garage he clicked. Yes, they had let out a '41 Hudson yesterday about noon to a Mr. Simpson. The time of the rental was marked on a card. 12: 40.

"I may be in town a few days myself," he told the man in the office. "What have you got that's fast?"

They settled on a late model Buick, and he made the necessary arrangements, identifying himself, and writing a check for the amount of the deposit required. It would be at least two hours before they proved up on him. A tire had to be changed, gas and oil checked. He grabbed the opportunity to get a bite of breakfast. Time was racing away. He fumed because he had neglected to bring enough cash to cover the amount of that deposit. He kept an eye out for Jimmy, but the other didn't appear.

It was 11 o'clock before he got the Buick and drove to the post office.

"No luck yet," Jimmy told him. "I've asked a dozen guys. But the rural route boys are showin' up now. Wait out front. If I get something hot I'll let you know."

In twenty minutes he came out, eyes alight, a pleasant-faced chap in tow. "Here's yer man, Mr. Anderson. Hey, Jack, tell him what you told me!"

Lark slid out from beneath the wheel eagerly.

"Sure," the other nodded. "I saw a '41 Hudson this morning. Blue, you say? It

was coming out of the road that leads to Jason's Sanitarium. Man and woman in it."

"You're sure?" Lark said tensely.

"Of course. That was about 10 o'clock. I'm on the tag end of my route by then. It's only six miles to Jason's from here. That's a private home for the mentally unbalanced."

"I see. Thanks very much."

Jimmy was tugging at his sleeve. "Want me to come along?"

"Uh-uh. You've done plenty as it is." He started to reach for his wallet, but the look in those blue eyes stopped him.

"It's for the swellest girl in the world," Jimmy said soberly. "Let me know how it comes out."

Lark pressed his shoulder. "Sure I will. I'll run you back to the hotel."

"Naw. Get goin'! Jason's is out on the Potter Road. Head out this street and turn left at the bridge. After that keep on straight. You can't miss it."

Lark jumped in and slammed the door, kicked the starter. The car ran like a breeze. Jimmy's figure dwindled in the rear view mirror. . . .

THE SIGN said simply: *Jason's Sanitarium*. A circling driveway, newly tarred, led past a square stucco building on a wooded hillside, with several small out-buildings grouped nearby among the trees.

Lark parked in front and walked up a flagstone path. The bell beside the wrought-iron grill peeled loudly.

A large, unsmiling woman in a starched white uniform opened the door.

"Good morning," Lark smiled, removing his hat.

She nodded stiffly.

He cleared his throat. "I wonder if I'm too late to catch Mr. Simpson?"

She lifted her brows questioningly. "Mr. Simpson?" Her voice was slightly nasal. "We have only women patients."

"The gentleman who was here this morning."

"Oh. Mr. Simpson *did* call for his wife. They left."

Lark managed to restrain a quiver of excitement. He was thinking fast. "I didn't realize," he said, "that Mrs. Simpson was in a condition to be—what's the word—released?"

"Mrs. Simpson is completely cured."

"Well," he drawled, fanning himself with his hat. "That's fine. Glad to hear it."

"Are you a friend of Mr. and Mrs. Simpson?"

"Sure. I've known them for years. I was to meet them here. Have you any idea where they—"

"Step in," she said. "I'll ask Doctor Creighton. She was his patient."

He walked through the shadowy doorway and paused. It was fairly cool in here. Her heavy tread departed down the hall. Unconsciously he found himself listening for something. In a joint like this you might expect to hear anything.

She was back, holding forth a small locket on a chain. "Mrs. Simpson overlooked this. I believe it has sentimental value. Would you give it to her when you see them?"

"Sure thing." He slipped it in his pocket.

"I'm sorry—Doctor Creighton is busy right now and can't talk to you. He doesn't know where Mr. Simpson was planning on taking his wife."

"Oh. Well, I'll probably catch them in town. You've helped a lot. Thanks very much."

She smiled and one hand dove for her pocket, came out holding a gun!

He slapped her across the face with his hat. His upraised knee jolted her hand hard as he swung to one side. Miraculously the revolver didn't go off. He tore it from her fingers, tossing it out the door onto the lawn. Once he got his

arms around her, she quit squirming.

"Now," he grated, "what's the idea, sister?"

"I didn't want to alarm Doctor Creighton," she panted. "But you don't know Mrs. Simpson! You didn't even glance at the pictures in that locket. If you'd known them for years like you say, you'd at least have glanced inside."

"You're bluffing about the doctor. *You* run this place!"

She glared. "What if I do? It's a respectable business. But our patients are strictly confidential. Mr. Simpson would certainly never have friends dropping in here. He visited her himself only once a year up until lately. I don't know what you're up to, but—"

He pushed her away from him and stepped back. "Don't worry about me. Your dear Mr. Simpson already has a wife! Now do you know where he's taken this one, or don't you?"

She stared at him searchingly. "Mr. Simpson committed his wife to our care almost five years ago. Her mind was—well—we expected no hope of recovery. But she made amazing strides this last year, and we notified him to that effect."

"When?"

"About three months ago. But who are you? What authority do you have making accusations?"

"Do you know where he took her?"

Her face darkened. "I don't! You better get out of here!"

He slapped on his hat. "With pleasure. But if you try to burn any of Mrs. Simpson's records, the police will make it tough on you. Understand?"

She remained rigid, stony-eyed.

He slammed the door, left the gun laying on the lawn, and jumped in the Buick.

The full implications of this business began to soak in as he headed for the main road. Where was Varden hiding wife number one? What *did* the black

gloves mean? Afraid of fingerprints maybe?

He dug the locket out of his pocket, pried it open as he drove, and stared at miniature photographs of Varden and a woman. Varden looked seven or eight years younger and somehow different without the mustache. His cheeks were shadowed, not so plump. The girl was a pale blonde with wide-set eyes, a prim mouth. She appeared to be around Jeri's age, twenty-five or six. Her face was soft and round, the little ringlets in her hair giving her an air of wide-eyed innocence.

He let the locket lie on the seat, glancing at it from time to time. Finally he put it away in his pocket.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Trail

BACK at the Alcazar he discovered that Varden, alias Simpson, still hadn't returned. No doubt of it now. In this section of the country—somewhere—was his hideout.

In the phone booth at the drug store, Lark put through another call, this time to Mac.

"Don't ask questions," he said crisply when he had him on the line. "Get over to Jeri's. Tell her I'll see her tonight—" he glanced at his watch—"around seven o'clock. I'm in Deerfield. Driving through as soon as I hang up."

"Right," Mac replied. "But listen: That gun of Jeri's that you left in the truck—I slipped it in the glove compartment of her car. It's gone. I missed it Thursday morning when I started working on the wheel."

"Varden?"

"Who else? I just wanted you to know he's armed. Take care of yourself, boy."

"Yeah. Thanks. . . ." He hung up, lips compressed.

Outside, he climbed into the Buick and headed for the Lincoln Highway. It was almost four-thirty. With luck, he'd make Elgin in two and a half hours. . . .

It was growing dusk as he pulled in back of the three-car garage at Jeri's, took a shortcut across the grass beneath imported firs. A few lights gleamed in the rear of the two-storied house. He followed the edge of the walk, moving soundlessly. A maid came out of the kitchen, beating a mop over the porch railing. He stood motionless, waiting. Without a sideward glance she went back inside and the screen door banged.

It had been four months or better since he had taken this path to the partially enclosed terrace at the far side of the house. He came to a low, ivy-covered wall overlooking the rock garden with its splashing fountain. Rustic tables and chairs were scattered about. A softly glowing lamp framed Jeri's head, her slim weight stirring an old rocker, one leg tucked beneath her, a book cradled on her lap.

He whistled.

She jumped up nervously, tossing the book in the chair. "Lark?" The sleeveless, blue silk dress clung smoothly, revealing bare, white shoulders.

He vaulted over the wall, tossed his hat on a chair and strode toward her. "Thought I'd better sneak in."

She laid her hand on his arm, barely conscious of the act. "What's happened to you? Your face. . . ."

He touched a strip of adhesive tape gingerly. "Never mind. Mac get in touch with you?"

"He phoned. Said you were in Deerfield. I've been waiting hours—all yesterday—"

"Take it easy, Red. I've had myself a time. Is it safe to talk?"

"Wait!" She slipped over to the side door, locked it, and came back. "Gabe has a way with servants. He must give

them outrageous sums for their loyalty. Hungry, Lark?"

"Starved."

She pulled him over to the table where a white cloth had been laid. "Just coffee and sandwiches. Sit down."

He watched her tilt the percolator over his cup.

"Jeri—you've got to get out of this house."

She looked up slowly, her eyes dark unfathomable shadows, regarding him steadily. "Is it—that bad?"

Lark dropped into the chair, dribbling lumps of sugar into his coffee. "Sit down."

She sank into a chair. "Tell me, Lark! Is he in Deerfield?"

He jabbed his spoon at her. "Let me ask you something—has he got into you for much dough? I mean—he hasn't broke you yet, or anything like that?"

She shook her head. "Dad left things tied up in investments. My income is large. Naturally Gabe spends money like water, but he stays within a limit. He's a business man. He's content to let things go along as they are. Why shouldn't he?"

"But what if something happened to you?"

"Then I suppose—" She stopped.

"Uh huh." Lark sat back, lighting his cigarette.

She leaned forward. "Will you stop being so secretive? Where is he? What's he up to, Lark?"

"He's got a wife. Married her before he met you."

"A wife!"

He told her then, swiftly, all that had happened in the last two days.

She shook her head mutely. Finally she whispered. "It's horrible. That woman—where do you suppose he's taken her?"

"Tomorrow I'm going to find out. D'you want to help?"

She jumped up excitedly. "Of course! Let me see the locket."

She took it from him, turning it toward the light. Varden's picture fluttered onto the table. "Gabe," she breathed. And then: "Look—she's rather pretty."

THEY both heard the car in the driveway at the same instant. She caught his hand tightly, her breath warm on his cheek. "It's Gabe! There's a cab just leaving. You'll have to go."

His face darkened. "And leave you with him?"

"We can't let him know—yet! He thinks you're dead. He'll make up some excuse why he decided not to go to Omaha. He's a glib liar."

"I've got to settle it with him. Now!"

"He'll stay in his part of the house, darling. *I'm* in no danger. It's that girl—"

"*You're* my girl!"

She pressed against him, one hand over his lips. "Sh-h-h. We've got to find her, Lark. Find out what he's done with her. Don't you understand? I know Gabe. He's money-mad. He'd be merciless if he thought she endangered what he has here."

Lark jerked her hand away. "Then make up an excuse. You're getting out tonight! We'll go to Deerfield and pick up any clues we can. He's got her stashed there—somewhere. I'd bet on it."

"Tomorrow," she whispered. "I'll tell him I'm going to visit Aunt Neila's in St. Charles. Neila Brent. Pick me up there at ten o'clock in the morning." She slipped the locket in the front of her dress. "Hurry, Lark."

He caught her hard against him, staring deep into her eyes. "You know what this means, Red?"

"I'll be free," she said, gazing into his eyes. Her voice throbbed: "Oh, darling—free!"

He silenced her with his lips.

Her arms slid up around his neck, warm, strong arms, binding him. . . .

He let her go finally. "If you need me—phone Mac."

She nodded wordlessly, the wild flame still in her eyes.

He grabbed his hat, went over the wall, made his way to the Buick. He pushed the car down the inclined drive, drifted along in the dark without lights, then let in the clutch. He pulled a short distance down the main road and parked.

For awhile he couldn't make himself leave. Varden must have left the rented car in Deerfield, and returned by train. He sat chewing his lip, worrying about her. She was probably right—Gabe's number one wife was the one on the spot. In the quiet dusk birds twittered sleepily. He edged his tired body down on the seat, thinking of a spare cot in the back room of his garage at the station. He'd stay there, rather than at his bungalow. Mac would wake him if she phoned during the night.

Wearily he stepped on the starter. His eyes were so tired, they burned. He'd probably slump into a deep sleep if he sat here any longer. . . .

Mac was shaking him. "Get up. This is Saturday. You wanted to be in St. Charles by ten o'clock. It's 9:30 now. I let you sleep as long as I could."

Lark threw off the blanket groggily, swinging his feet off the cot. His neck ached.

Mac held a cup of coffee and he took it gratefully. "How's business?"

"Swell. What he'd do to you—run over you with his car?"

Lark rubbed the back of his neck; sipped the strong, black coffee. There were some clean clothes laid out on a chair, and he lifted his eyebrows.

"Went to your place and got 'em." Mac grinned. "You can wash up here. Where'd you get the Buick?"

"Deerfield. By tonight I think I'll

have Gabe Varden boxed up tight, Mac! I'm meeting Jeri in St. Charles—going back to Deerfield."

"You need me? How about me doing the driving?"

Lark shook his head. "You sit tight. If I get in a jam, I'll phone you."

Mac scowled. "What do I do then—hop a plane? And supposing there's no phone service where you meet up with Gabe?"

"He's here in town. Now stop belly-achin'. Right now I'm after a little blonde with a solemn face—Varden's number one wife."

Mac ran stubby fingers through his yellow hair. "He's that smelly?"

"Brother, he is!" Lark snapped, trotting toward the washroom.

JERI came running down the steps of her aunt's house, hair flying in the sunlight, red lips parted. "I brought a picnic lunch." She shoved a basket into the rear seat and jumped in front. "Not that I expect it's going to be a picnic."

"What happened last night?"

She snuggled against him, gripping his arm, smoothing her green, linen skirt over her knees. "Nothing."

He headed the car away from the curb.

"He said he'd decided not to go to Omaha. Oh, he was cool as you please, but—he's different, Lark. He's done something. He seems very pleased with himself."

"That I don't like!"

"Me either. Of course he's had plenty of time to check on the fact that no body was picked up along the Chicago North Western. He must realize you're alive."

"Did you bring the locket?"

"Of course." She lifted a red leather wallet from the pocket of her skirt, thrust it back again. "When I told him I'd be at Aunt Neila's a few days, he

gave me a peculiar look. I believe he'll check up."

"You warned her?"

"Yes. She'd lie like a trooper for me; simply tell him that I'm down town shopping or something."

"But it's risky. We'll have to make today count."

He kept the speedometer needle floating high, and as he drove, told her there was a lot of leg-work and hours of questioning ahead of them—a hot, tiring, dusty search for an illusive hideout, probably in the country. A lonely farm, or a house one would least suspect.

"Or," she added hollowly. "A plot of earth in the ground."

He glanced at her face, caught the suddenly sombre expression.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. "She may be dead, yes. But then again—maybe not. He's had time to plan things. And he probably doesn't suspect interference. I think he took her somewhere first. Some place where she'd think she was secure. He'd put on the anxious-husband act probably."

Jeri shivered. "Hurry," she whispered tightly. "Oh, Lark—hurry. . . ."

They didn't reach Deerfield until two in the afternoon. A flat tire hadn't helped. He took Jeri into the Emporia and bought her a drink, left her there while he skipped across to the Alcazar to check up.

The toothless clerk informed him that Mr. Simpson had checked out yesterday about 3 p.m.

Jeri was waiting in the semi-darkness of the cocktail lounge, twirling an empty glass, her slender heels locked over a rung of the stool.

"You may as well have one," she gestured. "Then we'll start. It's on me, partner."

He grinned, ordered bourbon.

She did deft things briefly with a lip-stick, ran a comb through her red curls.

She laid a ten-dollar bill on the counter, and the barkeep went away to make change. She swung toward Lark reflectively.

"If Gabe left that sanitarium about 10 o'clock yesterday morning and caught a train out of here about three—that gave him five hours alone with her."

He finished his drink, nodding.

"What do you suppose he was doing from the time he got in town Thursday—about noon, you said—until 10 o'clock Friday morning? That's 22 hours!"

"That's one reason I'm guessing he's got a place in the country. A nice, lonely place. Let's get started."

She picked up her change and stepped down from the stool, following at his heels.

He stopped by the garage where he had rented the Buick, gave them some money and switched cars, heading out into the general direction of the sanitarium, driving the blue '41 Hudson that Varden had used the day before.

CHAPTER FIVE

Delectable Dick

AT SIX o'clock that night they were still cruising. He'd called at scores of houses and farms, asking questions, describing Gabe. Had they noticed this '41 Hudson the last two days? Even Jeri took a hand, without success.

They parked on a lonely stretch of road. Lark pushed his hat to the back of his head, pursed his lips and expelled a gusty sigh. "I don't know, Red. Got any hunches?"

She shook her head, slumping down in the seat.

The sound of plodding hoofs approached, harness creaking and jingling. A farmer emerged from an almost hidden side road, driving a team of weary

horses hitched to a wagon load of hay.

"Hey, mister," he hailed. "You better put a top on that water tank you've been buildin'. It'll fill with bug'n twigs—Oh! I thought you was someone else." He picked up his whip, a tall, gaunt man in faded overalls, an old straw hat, and was about to lash the horses.

Lark tumbled out. "You thought I was Mr. Simpson?"

The man spoke to his horses, pulling on the reins. "Well—I don't rightly know his name. He took over the Johnson cottage about three months ago. Caught a glimpse of him yesterday from the field in a car just like yours."

Lark glanced at Jeri. She was edging to his side of the car, gripping the wheel excitedly.

He took out a cigarette casually. "Is that cottage nearby?"

The man pointed the whip back the way he had come. "Up the road a piece. Better'n a mile."

"I've been looking at property all afternoon," Lark said glibly. "Any idea he might sell?"

The farmer shrugged. "Wouldn't be knowin'. He had some men fixin' the place up when he first took it. Tennis court 'n everything. Then he lost interest, I guess. No good for farmin' anyway."

"I might have a look. My name's Anderson."

The man leaned down awkwardly, extending his hand. "Mine's Arkwright. Reckon it wouldn't hurt nothin' to have a look. Storm's comin'. I gotta get my hay in."

Lark took his crushed hand back, gesturing toward Jeri. "My fiancé."

Jeri stuck out her tongue at him, smiled at Arkwright. "You were saying something about a tank?"

"Mmm," he muttered. "You'll see. A crazy notion if you ask me. Water tank on stilts 'n no cover on it. Well—they

clouds says I ain't got too much time."

He chirped at the horses, and the wagon began lumbering on. He waved. "I'm up the road about two mile. Stop in an' get some cold milk. Best you ever drank!"

Lark grinned, waved, climbing back into the car. "Farmers," he said. "God bless 'em!" He spun the car in a circle, wheels churning the dirt.

"Luck!" Red breathed. "Pure luck!"

The road became a lane, dense foliage crowding the edges. Jeri looked ruefully at the cloudy sky. "It's certainly getting dark."

"Look in the glove compartment. I saw a flashlight."

She found it, clicked it on. "It works."

"Good." He was straining his eyes in the half-light, not wanting to turn on the headlamps.

They passed a hay field where Arkwright must have been working. It was on the left side of the lane. A streak of lightning flickered weirdly over the face of rolling, black clouds. A clearing on the right loomed up, the lane winding on endlessly. He turned sharply into a rutted driveway and cut the motor.

The cottage was moderately large, an almost flat roof littered with leaves and fallen branches, low-hanging eaves, a porch extending on two sides. It looked empty—curtains at the windows, but no light. A stream somewhere in back made a babbling, rushing sound, loud in the stillness.

"Empty." Jeri whispered. "It doesn't look good, does it?"

"Stay here," he said. "I'll give it a once-over."

She scrambled out first. "Not on your life! I'm coming too."

He climbed out. "You can't tell what we'll find, Jeri. Better think twice."

She looked at him tight-lipped. "If I'm thinking the same thing you are, it won't be easy. Not if I know Gabe. Look.

There's the tank. Back of the house. And the tennis court."

CLAY had been spread for the court and rolled with a large metal roller which appeared now to be abandoned and gathering rust. Weeds were sprouting in patches through the clay. But it was the water tank which took Lark's eye.

About fifty feet back of the house, it stood eighteen or twenty feet above the ground on a framework of creosoted two-by-fours. a large, galvanized tank roughly ten feet in diameter and about eight feet deep. There was no ladder in view. Jeri was eyeing it curiously. Their eyes met.

Side by side they approached the cottage. A bird fluttered from a thicket, darting straight for the porch and the closed front door, veering sharply on beating wings.

Jeri's fingers dug into his arm. "It—it's creepy."

He shook off her hand and went up on the porch, trying the door. The knob turned but a lock held it without budging. He tried the windows along the right side of the building and found them securely locked. There was a sizable rock handy, and he picked it up. "Stand back, Red."

Shattering glass tinkled, falling on the floor inside. He reached in gingerly and found the latch, raised the frame. "Want to go in first?" he grinned.

She was tense. "Don't be funny, Lark!"

He hoisted himself over the sill, eyes darting over the gloomy interior. The place wasn't badly furnished.

She held up her arms and he lifted her in. "Gimme that light."

He pushed the bright beam ahead of him, kicked open a bedroom door. Empty. The bed was neatly made up. A sour smell hung over everything. The

closet was completely bare. Another bedroom held a scattered array of tools, nothing else. There was a portable welding outfit, tanks containing oxygen and acetylene gas.

"What's that for?" Jeri asked, pressing close behind him.

"Probably used to weld the tank when it was put up. It's a complete outfit. Look. Here's a flint lighter, dark glasses, even filler rod."

"What's filler rod?"

"Filler rod, or welding rod, it's all the same. See? Here's two torch heads. You weld with one type—do cutting with the other. Get me?"

"You garage men," she said, shaking her head. "Does it matter?"

"I wonder," he muttered, eyes squinted thoughtfully. He spotted an open can of paint with a brush lying across the top. There was a thin scum across the brownish surface but it told him nothing except that it could have been used within the past few days or hours.

Jeri was rummaging through kitchen drawers. "Lark!"

He swung the light around, grabbed the black leather gloves out of her hand. "Gabe's! I told you about these. Remember?"

She took her purse out of her pocket, fumbling inside. "I think I need a smoke."

The locket fell out, lay face up on the floor. The picture of Gabe Varden was missing.

"That's funny," she mused, stooping and picking it up. Then her face went white. "Lark! Do you remember last night? It fell out on the table at the house. If he found it—or one of the servants took it to him—"

Lark reached for the locket grimly. The girl's face stared up at him with wide, mutely staring eyes.

"She's dead," Jeri whispered. "I know it! And buried in this very house!"

He gripped her arm. "Or in that water tank!"

She shuddered, pressing her face against his shoulder.

"I've got to get you out of here, Red. But first I'll have a quick look in that tank."

Her head flashed back. "You think Gabe would come here?"

"Like a homing pigeon! Come on." He stuck the gloves and the locket in his pocket, leading the way to the window.

Outside, he surveyed the tank grimly, removing his coat and hat and handing them to Jeri.

"You're going to climb?"

"I need a fairly long stick. . . . There's one." He picked up a fallen limb, breaking it off at the right length. "Hand this up to me." Thunder rolled and reverberated, coming almost simultaneously with the lightning flash.

She couldn't hear all he said, but she nodded.

HE STARTED to climb, hoping the swiftly fading light would hold a bit longer. The blood pounded in his ears as he struggled for handholds, swinging higher. Jeri was holding the end of the stick as high as she could. He grabbed it and continued on up to the top.

Stagnant, smelly water lay inert, filled with nimbly hopping water-bugs, crawling things. He pushed the stick clear to the bottom, stirring, feeling. She'd probably be weighted. His teeth were clenched with repugnance as he inched around the side, probing, digging.

"Lark?"

He stopped, peering down. "Huh?"

"Is she—?"

"Not yet." He started in again, covering the bottom of the tank thoroughly.

"Lark, she isn't in there! Listen to me. She's under the tennis court!"

"What makes you think—?" He

straightened with a jerk. "You mean that roller was used to—"

"Of course! He's buried her in the clay and used the roller to smooth it flat."

He threw the stick down, began scrambling swiftly toward the ground. Maybe she was right.

He grabbed the light. She piled his coat and hat on the ground, following at his heels as he ran for the tennis court, pausing beside the roller.

She picked up the long, metal tongue and pushed. "It's darn heavy. It would flatten anything. I doubt whether even Gabe could push it."

Lark lent a hand and together they rolled it a few feet. "Needs a car hitched to it," he grunted. "See any tracks?"

She flashed the light. They started working their way slowly over the level court.

"Nothing," she whispered. "He's smooth. Maybe all these things are just for effect. We can't start digging up the whole tennis court!"

"Not tonight at least," he agreed. "But I think you're on the right track, Red." He reached, giving her a quick hug.

She jumped as a glare of lightning ripped the sky and thunder growled, came trembling into his arms. "I guess I'm a coward. I want to get out of here, Lark. Fast!"

"Me too," he nodded. "C'mon."

They ran toward the car. He snatched up his hat and coat. Rain was beginning to pelt down hard, whispering and chattering through the leaves overhead.

"What now?" she asked, as he backed the car out swiftly.

"I'll take you to the hotel. I'm coming back."

"Not tonight! I won't let you come back here—unless you bring the police. You haven't even got a gun."

"Don't be a nut. We haven't got a body either. Just a lot of suspicions.

But if Gabe comes poking his nose in—which I hope—he may spoil his nice little set-up. All I ask is to get within arm's reach of that rat!"

"You're crazy! He may be in town right now. On our trail. Did you register under your own name?"

"I used my own name," he admitted drily. "Right now I could use a drink. I'll check the Alcazar just on the off-chance that he might have the gall to stop there again."

"I'll check," she contradicted. "Too many people have seen you running around lately. You wait in the bar of the Emporia."

He really didn't intend to let her do it, but when they parked near the hotel, she was adamant.

"Okay," he said finally. "What'll I order for you—a collins?"

"Right." She opened the door.

"What's that?" He pointed to a brownish smear on her green skirt.

"Paint," she exclaimed. "I must have brushed against something at the cottage. Oh well—I'm a mess anyway."

"But you didn't get near that open can of paint. Funny. I didn't see anything freshly painted around the cottage either."

She shrugged. "The rain's slacking up, Lark. I'll run over to the hotel." She brushed her lips to his cheek, and jumped out, laughing. "The lady detective's on her way. . . ."

CHAPTER SIX

The Iron Grave

HE HAD a straight whiskey. He needed it. The thought of that tank gave him the willies. Her collins sat beside him on the bar, waiting.

He moved over to the juke-box, slid a nickel in, and stood listening. Sudden-

ly he went cold. She'd been gone fifteen minutes!

Running out into the rain, he splashed across the street and into the lobby of the Alcazar. The same toothless clerk was drooping over the desk. Jeri wasn't here.

"Listen," he said, "did a girl come in here? Redheaded? Beautiful? So tall?" Holding out his hands he made an age-old curving motion.

The clerk shook his head.

A hand tugged at his sleeve and he turned, staring down at his friend, Jimmy, who grinned widely.

"Hello, Mr. Anderson. Gee, they don't grow like that in this town."

Lark grabbed his shoulder, shaking him. "You're sure, Jimmy? She didn't come in here? If you're kidding—"

"Honest. That's straight!"

Lark let go of him, whirled, running for the door. Gabe had her! He could take her to the cottage, rid himself of the last stumbling block in his path. . . .

Lark hesitated in the doorway. "Who's the law in these parts? Who's your sheriff?"

They stared.

"Snap out of it!" he roared. "A girl may be murdered if I don't get help right away!"

"Sam Jager is sheriff," the clerk mumbled. "But you'd have to catch him at his house. I could phone."

"Then phone, pop!" Lark snapped.

Jimmy leaped with excitement. "Murder! Wow! Got a car? I'll show you where the sheriff lives."

They tore across the street and leaped in the Hudson.

Three minutes later they pulled up in front of a neat yellow house. Light came from several windows, shimmering through the steady downpour of rain. Lark left the motor running and dashed for the low porch, the bell-hop at his heels.

A white haired woman opened the door. "Lands sakes—what's all the racket? Sam?" She stepped back. "This must be the young fellow Henry phoned you about."

A vague grunt came from the other room, followed by the screeching sound of a violin.

She turned back. "My, isn't this an awful night? Oh hello, Jimmy. I didn't see you."

Lark groaned.

Jimmy slipped past her with a muttered greeting and vanished inside, jabbering a mile a minute.

Presently a short, heavy-set figure moved into view. His face was lined and seamed, hair frosted with gray. Lark's hopes diminished until he gazed into his eyes—eyes like green ice-cubes, flickering over him appraisingly.

"Well?" he said, buckling a holstered revolver around his thick waist. "Where we gonna find this girl you're talking about? Ma—hand me my slicker."

"I'm sure he's taking her to a cottage about four miles from here. I've got a car."

"We'll use mine. See you later, Ma." He kissed her on the cheek, set a wide-brimmed hat carefully on his head and led the way around the side of the house. "No, Jimmy," he told the bell-hop at their heels. "This ain't for you. Ske-daddle!"

"Aw, Sam."

"What's your name?" Jager asked Lark, swinging wide a garage door.

"Anderson. I'm from Elgin. My girl's in the hands of a killer, Jager. And there's a body buried somewhere around that cottage. The Johnson place, it's called."

They were climbing into a beautiful black car, with a siren on the side, and twin red spots.

Sam Jager backed out cautiously, easing off down the street. "I know where

it is. Now give me the whole story."

Lark was straining in the seat. "How about stepping on it?"

The siren drowned his voice. By the time the sheriff snapped on the spotlights, things were passing in a blur of speed.

JAGER listened without comment, his hands heavy on the wheel.

There was no need for the siren on these lonely stretches of gumbo. At times the wheels churned, slid—the car lurching and fighting.

They turned onto the lane at last, swinging up into the clearing. There was no car parked in front of the cottage.

Lark's eyes had been busy on the road. "He was here!" he shouted as they climbed out. "See those ruts his tires made? He's driven on up the lane—probably saw our lights."

Jager grunted, sweeping a five-cell flashlight in short arcs.

Lark ran up on the porch. The front door was swinging on its hinges.

There was no sign of Jeri. They went from room to room.

"Let's go!" Lark gritted. "He's got her with him!"

"Wait up," Jager said. "Let's have a look for that body you're so sure about—wife number one, you say?"

"There's no time. I tell you, he's got Jeri with him!"

Jager flung him off. "You've been telling me a pretty wild yarn, young man, with nothing to back it up except some tire tracks in the mud."

"And the front door wide open! He's been here and gone."

"He won't get far on this mud road without chains. A body, you say. Now where—?"

"I don't know where!"

Imperturbably, Jager swung the beam of light in a slow, sweeping motion, rain trickling from the brim of his hat.

"What's that thing?" He had the heavy roller targeted squarely.

The answer exploded in Lark's face. "The paint!" he yelled. "Jeri brushed against that roller when we tried to push it. She's in there! His wife's in it!"

Jager stood hunched, disbelief written all over his face. "Calm down, Anderson. You're shaking like a colt. How'd anybody get a body in that roller?"

"I'll show you! Got a hammer in your car, and a screw driver?"

Grudgingly the sheriff moved away.

Lark groped toward the tennis court, crouched by one end of the roller.

About four feet long, three and one half feet in diameter, it was the type that held either water or sand for ballast in its hollow interior. He found the threaded, screw-type cap midway along its length, but couldn't budge it. In the darkness he could tell very little, but he found the paint—a thin circle of paint camouflaging a newly welded seam.

Jager came lumbering through the clay with a hammer and a chisel.

He picked up the hammer, held the chisel at an angle and swung. One end of the chisel penetrated. A thin stream of water spewed out, running steadily.

"Dunno," he said, catching his breath. "A damn good hiding place. An iron grave."

Lark's eyes never left the dwindling stream of water. It wavered, ceased.

The sheriff dropped heavily on his knees, maneuvering one eye close to the opening. He squatted back wordlessly.

Lark went down on all fours, peering. He saw a white arm, blonde hair. . . .

Jager took the light out of his hand. "Guess we better not waste more time. Not if he's got your girl!"

LARK followed him on a dead run. They passed that eerie cottage and leaped into the car. Mud flew high as Jager sent the big car roar-

ing in reverse. He straightened it out and they forged off up the winding lane.

"He can't get far on this road," he muttered. "And maybe we won't either."

They rode in grim silence, eyes straining ahead.

"What'd I tell you?"

The lane abruptly climbed, and about half a block ahead, a tail light gleamed, bouncing, weaving. . . .

"He can't make the hill!" Lark yelled.

The Cadillac squatted, lunging upward, losing momentum. Jager was growling, fighting into second gear, back into high again. His driving was masterful, but they were in a sea of mud and water, crawling now.

The car ahead stopped. The door on the driver's side flew open. Varden's figure lunged into the road, fell, reared upright. Flame spurted from his hand.

One of their headlights blinked out.

Lark had his door open. "Keep going!"

He climbed out on the running board, got the door shut and crouched, hair plastered in his eyes, finding a precarious handhold on one of the red spotlights.

He saw a movement in the car. Jeri! Her slim legs appeared, sliding into view through the open door, down into the mud. She crouched, hair whipping wildly.

Varden was holding his fire, waiting, moving closer to Jeri for protection.

They got to within sixty or seventy feet. Varden's arm moved, extended stiffly. There was a flash—and their other headlamp went out.

Lark jumped, feeling the car sliding down into the ditch. He ploughed toward Varden—toward a cold, methodical Varden with death in his hand.

The first bullet brushed Lark's cheek. The shadowy figure loomed tall ahead. He sprinted on in short rushes, weaving, getting close. And then Jeri's figure left the side of the car swiftly. She flung herself at Varden, jarring him, clinging.

(Please continue on page 129)

THE RANDOM KEE-WHANGO

Alex felt almost tender toward his fat and frowsy wife—now that her grave was awaiting.



Little tableaux of murderous acts flashed through his mind in a crazy montage.

IMMOBILIZED by a dinner of pork shanks and sauerkraut, Alex Faffner lay on the velour couch in the front room of the farm house, acutely conscious of his wife, who was washing dishes in the kitchen. He could not remember the exact moment at which he had decided to murder her, but the decision had been made and was, he knew, irrevocable. He remembered that for a time, a short while ago, her presence and her movements in his house—indeed, her very projection into his life—had become

By
**RUFÉ
BAKAL**



almost unbearable. But now, he reflected with satisfaction, that feeling was gone. Since he had made up his mind, Vi was tolerable to him. It was, he thought, like letting an ant crawl up your arm, enduring its sauciness because you knew you could kill it at your pleasure.

The kitchen noises stopped abruptly and were superseded by a variety of grunts. Vi called, "My hip bothers me, Mister Faffner; it's going to rain!"

Alex acknowledged this forecast with a non-committal "nyuh" and said archly to himself, *It won't be bothering you for long*. He smiled at his ominous little joke and almost regretted that, under the circumstances, he was unable to share it with her.

The kitchen noises resumed. Through the open doors, he caught glimpses of her moving about in the kitchen: tidy, but somewhat lumpy, in a cheap percale housedress, moving laboriously in worn carpet slippers. She was a little taller than he, and she was fat. In a happier day, he would have called her plump. But there was no longer any need for euphemizing. Studying her, she seemed strange to him, in a way that all things lose their familiarity under scrutiny. This was Vi, his wife, upon whom his head and heart had directed his hand to fall in murder, premeditated in the fields, and in the barn, and on his bed, and on the velour couch: unfamiliar to him now after two years of courtship and seven of indifferent marriage.

Vi had been a country schoolteacher when he met and courted her, a plum, just barely within his reach, which he hungered for and plucked. During the courtship, he had not considered whether or not she would make a good farm woman or even if the laughter would last, just as he did not consider now whether or not he would be caught and punished for the crime he was to commit. Vi had turned out to be a good farm

woman and more. She managed the house, the chickens, the canning, the milk records, of course; but she could, as well, swing an axe and handle a plow with the best of men. But the laughter and romance had gradually lost its urgency and then, at no particular moment, had disappeared completely among the chores. In quiet moments, Alex remembered them and missed them. It is reasonable to suppose that Vi did, too.

Well, thought Alex, why worry about it? He had gone over these things in his mind often enough. The time for feeling sorry for himself was past. "My mind's made up," he mumbled, half-aloud.

How was it to be carried off, this thing? That was what he had to think about now.

Alex swung heavily off the couch, and smoothed his hand over the velour couch where he had been lying. He went into the kitchen, where he took his cosack and cap off the hook behind the door. Avoiding Vi at the sink, he spoke to the empty hook, "Got to go out and see about a few things."

"All right, Mister Faffner," said Vi wearily.

When he got outside, Alex smiled at her manner. That was something else that got him: that "Mister Faffner" business. She said it with equal emphasis on each word so that her tone suggested cold formality rather than mockery. Still, he really didn't know what she meant by it and, at the moment, the insinuation didn't seem to make much difference. Clear of her, Alex took a deep breath of Vi-less air. He picked a stem of timothy grass, bit into the soft end, and, chewing it meditatively, looked at the sky. He noted the fleecy cumulus clouds, which gainsaid Vi's hip. It would not rain. He began to walk.

He found it difficult to concentrate on

a plan for doing away with Vi and decided to wait until he had passed the distractions of the barnyard. The newly plowed fields stretched out before him and their very expanse seemed to reassure him: surely in the fields he would find the answer. He could postpone the ache of concentration until he reached them.

ALLEX walked aimlessly at first, following the fresh furrows, and then, as he had often done as a child, stepping from crest to crest of the furrows. He was annoyed that the seed of murder, already firmly implanted in his brain, did not spring full-grown. As a farmer, he should have known better; but he was impatient. He put his head down and began to walk as fast as he could over the land, slipping and stumbling, hoping that a solution would emerge from all the joggling. Little tableaux of murderous acts appeared to him, disconnected and incomplete; distorted guns, knives, poisons and ropes flashed through his mind in a crazy montage. He saw little cinematic snatches of conspiracies, plans, alibis, getaways, and hideouts. These visions frustrated him and made his brain ache. Well, how could he, Alex Faffner, a simple farmer, know about the techniques of murder? Poisons, for instance. What could he know about the subtleties of poisons? It suddenly occurred to him that he was not even sure of the spelling of the word. Were there two *o*'s in it, or two *i*'s? This seemed a pressing matter to him, and he was relieved for the excuse it gave him to leave the larger struggle while puzzling over it. He stopped, rested on one knee, and smoked a cigarette. Poison? Poisin? He arranged them in his mind and then wrote them side by side in the earth with his finger. Yes, of course: poison—but, perhaps: poisin.

He dropped the subject, and looked

about him. He was now far out in the fields, with a good view of the whole farm: the house and barn in the distance, the rolling fields and pasture land. Then, suddenly, the scheme did spring full-grown, and the icy tingle of a thrill going up his spine and around the base of his skull brought him to his feet.

Of course! This was perfect. The farm. He rubbed his hands with excitement. The closest neighbor was Richard Kulze, almost a mile away and with no clear view of his farm. He studied the terrain hurriedly to make sure of it. Yes, on the farm they were all alone, Vi and himself: no one to see them, no one to pry, no one to suspect. A straightforward method would do, then. The plan came easily and quickly to him now. He'd dig a pit in the plowed field, go down maybe eight feet, just to make sure there'd be no slip-up. He'd get Vi out there on some pretext or other and then, Kee-Whango! Alex liked the sound of this magic word, which seemed the key to his liberation, and he repeated it aloud with relish: "Kee-Whango! Kee-Whango!" That does the trick!

Then he'd fill in the pit again and run a furrow over the ground with the plow, restoring the pattern. He began to laugh at the clever simplicity of it all. And then, afterwards. Well, afterwards, he'd tell folks that Vi had gone to visit her sister in Milwaukee. And, later, he'd admit grudgingly that perhaps she had left him for good. Anyway, there was plenty of time to work all that out and he was confident now that he could.

He was so pleased with the plan that he permitted himself the wistful speculation as to whether the corn would have a better yield over Vi's pit. He returned to the house in a happy mood.

At dusk he told Vi that he had to "run over to the Kulze place to see Dick about something."

"All right, Mister Faffner," said Vi.

He threw a spade into the box on his pick-up truck and drove by a devious route to a clump of trees on the far end of the fields. He concealed the truck in parking it and, carrying the spade, walked quickly to the place in the fields he had selected that afternoon. He spat on his hands and began to dig competently.

The digging went quickly, more quickly than Alex had thought it would. The earth was easy to handle and he seemed to have a strength he had not counted on. Everything was going his way. He sang as he worked, songs that were popular when he first met Vi. He might have finished the digging that night, but decided that he could afford the luxury of waiting one more day. Perhaps it was wiser to wait, anyway, he thought, for there was more than digging to be done and Vi was, after all, a strong, big woman. He would come, then, on the next night to finish the pit. And to finish the whole business, with a Kee-Whango.

Alex crawled out of the hole and looked down into it. He realized for the first time that what he had been digging was actually a grave. The thought of this shocked him momentarily and he wavered. Then, realizing that what he had wanted so badly was within his grasp, he turned away from the pit, laughing at his sentimentality of a moment ago. You don't think about those things, anyway, he told himself, just as you don't think about getting caught. You plan it all, if you're smart, so that you don't get caught, but you don't think about it.

IF VI sensed anything unusual during the rest of the night or the next day, she didn't show it. Alex was very kind to her and that, in itself, was suspicious. But since he had begun work on the pit, he felt a tenderness toward her that he had seldom felt since the

days of courtship. He felt genuinely sorry for her when he saw the untroubled ease with which she carried on her household routine. "She did not act at all like a condemned woman. But, then, she didn't know that she was condemned. Only Alex knew that. . . ."

At dusk he went out again, bolder, now, straight for the fields, not bothering to conceal the truck. He finished his job in an hour and sat down to smoke a cigarette on the mound of earth he had thrown up. He smoked it leisurely, threw it into the hole when he was finished, and breathing heavily, drove back to the house. He parked the truck and walked slowly to the house. As he went, he kept repeating to himself in a low, trembling voice: "Come on, Vi, get your coat on and bring the flashlight. I need some help." Such a simple, natural thing for him to say to her; and yet, he felt that he had to practice saying it, as if nothing were so important in the little drama he had devised as getting the opening line just so.

He opened the back door and was relieved to find that his wife wasn't in the kitchen. Now there would be no necessity to face her, for a while yet. "Vi," he called. "Get your coat on and bring the flashlight. I need your help!"

"All right," she said from the front room. "Where?"

Alex ran his tongue over his parched lips. "Where? Where what?"

"Where do you need some help, Mister Faffner?"

Why fool around? he thought. "In the far field!"

Vi shuffled into the kitchen, putting on her coat as she came. Seeing her come, Alex walked into the back yard to wait for her. He felt a little drunk, a little too giddy, and he clenched his fists, digging his fingernails into his palms until the pain steadied him.

Vi had just come out the back door

when two brash fingers of light were thrown in a wide arc from the highway into the drive. Alex felt the back of his head go hot. That was something he hadn't figured on: someone coming to the house. He grew panicky, grabbed Vi's arm and implored in a frantic whisper, "Vi. Come on, let's hide. Let's go! Let's hide!"

Vi wrenched her arm away and looked coldly into his wild eyes. "Why, Mister Faffner, whatever's the matter with you?" she said quietly. "Gracious, it's probably only Richard Kulze."

Richard Kulze? Dick Kulze had seen him digging the pit! That was why he had come, to snoop around. To poke his nose in other people's business. Alex's reason would have told him that the contour of the land made it impossible for Kulze to have seen him, but Alex was lost somewhere between reason and unreason.

Vi was right: it was Richard Kulze's car.

Alex closed his eyes, as though that might relax him. At this moment he recalled, oddly enough, that when he and Vi had had their wedding photos taken, the photographer had told them to relax by taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, fighting to get a grip on himself. That scene with Vi was bad enough—she probably knew something was up—but he couldn't let on to Kulze, just in case Kulze hadn't seen him digging.

KULZE turned down the window of his car and leaned out. He said that he was going bowling in the town and thought maybe Alex would like to come along with him.

"No, not tonight," said Alex shakily. He could tell that Kulze hadn't seen him dig the pit. Kulze wasn't that deep.

"Now, what are you and Mrs. Faffner

doing out this time of night?" Kulze laughed. "Going to finish your plowing?"

Alex hated him and his laughter. "Why, no," he said, "having a little trouble with the pick-up. Thought I'd work on it a little tonight. Vi is going to hold the flashlight."

Vi looked at him curiously, but said nothing.

"Need some help?"

Alex refused more emphatically than he had intended and there was an uncomfortable pause. He could feel the sweat on his back and his shirt sticking. His hands were damp and he rubbed them against his overalls. He studied his shoes, aware that Vi and Kulze were looking at him.

Kulze cleared his throat uneasily. "The pick-up, eh? What's the matter with her?"

"The—the distributor, I guess." Alex had to keep his wits about him now, had to concentrate on what Kulze was saying; but he found himself repeating childishly in his mind, "Go away! Go away!"

"So you're a mechanic, too, now, eh, Alex?" said Kulze.

Alex saw no trap in that question. "Why, yes, I guess so."

"You know, Alex, I always say that a good farmer got to be a good jack-of-all-trades. We got to do plumbing, carpenter work, mason-work, and what have you. Got to be good on all them things. Like you, even got to know how to tinker with a motor."

"Guess that's right, Dick."

"Now, take you, Alex," Kulze persisted, "if you ever wanted to give up farming—and I'm not saying you would—you wouldn't have no trouble at all making a damn—pardon me, Mrs. Faffner—damn good living in some town doing carpenter work. Now, am I right or am I wrong?"

"Why, yes, I guess so," said Alex, hop-

ing that he had said the appropriate thing. He became acutely conscious of Vi standing next to him, saying nothing. He felt her eyes burn into him and he wondered what she was thinking. All of it was so strange and confusing; Kulze and Vi and the pit in the fields. Even he himself seemed strange, not like Alex Faffner at all.

"I won't keep you folks," said Kulze after a pause. They exchanged good-byes, Alex's being elaborately cordial, and Kulze turned his car around and drove away. They stood and watched the tail-light disappear down the highway.

The air seemed lighter to Alex. He turned and started walking toward the fields, not wanting to look at Vi or talk to her, not wanting any questions. He felt better now, and ready for what lay ahead. He'd gotten over that extra hurdle all right. "Come on, let's get going!" he called over his shoulder.

"All right, I'm coming," said Vi wearily, and she labored after him over the fields.

* * *

A stillness hung about the Faffner house when, a week later, Richard Kulze once again pointed his car into the driveway. He sounded his horn, but there was no response. Puzzled, he got out of his car and walked to the front door. It was ajar. He walked in gingerly, his head cocked. There was a stir in the kitchen, and the faint sound of someone weeping softly.

Kulze was in the kitchen now. He stopped short when he saw Vi sitting in a straight-back kitchen chair. "Why, Mrs. Faffner, what's the matter?"

"He's left!" Vi said, composing herself with much effort.

"Who's left? Alex?"

"The day after the night you came.

Mister Faffner took the bus to town; said he had to get a new distributor for the pick-up."

"And ain't he been back since?" Kulze asked with astonishment.

"And hasn't been back since." She looked at him significantly and said very slowly: "Mister Faffner took most of his carpentry tools with him!"

Her eyes encouraged him as he deliberated the implications of that fact, and her head nodded affirmatively as he did arithmetic in his mind, adding the taking of the tools to the strange conversation of a week ago and to Alex's disappearance and getting the obvious result.

He looked at her tenderly. "Gee, Mrs. Faffner, I just don't know what to say. I never figured. I never thought. Alex."

He comforted her as best he knew how, and soon they were able to speak of the desertion and the great injury done Vi.

"I thought he acted awful queer that night," Kulze mused. "Thought he had something up his sleeve."

Vi dabbed at her eyes with a corner of her apron and agreed that Alex had been acting peculiar for a long time.

"Sort of leaves you high and dry, Vi," said Kulze. "What you aim to do now?"

"Oh, I guess I'll stay on here for a while to make sure. To make sure he's gone for good, that is."

"Poor Vi," said Kulze, "it's going to be awful lonely for you."

Vi rose and walked to the window. She stood before it, looking out over the rolling fields. With a hint of regret in her voice, she said, "There's some that are lonelier than I." Then she stared down at her hands and, with a shudder, wiped them in her apron.

Kulze fumbled with his hat, taking a step backward. "I guess I'll be going."

Vi turned, her face brightening. "No, Dick," she said. "Don't go. Stay. I'll make a fresh pot of coffee."

THE HIGH COST OF LYING

By JOHN BENDER



*The blonde cashier
identified Manny
Arno. . .*

KYLE LEWIS, attorney at law, finished his hurried dinner in the restaurant near the courthouse, and touched his napkin to the smile he wore. He was not the slightest bit displeased that the newspapermen

The golden-tongued lawyer got Manny off in nothing flat—and found Manny'd rather kill again than pay.

had converged about his table, but he was wise enough not to act too boastful, too certain of himself. The trial was still not over.

Flashbulbs splashed their brilliance on his carefully barbered, not unhandsome face, and on his scarlet tie—the only spot of outstanding color which he permitted his expensive clothes to boast.

"I hear the jury is filing back in, Mr. Lewis," said one of the reporters. "Do you think they'll let Manny off?"

Kyle smiled noncommittally.

Mason, the *Mirror* man, made a wry face. "Tell me, what do you think personally, Lewis? Is Manny Arno guilty?"

The lawyer frowned. "You should know better than to ask me that."

"Let me put it this way, then," Mason said. "How does a lawyer swindle himself into defending a pathological killer like Manny Arno?"

Kyle rose. He saw the bailiff at the restaurant door, beckoning. For himself, Kyle Lewis needed no avenues of philosophic escape for the fact that he had chosen to defend such men as Manny Arno. He knew his legal talent, and he set a price on it. If only men like Arno could pay that price, well, it wasn't his fault. The goals of success remained unchanged.

But for the record, the lawyer said, "The laws of this sovereign state, Mr. Mason, are administered impartially, for the protection of all. To admit one man's lack of right—guilty or innocent though he may be—is to deny faith in our system of government."

"Quote, unquote," Mason said. "The money helps, though, doesn't it?"

"You are impertinent, Mr. Mason. Now, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me. . ."

He threaded his way through them and went outside into the warm Spring night. Impertinent but accurate, he thought. He wondered how much Mason knew about the fee involved. Fifteen

thousand dollars—it was virtually in his hands now.

He heard the footsteps at about the same time he realized that two men were at his side.

"How's it goin', shyster? Manny beat it?"

It was Patchy Quill, Arno's chief lieutenant, a dark-faced hood who had been in on the lumber mill job with Arno. The other man, Link Travers, was also one of Arno's boys—equally dark-skinned and vicious looking.

The attorney faced them. "I told Arno that I would not be seen with any of you in public. The trial is not yet finished—the order still applies."

"Why, you little fink!"

"Get away from me!"

Travers snarled, "Who the hell you think you're talking to?"

"I told Arno to keep you out of sight."

"So we're out of sight. Tell him we're out of dough, too. It's been two months since that push—"

"Good night!" Kyle walked away. He could feel their eyes burning into his back, but they did not follow him.

WHERE the hell you been?" Arno demanded, when Kyle took his place in the seat next to his client. "The jury's been back for five minutes." His flat gray eyes shifted impatiently, bespeaking his eternal restlessness. He was a short man, blond and strangely pale, who looked much older than he should have.

"I told you to keep those hoods away from me, Arno," Kyle said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Link and Patch. They were waiting outside the restaurant. They seem eager for their money."

"Dough, dough!" Arno scowled. "That's all I hear! And you're as bad as they are. Nicking me fifteen G's."

"Only if I get you off," Kyle reminded

him. "Which seems fair enough, considering that you took in close to ninety thousand dollars on the job."

"Okay, okay," Arno said. "Money-hungry bums, all of you! You'll get your dough—after the trial."

Kyle Lewis wasn't worried about the money. The case had gone without a hitch. That his client was guilty, he was certain. Arno was a killer, a West Side hoodlum who had risen to prominence through a barking gun and a thorough lack of conscience. A cold, hard little man who could pay cold, hard cash.

Kyle had handled the case carefully, turning it bit by bit to a simple point of identification, which had seemed infallible to the prosecution.

The blonde cashier of the lumber mill which had been burglered had positively identified Manny Arno as the man who held her at gun point and rifled the payroll. He had, she testified, shot the aged clerk in the lumber mill office without the slightest provocation.

But under cross-examination, just before his defense summation, Kyle had forced her to admit that she had been visiting an eye doctor for several weeks prior to the crime. He had made her admit she should have worn glasses and didn't, because she thought they detracted from her appearance. Then, holding aloft a deck of playing cards, he had shown the jury that she was unable to identify the eight, nine or ten spots of any suit, one from the other.

The State's objection had been sustained, of course, in the face of such a trick, but the effect upon the jury was registered nonetheless.

They delivered a verdict of not guilty.

A short time later, after they had escaped the newspapermen, Kyle and Manny drove, in Manny's large, luxurious convertible, through the swelling evening traffic. Kyle ran a carefully manicured finger along the fine, leather

upholstery. Then they stopped for a red light and he became conscious of Manny Arno's amused stare.

"Think you'll get one like it, counsellor?"

Kyle folded his hands about his briefcase. "I might."

Arno laughed. "With my money."

"With the Crescent Lumber Mill's money, more likely."

"Ain't it the truth! I got to hand it to you, counsellor—you wrapped the whole thing up nice and neat." Arno reached across to the dash compartment. A blue-steeled automatic snuggled in among the road maps. "All except for that no-good fluff who tried to put the finger on me. She could stand a treatment. Maybe I could fix her eyesight up real good." He transferred the gun to the special, leather-lined pocket in his suit.

Kyle did not like the gun; and it annoyed him to see Arno being so careless here on the brightly lighted street.

"Don't start acting foolish. Arno. You can't afford any more trouble."

The motor purred and they were moving. Kyle heard Arno's laughter, like a cold blade pricking at his spine. "Trouble, counsellor? Trouble? Manny Arno don't have trouble. That's why he hires boys like you."

Kyle wished suddenly that this business were done and over with. He was aware of a change in the man beside him, a slight but disconcerting alteration in Arno's attitude toward him now that the threat of prison was gone. The man's re-found arrogance was both distasteful and—he admitted it to himself—frightening.

"How long is this going to take?" he asked.

"You gonna buy that car tonight?"

"I have a rather important engagement."

"Don't worry about it, counsellor."

Arno gunned the convertible to a faster pace. "You let me do all the worrying from here on in." Again he snickered. "Yeah, now it's my turn."

He began to whistle tunelessly, his eyes fixed on the road, his pale face frozen in a faint smile. . . .

The bridge loomed large and dark before them, its metal bulk a deeper purple than the starless sky. Arno took the car across to the far side of the river and turned into the first road at right angles to the bridge. He parked and killed the lights.

"Okay," he said. "Here we are, counsellor."

Kyle Lewis knew the section slightly. They were some twelve miles from the city, perhaps six or seven from the Crescent Lumber Mill whose loading yards fronted upriver to the north. This was part of the route Arno had taken in his flight from the police.

"Down there," Arno said, pointing to one of the large cement bridge bases, "there's a sort of shelf between the cement and the girders, around the edge, right out by the water. You'll find a metal cash box taped to the inside edge of the girder."

"I'll find—!"

"Go down and get the box, counsellor. I'll wait here for you. The sooner you get back, the sooner we get this over with." He smiled. "That's all you want, ain't it?"

Kyle took flashlight Arno offered and went down the slight incline, careful of his expensive clothes, feeling his way among the tall weeds. He was breathing heavier than this small exertion warranted, but he was strangely grateful to get away from Arno. He had no doubt that this was Arno's way of showing him who was boss.

Kyle smiled into the darkness. For fifteen thousand dollars, he didn't really mind.

THE attorney stopped. Was it a trap? Did Arno suspect that the police might have figured this, and were ready to grab him when he came to get the money? Were they waiting somewhere in the darkness even now?

He could not know. But he realized that he was letting his nerves run away with him. He heard Arno's voice from above calling him, asking how he was making out.

He grunted a reply and continued toward the bridge, feeling better. Full confidence returned when he stepped out on the platform and found the heavy, oblong box. He freed it from its tape and turned from the river bank, consoling himself with the thought that fifteen thousand of these unmarked bills were his.

"All right, counsellor, hold it there!" The voice was Arno's, just behind him. "No, don't turn around. This'll do fine."

It was impossible to mistake that tone of finality. He saw now why Arno had sent him for the box. To follow him down to the river—to kill him!

"No, Manny," he said. "Manny, you can't!"

"Oh, but I can, counsellor. Stand still! Now, just put the box down and take two steps forward."

Kyle's breath deserted him; his stomach experienced a convulsion that sucked his tongue dry. He fought for words.

"Manny, listen. About the fee. If you think it's too high—I mean—" Even at that moment, he could not will himself to give it all up. "We'll make it ten. Five, Manny!"

"Move," Arno said.

"We'll call it square, Manny."

"Move!"

Kyle whimpered, his legs numbed into immobility.

"Your fee was fair enough," Arno said flatly. "But I just don't want to pay anything, see? It's cheaper this

way, counsellor. All neat and simple."

The gun prodded Kyle in the small of the back. "Put the box down!" Then Arno shoved him, hard.

The movement broke the bonds of fear. Animal reaction—blind, unreasoning desire for survival—turned Kyle in full motion, desperately swinging the heavy metal box which he clutched by the slender handle.

The gun sounded—a tremendous blast in his ears—but he felt no pain and did not stop to marvel that his unexpected action had made the man miss. Kyle saw nothing but the other's bulk, breathing death upon him. He kept swing wildly.

He felt the shudder of the blow in the bones of his shoulder. Arno gulped a strangled cry, falling away, his hand held up to his bloody face. A long gash lay across his forehead, filling the eyes beneath with the vacancy of shock. Automatically, the gun came up in his hand, searching for an opponent he could not see.

With a whimper of effort, Kyle swung at Arno again. Despite the gun, it was not self-defense. His mind was racing madly to the only conclusion left to him—kill him, kill him, kill him! Not just fifteen thousand, not just a part of it . . . all of the money now.

The box crashed across Arno's skull, driving the man closer to the river's edge. Again Kyle swept the box around in a vicious arc. It thudded against the bleeding face and Arno collapsed. . . . He did not have to feel for a pulse to know that Arno was dead.

Gradually, his fear and rage deserted him as he sat there beside the body, drawing air into his tortured lungs. He felt no remorse. Somewhere on the river, a mournful whistle sounded. It was proof that life had stopped for one small man only.

He pushed himself erect, his legal mind telling him that he was safe. He could push the body into the water, and it was possible that it would not be discovered for days.

Chuckling, he clutched the money box. He had it all now—all of it. He ran his fingers over the slippery metal surface. And abruptly his laughter stilled.

The box was open! It was empty! Somehow, in the struggle, one of the blows had sprung the lock.

Desperately he began casting around in the trampled weeds, searching on his knees. It must be here somewhere.

And then, abruptly, his fingers touched the edge of a packet of bills lying on the river bank. Before he could clutch the packet, it slipped off into the river.

No! No! He cursed savagely. The money had fallen into the river as they fought along its edge! He watched the flow of water beneath him and hunched over, trying to find some trace of it in the darkness below.

He did not hear the car pull in above. He was stalking thus, a few feet from the body of Arno, when the first rays of the flashlights caught him.

"There! Somebody's down there!"

He felt a wave of panic. Had the police followed them after all?

"Cripes! Look at that! He killed the boss for the dough!"

It was another voice, and looking up, Kyle recognized the men. Link and Patchy.

"Hold it!" Patchy cried at him. "You little fink!"

But Kyle was moving, scrambling desperately up the river bank toward the parked convertible. The first shot caught him in the back, literally blowing him to his knees. He was kneeling above the money box when the other shots found him. . . .

DEAD-END

CHAPTER ONE

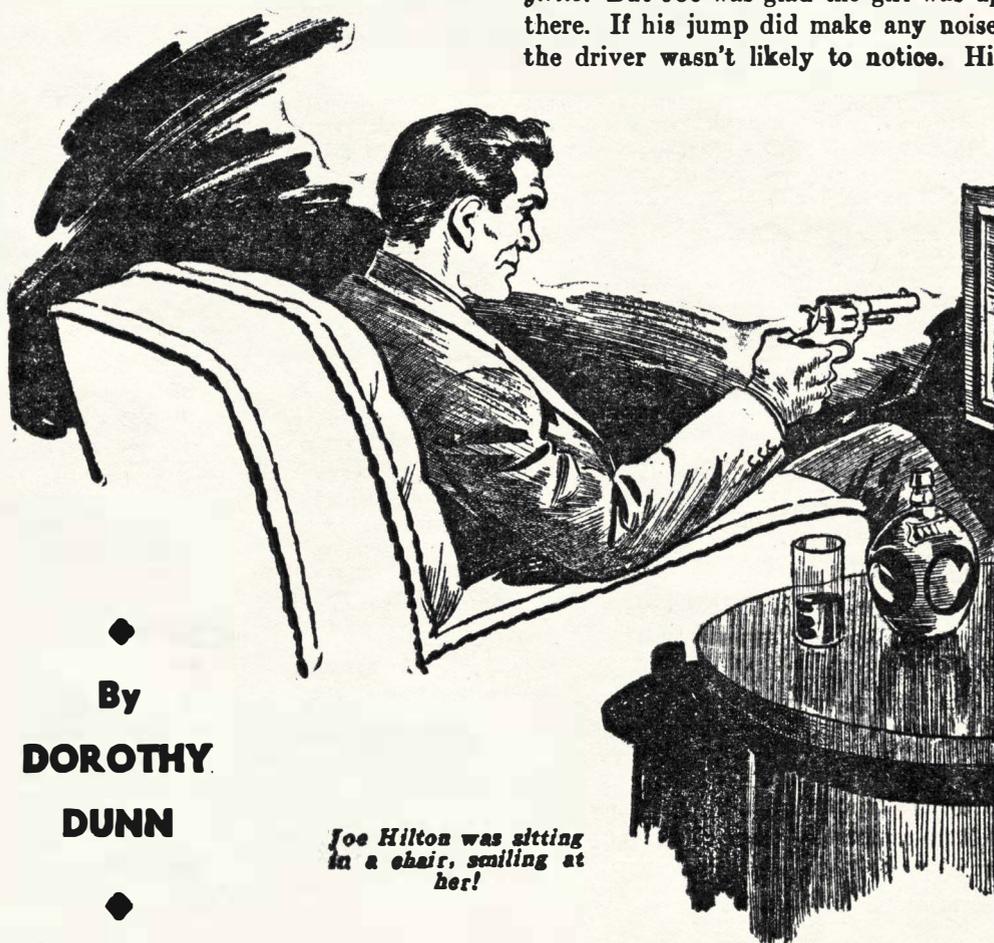
Blonde Slay-Bait

JOE HILTON was going to jump from the back of the truck and then roll into the ditch. He picked a curve on the highway, where the truck would have to slow down. It was a moonless night, dark and cloudy. The driver up front in his cab wouldn't ever know that he'd smuggled a man out of the prison yards.

The driver had picked up a girl hitch-hiker a few miles back, and he was mak-

ing senseless cracks about how a pretty youngster like her was taking a chance when she thumbed a ride. He was telling her how lucky she was to draw a respectable family man like himself, for instance. He was telling her if she was tired, it was perfectly safe to lean against his shoulder, him being married and all.

Yeah, thought Joe. *That driver's about as safe as a C-note in a poker game, girlie.* But Joe was glad the girl was up there. If his jump did make any noise, the driver wasn't likely to notice. His



◆
By

DOROTHY

DUNN

◆
*Joe Hilton was sitting
in a chair, smiling at
her!*

DARLING

Joe had crushed out of prison—the same hot-blooded Joe that Lois had sold up the river. And now all that sultry two-timer could do—was crawl in her coffin and wait. . . .



**Thrilling Novelette
of a Double-Crosser's Comedown**

eye wasn't strictly on the rear vision mirror.

Luck seemed to be with him. There were no cars behind to spotlight the back of the truck. He leaned out on the curve, landed in a crouch on the soft shoulder, and rolled into the ditch.

Now he was fifty miles away from the cell that had been home for two years. Now he'd done the thing that had kept him awake planning, ever since his first night in that little apartment back there that had been leased for the next eighteen years, rent-free. He'd broken the lease at last. He'd crushed out.

He lay there for a few minutes, watching a whole sky full of clouds and stars, drinking it in—the bigness of it, the freedom of looking as long as he wanted. Back there, some punk was around to tell you what you could do and what you couldn't do. That's what had made it impossible to stick it out. He'd never been able to take orders from anybody and he'd never been able to take a pushing around, either.

He stood up, remembering his real reason for wanting to be free. Not to stare at the sky and breathe on his own time. He didn't care how long he breathed, just so he got to Lois Baum.

Ten minutes with Lois was all he wanted. He wasn't fooling himself that he could last any longer than that. Even with luck, he would have to play it quick and rough the way he had planned.

They'd have him marked as soon as he commandeered a car, stole the driver's clothes and cash. He didn't want to kill the driver, so there would be a report. But he hoped to make enough quick, daring moves to keep ten minutes ahead of the law.

He would ditch the first car, steal a second, ditch the second car, switch to a train, get off before his ticket reading, switch to a bus and double back, catch

another bus and go on in. Once in the city, there would be no more stalling. He knew exactly where he was going and what he was going to do.

He had it all figured out, right down to the schedule of the last bus out of Belleville for St. Louis. At best, it would take him a week to reach Lois Baum.

It would take him a week to reach her, and only ten minutes, or less, to kill her.

After that, they could come and get him. He didn't care. Everything would be all right with him the minute he gave her what she had coming. She wasn't going to get away with it, that was all. She wasn't going to get away with it!

* * *

The girl had soft blonde hair that was as natural as all the looks she was getting from the men who walked past her into the cocktail lounge.

She was dressed in cool green silk, the color of watermelon rind where the pink leaves off. You couldn't tell at first whether the dress was buff, yellow, or green, but it was mostly green—and her eyes were the same pale, clear shade, almost translucent, wide and lovely under the dark lashes. Her brows were darkened a little, too, which set off her light hair, eyes, and skin.

Interest varied in the eyes of the men who saw her. Whatever they saw first, seemed to catch and hold the attention. Each man who passed was cheated out of the whole enticing picture by not being able to shift his gaze.

She sat stiffly, as unobtrusive as possible, in a heavy, uncomfortable chair of carved oak in the foyer of the Mayfair. She looked at her watch often. She wasn't used to waiting for people and, plainly, didn't like it.

Finally, he came.

This man didn't cheat himself. He

started with the tip of her toe as he left the revolving door, and timed his vision so that he was looking directly into her eyes when he stood in front of her.

"Darling, I got here as soon as I could. What's wrong, anyway? You sounded so upset on the phone. But never mind right now. Let's crawl into dry martinis while you tell me."

HE MANEUVERED her deftly into the *Hofbrau* and they found a table in the corner that was private enough if voices didn't rise above the wired music.

He chattered away. He always chattered. Hank Irby, glib and gay, could talk anybody into anything. He always could, even though one sometimes had a faint suspicion that he might be talking strictly for his own advantage.

"Your call caught me in the middle of a board meeting. Can't just walk out on those things, you know. Horrible bore, too. Curtis was spouting off as usual about the coming depression. Did you wait long, Lois?"

Their drinks arrived and the waiter went away.

"It seemed long. Hank, I didn't want to talk about it over the phone, but he's out!"

"Out?" Hank sampled his drink, connoisseur-fashion.

"Joe's escaped. Haven't you seen the papers?"

"So what, baby?" Hank lifted his glass again. "Don't be silly. Drink up before the chill leaves the glass."

"But Hank—"

"Now, now. He won't get ten miles before the cops nab him. Joe isn't smart enough to play a thing like that smoothly. You know how he is. He'll snort around and be dramatic and daring, thinking his muscle makes up for his brains. He won't even get close, honey. I can promise you that."

She gathered enough confidence from Hank to drink the cocktail she needed so badly. But she wasn't really convinced.

"He must have used brains to get out of prison, Hank. They think he hid in one of the trucks, but they're not even sure which one. He certainly didn't accomplish that much with just muscle."

"Maybe not, but it took him two years to figure a way. That's pretty slow thinking when you get right down to it."

"I don't know, Hank. It seems to me that you've taken about the same length of time to do something about Melissa."

His eyes got soft and tender, as they always did when she mentioned it. He reached for her hand and curled her fingers with an absent touch of intimacy.

"Darling, that takes a different kind of figuring. You'll never know how hard I've been working on it. Every minute of the day I'm dreaming of the time I can claim you openly. But I want to get the money in there, too. All for you, honey. Surely, you know I'm making all my plans in that direction!"

She returned the pressure of his hand. When his eyes looked like this, when he talked to her like this, she trusted and loved him. There was only one Hank Irby in the world and she wanted to hang on.

"I guess you mean it, Hank, and it's all right, really. But I can't help this funny feeling I have about Joe. If I weren't alone in the apartment, I might not be so jittery about it."

"Don't worry, baby. Tomorrow you'll read that the police hauled him back for the rest of his sentence, or shot him down trying."

She puckered her brows with anxiety. She felt safe here with Hank, with other people around, but she wasn't forgetting the panic she'd experienced just

that morning, alone in her apartment.

She had known it was too soon to expect Joe, but her imagination had taken over.

Joe was an expert at breaking in. There wasn't a lock that defied his skill; there wasn't a door or a window that he wouldn't tackle. Lois wasn't sure how many jobs he had pulled on his own, but she had a mink coat in her closet right now as a souvenir of one of his successes.

Long ago, before meeting Henry, she'd seen a lot of Joe. But Hank had more to offer. He had a respectable air, he had position, he had money—even if the bulk of the fortune was in Melissa's name. She had decided right then that her future was Hank Irby, that she was through taking the risks of being a burglar's girl.

Even a good burglar like Joe. She knew how good he was. She knew that the lock on her door couldn't possibly protect her from him. If he wanted to get her, he would.

And she knew Joe. He'd want to get to her if it was the last thing he ever did. Joe was like that. You couldn't double-cross him and get away with it.

"I'm scared, Hank!" she said, shivering. "I never should have let you use Joe for the fall guy. We could have found someone else!"

HANK ordered another round of drinks in that smooth, easy manner of his. "Spilt milk, baby. We did pick Joe and it worked like a charm, thanks to *your* charm. We don't ever have to think of that little episode again. He's been tried and sentenced, and I'm still at the bank with twenty thousand to the good. Merton was just a heal who was about to have my accounts investigated before I was ready for it. The fact that he was killed with the gun that you took from Joe

—well, it was just one of those things.

"And poor Joe! The fact that he accepted your tale about all the cash Merton kept in his bedroom just proves how dumb he was. And the fact that the cops, through an anonymous tip, happened to catch him in Merton's bedroom with Merton's dead body is just another one of those things. That's old worry, baby. Forget it."

"I had," Lois admitted. "I guess you were right about me when you told me I wouldn't worry about having framed Joe, that I only worried about myself."

"We all do that, Lois. Except the fools with that awful affliction called a conscience. You're not getting any stabs of a sickness like that, are you?"

His eyes were suddenly sharp, studying her face.

"You mean am I thinking of making a deal with Joe if he does turn up? Thinking of telling him that it was really you who shot Merton?"

"Yes. I mean something like that. Is that why you're so much on edge today? Trying to figure an out?"

This time she reached for his hand and it was her eyes that started melting. "Hank, you're everything to me. You don't need to be afraid that I'd ever tell anybody what actually happened. I give you my word, dear!"

"Good!" There was an edge of false heartiness in his voice now. "Then just what are you so worried about?"

"I'm afraid that Joe will get into my apartment and kill me. I'll be afraid to close my eyes at night. I think I'll drive myself crazy waiting for him, not knowing at what moment—"

Hank laughed with real heartiness this time, his face breaking into amused and indulgent lines.

"Is that all, sweet? Simplest thing in the world to prevent. A good locked door is all you need, as long as you're careful about not going out alone. I'll

take you home and call for you until he's caught."

Her eyes were desperate.

"But Joe can walk through any door!"

"Any door with an ordinary lock, perhaps. But, darling, there's a little quarter item that you ought to know about. It's called a bolt and it beats a check-chain all hollow."

"But Joe—"

"No, he couldn't. Tell you what. We'll get out of here and drive to Central Hardware. I'll get the bolt and put it on for you. I'll feel better then, too. Your safety means more to me than my own."

"You're sweet, Hank."

"So are you. Let's get the job done so I can take you out to an early dinner. Melissa doesn't expect me until ten."

When Hank had been talking about it, she wasn't quite sure that she knew what a bar bolt was, but the minute she saw it, she recognized it from some dim reminder of the past. Just a round steel bar with a knob moulded on it. This fitted into a jacket, and you pushed it across the crack of the door and the frame, then turned the knob downward.

Secure. Really locked in. A lock could be picked, or skeleton keys used, but you couldn't get past the bolt from the outside. Without a blowtorch, or a saw. And that was risky business. It would make so much noise that the victim could call the police before the entry was made.

She mixed drinks in the kitchen while Hank was putting the screw driver away and washing his hands.

"I feel so safe now," she said. "I can see how safe it is! Darling, you're so wonderful!"

He kissed her lightly and took his drink into the living room, smiling at her teasingly as he relaxed.

"Didn't know I was handy with tools

in addition to my other charms, did you?"

She was at the door, testing the bolt with delight. "It's a very professional job," she admitted, "but it seems to be hard to slide. I have to wiggle it a little to get it across."

"The tighter, the safer. Come over here and sit by me. Lock us in if you like, but come here!"

She was delighted to come. Her morning panic seemed far away, and Joe Hilton turned into a phantom figure. A pathetic ghost out of the past who wouldn't be able to disturb her future because of a simple slide bolt that had cost a quarter.

She snuggled into Hank Irby's willing arms.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bolt

FOR the past five days, the papers had carried some small articles of no consequences to the average reader, but Lois Baum practically memorized each one.

Joe Hilton had not yet been apprehended, although the police had been close to him several times. The driver of a car had been slugged behind the ear and left in the woods as naked as a jaybird. He had given a very good description of the escaped convict. The driver of another car had given a fairly accurate description of the brown suit that had been stolen from the first victim.

So far the police hadn't seen Hilton, but they were close. An arrest was expected shortly. All train and bus stations were being watched. The highway patrol had been alerted. The net had been cast. They were sure they would catch him.

Hank Irby had been sure, too. Only

Hank had said they'd have him the next day, and here it was five days. Sometimes fact made fools out of optimists. Lois began to be afraid again, with a new kind of fear.

The law was protection, but Joe was keeping ahead of the law. Hank was protection, too, with all of his ideas for keeping her safe. But Hank had been wrong about Joe, about how long it would take to catch him. Hank might well be wrong about other things.

There was a feeling now that Lois had never felt before. It started in her stomach, really, and moved across her shoulders. It was something she couldn't predict, couldn't control once it started. Her hands shook and she jumped at the slightest noise. And at night the feeling moved into her mind and she saw things, unreasonable things, that depressed her and weighed her whole body down with a conviction that she was going to die and there was nothing anybody could do about it.

Lois had lived her childhood out in the country, and, like most girls with rare beauty, she had left home in her teens. But now she found herself thinking about the little farm house for the first time in years. The bolt! That's where she had seen a bolt before.

Her grandmother, a strange gnarled character older than the earth, had used a bolt on her bedroom door. Didn't want to be disturbed by a pack of younguns who could never learn to knock. And Grandma didn't want to be disturbed because she thought she saw and heard things beyond human explanation. At that, the old woman had had an uncanny second sight.

It was awful trying to go to sleep at night. It was awful to wake up in a cold sweat, the spell of those strange dreams still fresh in her mind.

At first she was only faintly puzzled by this reversion to her childhood and

scenes of home. She was dreaming of people she hadn't thought about for a long time. Why? She ought to be having nightmares that showed her Joe's stricken face at his trial. She ought to be haunted by the dead face of Merton. She ought to be seeing herself as a partner in Hank's crime, as a partial murderer, going through some awful punishment. Those things were on her mind. She ought to be dreaming of those things.

But she wasn't. She was dreaming of herself as a little girl, the idol of all the little boys in the one-room country school. For some silly reason, at the moment of the dreaded clammy awakening, she kept seeing a note in a childish scrawl with a dagger dripping blood saying that the sender was going to kill Lois.

It had happened. She'd received a note like that in the fifth grade and terror had caught at her stomach then. The teacher had laughed it off. Children go through that stage, he had said. Pay no attention, Lois. Pay no attention. But she had felt the hatred behind the note and had brooded at home. Grandma, with her second sight, had known it was something unusual and Lois found herself in the bolted bedroom telling about the note.

Grandma hadn't laughed it off. Grandma had told her a lot of things, but the thing that had been trying to break through Lois' subconscious was one sentence: *If you were going to be killed, my child, you'd know.*

People always knew when they were going to die, Grandma believed. Others might laugh at them, but people did get a feeling when the end was near. Maybe they didn't know what the feeling meant, but they got it just the same.

Grandma had been old and she thought a lot about death. There were some people who thought she didn't

have all her marbles, but on this morning of the fifth day of Joe's escape Lois began to understand her grandmother for the first time. Maybe there was something to it. Maybe that one little episode which came to nothing was designed to be her warning now.

People got a feeling. Lois had it all right, and now, after five nights of dreaming, she thought she knew what the feeling meant. She had the shivering conviction that death was near, that it was lurking outside, waiting for her.

It wasn't Joe who frightened her now. It was her own superstitious thinking, her own revealing dreams. Sometimes she awoke with the scent of funeral flowers in her nostrils, with the slick feeling of quilted satin under her cold fingers.

She was going to die and she didn't want to! She was afraid, and the fear made her feel like a little girl again—a desperate little girl with no one to turn to except Hank Irby. And Hank had been especially busy this last week. They'd had dinner together twice, but both times in her apartment, and she was beginning to hate the place, to feel closed in.

By afternoon, she couldn't stand it. She called Hank at his office. He had warned her about the switchboard, had told her always to be casual and cold about making an appointment and save what was on her mind until later. Hank was always careful about things like that.

She tried to make it sound like a business call, but her voice quivered and she bit her lips, trying to get it under control.

"What can I do for you?" he asked pleasantly. That meant he wasn't alone.

"I've got to see you!" she blurted. "I've simply got to! I can't help it, Hank. I'm going—"

He cut her off in a crisp voice. She could tell he was angry at her for saying such foolish things, when the switchboard girl might be listening.

"Yes," he said. "Of course. I'll take care of it as soon as I can. And thank you for calling it to my attention."

She banged the receiver on the hook and began to pace the room, crying with jerky sobs of exasperation and self-pity.

It was all Hank's fault! She wouldn't be in this terrible state of nerves, afraid of her own shadow, if it hadn't been for Hank. He had planned Merton's death, had talked her into using Joe for the sucker. She'd never been afraid of Joe before. It was all Hank's fault that she was afraid of him now.

And Hank knew what a state she was in. How could he sit there in his safe comfortable office and brush her off that way? *Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you for calling it to my attention. Thank you, Miss Zilch. Good-by, Miss Zilch.*

She hated Hank! She wouldn't see him again. She'd die before she'd listen to that smug voice refusing to accept her trouble as his trouble. Big, strong Hank! He'd spent a quarter for a bolt, a quarter for her life.

She began to laugh, to mumble out aloud: "Here she is, folks. Step right up. For a quarter, for one-fourth of a dollar, you may take a look at the corpse of the lovely, of the beautiful Lois Baum, the little lady who knew she was going to die. Just a quarter, ladies and gentlemen. Step right up. Step right up!"

THEN she stopped the foolishness. She clamped her teeth together and went into the kitchen with purposeful steps. She poured herself a stiff glass of scotch and made her decision.

She was through with Hank and his

endless promises that he'd get rid of Melissa and marry her. She was through listening to him, through letting him laugh at her fears. She'd forget the whole thing. She'd spend the afternoon dressing. She'd give the crowd a treat. She'd dress up for death as she'd never dressed up before!

The idea appealed to her and she sipped at the scotch, planning her outfit. Something gay, she decided. Perhaps the ice-green print, with the full skirt. Something that would billow around her as she fell.

That picture was such a sorrowful one that quiet tears began dropping across her cheeks.

The shrill sound of the telephone bell set her whole body to trembling and when she answered it, the sound was scarcely audible. Hank's voice now, soft and comforting as a mother's touch.

"Darling, I ducked right out of the office to call you. I was so worried at the way you sounded! You *are* all right, sweet? Tell daddy what's the matter."

She forgot her anger, forgot the moment when she had been sure that Hank wasn't interested in her plight. This was comfort; this was something to cling to.

"I'm so frightened, Hank! And I'm driving myself crazy just staying in like this."

"Sure, baby, I know. Tell you what. I'll run over for awhile and see what I can do. Just sit tight, honey. I won't be long."

She took a shower and slipped into the ice-green print, humming a snatch of a tune. She wasn't crying now. She wasn't dressing for death. She was dressing for Hank Irby, the man she loved, the man she intended to marry . . .

Midnight. The hour when most people decide it's time to go to bed. Lights in houses begin to wink out and the city gets darker than it was. Halls of apartment houses begin to take on

the hush of deep night, and dark shadows fall over gangways and doors.

Hank had left at eleven after spending hours with her, talking, laughing, and calming her fears with his sensible masculine logic.

He had led her about by the hand, pointing out the room's safety features. She lived on the eighth floor of the building and the windows couldn't possibly be used for entry. The door into the hall was the only outer door she had; this door was locked and bolted. She had a telephone.

What could happen to her? Granted, she couldn't stay locked in forever—but Joe couldn't stay at large forever, either. The police were bound to catch him if he came to the city. Then life would be back to normal again. What does a week or so of caution amount to? Nothing to ruin the whole future, nothing to be so gloomy about!

And the feeling, the bad dreams? They didn't mean a thing, baby. Just nerves, like battle fatigue. Then Hank had chattered away glibly about the mental reactions of the boys in the service. It made Lois feel better to realize that she wasn't going crazy after all, that other people had felt this way.

Then Hank began to talk about Melissa, about his plan for a little accident that might happen to her at their summer cottage, when summer came.

It didn't sound bad to Lois. It wasn't any worse than the talk about Merton had been. They weren't people to her. They were just cardboard figures who had to be pushed out of the way before she could have what she wanted.

She felt hopeful, very much herself, after Hank left. She sat there in her ice-green dress with the full skirt and continued to drink highballs in slow sips. Hank had advised that, too.

Get sleepy, baby. Scotch is better than a pill. You need a good night's

rest. You'll get it, if you just listen to old Doc Hanky-Panky!

It was working. She was getting pleasantly numb, and the tight, drawn feeling across her shoulders was beginning to go away. The past days seemed like a nightmare that had never happened.

Then, at midnight, she heard it. The stealthy turning of her doorknob, a faint sound that was more ominous because of its quietness.

Her stomach quivered; the tight steel bands jumped across her shoulders again. She crept on tiptoe into the reception hall, in a panic to see if she'd remembered to slide the bolt after Hank left. They'd been drinking a lot. Had she forgotten? Oh, dear Lord! The bolt was tight—she'd have to wiggle it to get it across. . . .

A board creaked under her own foot and her heart began to pound against her ribs, choking her.

But the bolt was fastened. She had remembered! She stood there trying to keep still, and her heart kept pounding. She could see the knob on the inside twisting, ever so slowly. Then she saw the lock give, heard the door being pushed inward. The steel bar stopped it, and she stared at the little quarter item in fascination, telling herself that it would hold, that Joe couldn't get to her.

The knob twisted again and the lock clicked back into place. Then there was a soft tapping on the panel. Fingers drummed enticingly, saying:

Wake up, Lois. Wake up gently and come to the door, still half-asleep, and let me in before you realize what you're doing. This is a lover's knock, like a pebble thrown at a window. Come and open the door, thinking it's a pleasant rendezvous. This is a friendly sound, Lois.

That's what the softness of the knock was saying to her. She felt like scream-

ing at the hidden figure on the other side of the door. Just a panel between them! A painted gray panel between her and the death she had been waiting for. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Dress Up for Death!

AT LAST the knocking stopped, and the shadow that had been across the crack of light, between the door and its frame, moved silently away.

She touched the bolt with damp fingers, like a religious person touching a holy relic in gratitude. Then she went back to the living room and sank into a chair, pressing her hands over her heart, as if holding it would quiet the violent pounding.

Joe had made it to her apartment. Joe had come, as she had known he would. Joe wasn't as stupid as Hank thought he was!

She went to the front windows and stared down at the street, turning out the lamp so she couldn't be seen looking through the slats of the venetian blind.

There was a couple, parked in a car across the street, saying good night the long way. There was the usual traffic. There was a man walking a dog.

Then he came out of her building and stood there like anybody else, waiting for a break in the stream of cars, so he could get to the other side of the street.

He dipped his head into cupped hands to light a cigarette, then threw the match aside and looked up briefly at the windows. She drew back instinctively, even though she knew he couldn't see her.

Joe Hilton! She'd know the tilt of his shoulders from any angle, the audacious shape of his jaw.

She watched until he walked on down

the next cross street into the darkness.

What now? What was his next move? That brief, backward glance at her window had seemed to say: *Don't go away, Lois. I'll come again.*

He knew about the bolt now. Did he also know some trick of the trade for breaking it? Had he gone off after some tool that he needed, with some plan for a second try?

She left the windows and crossed the room to the phone, staring at it. She turned the lights back on. She felt better in the light.

She could call the police. She could tip them off and they'd have him in ten minutes. But she wasn't supposed to be mixed up with Joe Hilton. They would ask questions.

How did she know Hilton was the man she saw? What had Hilton been to her? Where had she gotten the mink coat in her closet? If Hilton took the risk of gunning for her, there must be a reason for his grudge. What's Hilton got against you, lady? Maybe we ought to check and see just where you fit into the pictures Hilton drew at prison.

She backed away from the phone, her face pale, just as though the instrument had barked out the questions she didn't want to answer.

She couldn't call the police!

But she couldn't stay here and wait for Joe to come back and break the bolt, either! Joe had looked so solid, so sure of himself down there in his stolen clothes. Joe was coming back; his eyes had flicked the message up to her. Joe had gone through a lot to get here. He wouldn't give up now.

It was one in the morning when she looked up Hank's number. She'd never called him at home before. He would be in bed, asleep probably. He would be with Melissa.

Well, let Melissa find out! So what? Her days were numbered, anyway. And

let Hank be angry. What did she care? She certainly wasn't going to stay here and be caught by a fool of a convict with murder in his heart. She wasn't going to bet her life on a quarter bolt, when Joe had gone off to manage a way of breaking it!

She dialed and a woman answered.

"Mr. Irby, please." She remembered to make it sound cold, crisply business-like.

The reply was even colder.

"I'm sorry. He has retired. Is there any message?"

Damn her, anyway! Who did she think she was? Mrs. Henry Irby. Ha! Mrs. Corpse next summer, that's who she was! She felt secure tonight, didn't she? My big, strong man has gone to sleep, but anything you have to say to him, you can say to me. Any message? That was a laugh.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Irby tonight," said Lois firmly. "It's very important."

"I'm sorry," Melissa persisted.

Then Lois could hear steps. She heard Hank say: "What's wrong, darling?" It sounded just the way it sounded when he said it to her.

"Just some woman for you." Melissa gave a twist to that as she said it, implying that it would be a horrible bore for Hank. There was an intimacy in her voice that infuriated Lois. There was a cozy, possessive quality in the statement that seemed to stem from perfect understanding.

"Well, you run along and get comfy, sweet. I'll see what it is. Secretary must be in a jam, or something."

THE receiver barked as it changed hands and Lois heard a sound that might have been a kiss. Then she heard Hank saying, smooth as sin: "Yes? This is Mr. Irby."

"No kidding! Well, this is your secre-

tary, Mr. Irby. Just calling to find out how things are, Mr. Irby. And I must say, Mr. Irby, that things seem quite lovey-dovey at your end. . . . Has that old crow left the room yet?"

His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper.

"Good grief, Lois! Are you out of your mind? I told you never to call here, under any circumstances!"

"So you did, old Doc Hanky-Panky. And you told me a lot of other things, too. Does Melissa know you're going to break her neck next summer?"

"You're drunk, Lois!"

"Oh, no I'm not. I'm just getting sober, Hank—for the first time in two years. I'm just getting wise to you."

"Please, Lois. Sleep it off. I'll come by first thing in the morning."

He must be holding the phone as a crooner holds a mike. She could scarcely hear him.

"That's what you think. I'm through, Hank. Joe was here, trying to get in, and I know he'll be back. I'm not going to wait for that. I'm calling the police. I thought I'd give you a chance to do something about it first, but you don't rate a chance. I'm going to tell everything I know."

"Lois, you can't! Don't be a fool, Lois. You know what we've got waiting for us."

His voice was louder now. He was excited. She had touched him where it hurt. He hadn't been upset about her skin, but now it was his own skin. He had yelped.

"I know what we've got waiting, Mr. Irby," scoffed Lois. "You can forget the act. She ought to be comfy by now, so you just run along."

She banged the receiver down on his sputtering, and then sat staring at the dead phone, at the only thing that offered her an avenue of escape. Calling the police was no good; calling Hank had been worse.

She paced the room, trying to stop the panic that was rising, the feeling of utter desolation. She was going to die and nobody cared. She'd even lost Hank now!

It had been foolish to snap at Hank that way, but she hadn't known what she was doing. She couldn't think—she just couldn't think!

She slumped into a chair and dug her fingers into her skull. If she could only think of something, *anything*, to prevent this awful moment that was going to come to her. But the fear had been with her too long; her mind was frozen. There was this new sensation now of being alone, absolutely alone, and not knowing what to do. . . .

When the phone rang, she gave a small scream, far back in her throat. She felt as if a hand had reached into the silent room to touch her.

She lifted the receiver with icy fingers. It almost slipped out of her grasp.

"Darling, are you there? Speak up."

She managed a weak, "Yes."

"I'm in a pay booth now, Lois. I'm sorry, but you know I can't talk in front of Melissa. Tell me calmly, dear. What do you want me to do? I'd cut off my right arm for you and you know it. Do you want me to come over?"

His voice again. The one that belonged to her, not Melissa, the sound that kept her from being alone.

"I—I don't know, Hank. I can't think. There isn't much time. He'll be back. I just want to get away from here, to be safe. . . ." Her throat knotted with the effort of talking. "I can't think, Hank. I just can't think!"

"Have you called the police yet?"

"No."

"Good! Are you sure Joe isn't in front of your building now?"

"He wasn't a few minutes ago. He walked away, up Kensington."

"All right, darling. You've had enough

of this. Will you do just what I tell you to?"

"Yes," she cried. "Yes, Hank. Only—only the bolt isn't going to work the next time."

"I know. Forget the bolt. Call a cab right now and go to Skinner and Clayton. I'll drive over and meet you there. Unless you'd rather I came all the way down for you?"

"No, Hank! There won't be time. I'd better leave right now, while he's gone. I'm sure he's gone after something. . . ."

"Sure, baby, sure. Duck out now, then. I'll be waiting. And Lois. . . ."

"Yes?"

"You're the only woman I've ever loved."

"Yes, Hank."

She didn't feel a thing as she rang for a cab. She'd thought she never wanted to see Hank again, but now she knew that anything was better than being alone. She knew she couldn't stand it alone. This way, she might have a chance.

The cab arrived in five minutes. As soon as the buzzer sounded, she looked out the windows. Just as normal as living—the white car waiting, the little lights on the top blinking, the driver on his way back to wait for her. Nothing menacing below. No tilted shoulders, no shadowy figure dipping his head to light a cigarette.

She left the lights burning, as she always did, and ran out to the self-service elevator, her full skirt swishing about her beautiful legs. She broke a thumbnail pushing the elevator button, but the cage finally arrived and then she was sinking toward the street, toward her flight to safety.

SHE ran to the cab and stumbled in, without looking around. The driver closed the door, rounded the car, and settled himself leisurely be-

hind the wheel. He turned half around to smile at her.

"What's the matter, lady? You seen a ghost?"

"No," she gasped, her lungs bursting. "But I'm terribly late for an appointment. Hurry, please!"

"Sure thing." He started the motor, then turned around again, grinning.

"I could hurry better if I know where to."

"Skinner and Clayton."

He made a U-turn and they were off. She pulled great gasps of air into her shaking frame and settled back against the cushions. She had escaped!

"Mind going through the park, lady? It's quicker."

"Surely," she said. "Make it the quickest way."

"You bet. But I always ask. Lot of people think you're trying to pull a fast one the minute you get off a straight street. But I been hackin' in this town for ten years and I know her upside down."

Lois was composed now. The driver's habitual monologue was having a therapeutic effect. It was just any night in the year to him. A safe night, a night that he expected to live through.

She got there before Hank, but it was a well-lighted corner with a movie, a drug store, a hamburger stand, street car tracks and a cab stand. It was safe; it was far away from Joe Hilton. She paid her driver, gave him a generous tip, and let him go. She stepped inside the hamburger stand so she could watch through the plate glass window. She was just considering coffee when Hank's blue convertible pulled up.

As soon as he had settled her on the seat beside him, she dropped her head to his shoulder. She closed her eyes. She was so tired! If she could just stay this way for a little while—not moving, not thinking.

He drove the car away from the lighted area into the dark rim of the park. Then he stopped and turned to face her.

She caught a glint of his eyes from the dash light.

"No, Hank!"

"I'm afraid so, sweet. You sort of loused me up tonight. I don't like your nervous system. When you crack, you crack wide open. God help me, you're the most beautiful thing that ever lived, but I have to be practical. You'd tell the police someday. I can't take a chance on that, Lois. Your beauty wouldn't do me any good in jail."

"I wouldn't, Hank! Please! I wouldn't. Look at me, Hank. You know how you feel about me—"

His lips curled in derision and he moved his arm across the seat, resting his hand on her shoulder.

"All right, Lois. But Melissa knows now, too. That was stupid of you. You're just a little country jake, scared to death because you did wrong. Hell! Your beauty isn't that important to me."

His hands were coming toward her throat, and she twisted, struggled, scratched him, and kicked her way out of the car.

She ran. She ran down the road through the black fringe of the park, toward the lighted area, toward the cab stand. Her purse, miraculously, was still clutched in her hand.

He followed for a few steps and she stumbled. He could have caught her then, but he stopped. She heard him laughing.

"All right, you little fool. Have it your way. I reach toward you and you think you're being killed. Tell that to the cops if you think you can make it stick. I wasn't going to hurt you, damn it! I just wanted to shake some sense into your silly head. You'll realize that when

you calm down—or you'll get all upset and call me for help again. And don't worry. I'll know what to expect and Melissa won't beat me to the phone next time."

Talk. Hank and his endless talk. He never seemed to get tired of it. She scrambled to her feet and kept running toward the lights.

He *had* meant to kill her! She knew it. She had seen it in his eyes. But he was careful, always careful. She had thwarted his initial attempt, and now he felt that the act wasn't prudent. She was out of the car now, too close to the street. He had tried to talk himself out of it.

His laughter, gloating and exultant, rang in her ears as she climbed into a cab and gave her address.

It was safe enough to go back. The driver would take her all the way up to her door for a tip. Then she'd get behind the bolt and stay there! She wouldn't open the door for Hank or anybody else. And if she heard a saw scraping at her steel bar, she'd call the police.

She just wanted to go to bed and sleep, sleep, sleep. She was so very tired, so very sick of herself and everybody else.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Guy Named Joe

THE cab driver took her key and opened the door for her. He smiled in gratitude for the tip, touched his cap, and left with a pleasant goodnight.

She closed the door and leaned against it, wiggling the bolt across and jamming the knob down.

It still gave her a feeling of security, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she walked into the living room.

Then she stopped, heart jumping crazily.

Joe Hilton was sitting in her lounge chair, smiling at her!

She wheeled, raced for the door.

The bolt stuck. She tugged at it—couldn't make it move!

Joe walked calmly out to the hall, covered her mouth with his hand and dragged her away from the door.

"Whoever sold you on a bolt should have told you all the angles, girlie. Don't ever shoot it until you've looked the joint over. If you'd have done that, you'd be out there with the cab driver by now, screaming your lungs out for help!"

He took his hand away from her mouth and pushed her into a chair.

"Joe . . . Joe, you've got to listen to me!"

His face hardened.

"Do I?" He had her bottle of scotch beside his chair and he poured himself a drink with his eyes snapping. It would be an angry drink, intensifying his emotions. It was always that way with Joe.

"Seems to me I listened to you once, my friend! That's enough. That's all. You know what I'm here for!"

Her fingers fluttered over the folds of the ice-green print, with the full, floating skirt. The prettiest dress she had. The material felt so soft, felt like the quilted satin of a coffin that her hands had pressed against in her dreams. The flower-scent of her clammy awakenings assailed her nostrils again, and she thought of her grandmother.

"May I have a drink, Joe? I need it. I just left Hank. He tried to kill me, too."

He poured her a generous slug and handed it to her with a flourish. Joe had been in love with her once and he still had a flare for drama. But she didn't miss the dark, bitter hatred in his eyes. He couldn't pretend like Hank. The hatred was there, so it had to show.

"Well, what do you know! The rich

boyfriend turned heel. What did you expect?"

"I don't know." Her thoughts were all a jumble now. "He put the bolt on for me. . . ." She was going back to the beginning, trying to understand about Hank.

Joe grinned. "Yeah. Cute trick, that! It stopped me. I thought for a minute you were going to be smart and stay behind the bolt. Didn't your boy tell you that the minute you left the place, you left it wide open for me? Didn't you know that I wouldn't have stood a Chinaman's chance the other way?"

"I didn't think. I *couldn't* think! I thought you'd gone after some tool."

"And he let you think that?"

"Yes."

"Then he wanted me to get you, girlie. That's all I can say. He'd know damn well that I'd have had to break the door down to get in!"

"Stop calling me girlie."

"What the hell *should* I call you? Angel? Sweetheart? You double-crossing little tramp! Do you know what it's like to be locked up for two years? You and your high-powered boyfriend! Pinchbottle scotch, boneless ham in the ice box, chicken, fancy cheeses! Do you know what I've been living on? I even had to bum my smokes, to hoard butts like a guttersnipe!"

"Joe—listen. Hank did it! Hank killed Merton and planned the rest!"

"Sure. Sure, he did! And you went along with it, hands up. You stole my gun. You told me where to be at what time. You smiled and looked at me out of those pale, fish eyes. . . ."

SHE covered her face, sobs racking her body. "I know, Joe. I know! I've got it coming. I think I've known that all week. I'm dressed. I'm all dressed up. . . ."

His eyes narrowed. He jogged a ciga-

rette out of his pack, dipped his head to light it.

"All right, Lois. Cut the act. People get smart when they're slammed in the jug for a murder they didn't do. Even jerks like me get smart. In fact, I think I'm going to be smart enough to knock off my other pigeon before the law swoops down."

She lifted perplexed, tear-filled eyes.

He pulled out a gun and waved it.

"Pick up the phone."

She did.

"Call Hank. Tell him you're lost without him. Tell him you've got to see him. Tell him anything."

"He won't come."

"Don't be stupid. He'll come all right. But if you tell him I'm here, I'll plug you on the spot."

"But, Joe—"

"But nothing. Get him over here. Fast!"

She did it. What else could she do? What did it matter now? She told him she thought the police were watching the building, that she might be forced to tell the whole story about Merton.

He said: "Sit tight, darling. We're going to have to figure an out together. I'll be right there. Don't talk to anybody."

While they waited, Joe sat down with the gun in his lap, not looking directly at her. He fiddled with the gun, taking out shells. Then he jangled the loose shells in his hand like dice.

She tried to keep the sound from getting on her nerves. She thought about a path through the woods back home, about the cold well water, the dogwoods flowering in the spring, the smell of the white clover.

Joe began to twist the carriage of the revolver.

"Ever hear of Russian roulette, Lois?"

"What? . . . What, Joe?" She tried to bring her senses back into the room.

"Russian roulette. You play it with a gun like this one. Quite a game! There's one live bullet, see? The other chambers are empty. You spin the wheel, then put the gun to your temple and pull the trigger. If you're lucky, you hit a blank. If you're not lucky, you kill yourself."

"Please, Joe. Don't be dramatic." She slipped back into the woods at home.

"I'm not going to suggest playing. But I'm a sort of a gambler. When Henry comes, I'm going to give you a chance, just for fun. I've left one bullet in here. You don't have to spin the wheel. The bullet is right where it belongs. I'll give you the gun and you'll have one shot. Two men, and one shot. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

She didn't seem to be listening.

"Look, Lois! This is the only gun I have. I stole it last night out of a salesman's car. I'll wait in the bedroom when Hank comes, and leave the gun with you. You've got one bullet. You can give it to Hank, or you can let me have it! Don't you understand?"

"I understand, Joe."

But her voice was flat and lifeless.

When the knock came, he put the gun into her hands, turned his back and walked toward the bedroom—slowly—deliberately giving her time.

Dramatic. Poor dramatic Joe.

She laid the gun on the coffee table and went to the door. She unfastened the bolt and admitted Hank.

"You look tired," she said.

There were circles under his eyes, half-way down his cheeks, but his pupils glittered like ice.

"Yeah, yeah. Skip it. What's new with Joe? Have you seen him again?"

"I'm sure he's near." There wasn't a trace of panic in her voice.

"That's what I figured. But you were wrong about the cops, baby. They're not out in front, but they will be. I tipped them off. I've got this planned

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so it will fit around Joe's neck, pretty as a necklace!"

She wasn't listening, really. Hank always talked too much. She was listening to voices of people she had known before Hank, people who had been good to her, people from a long time ago.

He didn't hesitate or drag it out. His shot caught her right through the heart and she pitched forward, no shock or surprise on her face. None at all. Just an expression of tranquillity that he had never seen before.

He stood there staring, watching with fascination as the green silk skirt fluttered gracefully and fell into artful folds about her lovely limbs. Lord, she was beautiful! Even dead, she was beautiful!

Joe caught Hank from behind. Fingers ground into his windpipe, strangling him. A knee ground into his back. He dropped his gun and clawed the air.

"Thank you for everything, Mr. Irby! I knew you'd do my killing for me if I could get you over here. You're good at doing my killing, aren't you, pal? You're good at a lot of things, but not good for much right now. You called the cops, didn't you? You thought you'd let her have it and frame me again. *Darling!* You call a dame darling, and then plug her in the ticker!"

Joe increased the pressure of his hands and Hank's face turned an ugly blue. Joe dropped his hold and reached for the gun on the coffee table. He kicked Hank's gun under a chair and watched the man writhing on the floor.

Then the cops started banging. Joe gave Hank a tap behind the ear and sat there waiting, thinking about triangles.

BUT it hadn't been a triangle, not really. It had been sucker fun. Joe had been too proud to try to hold Lois after she fell for Hank. But being pushed around was different.

He'd be able to rest now if they sent him back, which they probably would.

The cops were in, and they were mad.

"All right, Hilton, drop that gun!"

Joe did and raised his hands.

"All right, Louie, I've dropped the gun. Just be sure that you don't blast until I speak my piece."

"Blast, hell! You'll get the chair for this. You really mowed 'em down!"

"No," said Joe. "No, I didn't. But Mr. Irby, the sleepy-head there, can pick them off like clay pigeons."

"Irby? Not Henry Irby, the banker?"

"No less. You'll have to pardon his blue face. He's all right, but he choked a little on something."

"Hilton, you're on your way out this time. They'll pack you fuller of juice than a Florida orange! They'll—"

"Can it, copper! Do you think I'd shoot off my mouth if I couldn't prove it? I just ask one thing—a simple test. The bullet from Lois Baum will fit that gun under the chair. If you'll stick the barrel under your nose, you'll still smell something. Cordite. All I want is a paraffin test. You'll find out that my hands are as clean as a baby's kiss. But the pinkies of that prominent citizen lying there ought to be loaded. Get it?"

The cops handcuffed him and dragged him to his feet.

"Thank you Mr. Hilton. So nice of you to tell us our business!"

Joe looked back over his shoulder, just once. They were picking up Hank Irby's gun with care, so as not to smudge prints. They were picking up Hank Irby. You didn't have to tell them their job.

Lois looked like a little doll, all dressed up in green for some big occasion. She looked peaceful in death, somehow. Almost as if she had known and didn't mind.

Joe shrugged and walked out.

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(Continued from page 73)

eyes were filled with tears. She was bending over me and her soft lips were close to mine. Then for the second time that night I was floating . . . floating . . .

I moved my body and a sharp pain shot through my chest. I guess I moaned because a chair scraped close by, and when I turned my head I saw Janie.

"How did it work out?" I asked.

"Shhh," she cautioned. "You're supposed to rest. "You're in the hospital."

I started to sit up but Janie and the stabbing pain wouldn't let me.

"Is it all over?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Mr. Hartley's in jail and Lt. Repetti says he'll get the chair. They're taking him back to Atlantic City."

"Then I did see Repetti and the sergeant before I passed out!"

She smiled. "They were following us all the time. They were in that car I saw in front of the apartment house."

"But there was something else, Janie," I murmured. "Just before I went under you were bending over me and," I grinned, "what were you going to do?"

She showed me and this time I didn't pass out.

She patted my face, "You're supposed to take it easy," she breathed softly. "I'll be back later."

I let my body relax as she went out.

And then the peace was shattered by a buxom gray-haired nurse.

"Say, aren't you the lucky one, inheriting all that money!"

"Yeah," I muttered.

"I'll bet you'll want to go on a real nice vacation, huh?"

When I didn't answer she went right on. "What you'll need is a rest and a nice spot for a quiet holiday. Why don't you go to Atlantic City?"

Say! Was she kiddin'?

THE END

(Continued from page 98)

Fighting for breath, Lark drove his aching legs in a last desperate spurt.

Varden's gun came up, blasting, but Lark had hold of that arm, twisting violently. His fist smashed into the other's face, sending him reeling. Jeri was sitting dazedly in the mud; then she began scrambling to get out of the way.

Varden's gun was gone. He came with a rush, face contorted in fear.

Lark gasped, got a wad of black hair twined in his fingers and jerked, smashing with his right. Muscle and bone grated; the plump face changed contour. He smashed—again and again.

He heard Jager's harsh, excited voice: "Wait now! Stop that!"

He kept on, his mouth twisted.

Sam Jager said, "Sorry," and aimed a kick.

Lark went down in the mud, nursing a shin bone. It felt good to just lie there.

Jeri dropped down, pulling his head onto her lap.

"Jeri?" He stared up into her face. "Did he—?"

"Hurt me? No. You came in time—just in time. I was going into the hotel when he grabbed me. He found the picture out of the locket and realized I knew too much. He—strangled his wife—bragged about it, Lark!"

The sheriff stooped, gripped Varden's coat collar, and began hauling. "His welding days are over," he said. He paused, gazing at them thoughtfully. "Must be love," he said, shaking his head, "to make you sit in the mud."

Jeri pushed back her wet mop of hair, teeth flashing whitely. "It's taken me four months. How am I doing?"

The flashlight went on its way.

Lark pulled her down into his arm. Finally he whispered: "How am I doin'?"

"Gee," she said shakily. "Gee. . . ."

THE END



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