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BY FERGUS TRUSLOW

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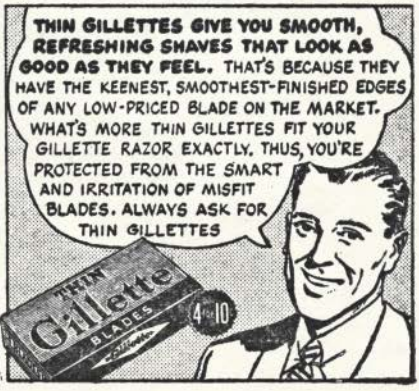

BLACK MASK

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K. S. WHITE, *Editor*

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Murder MAKES THE

A shadow blocked the open window . . . I lined up the Walther and let drive.

YOU SELDOM see a Chinese with scrambled ears. I mean, they are a people little given to playing around in the cauliflower circuits. The way they look at it, this is strictly a pastime for the inscrutable Americans, with their strange foreign eyes.

But this iron-chinned Celestial specimen who pretended to be loafing within a dozen feet of Guy Malott and me, in the waiting room of L. A.'s Union Station, is different. He has ears like Philadelphia beaten biscuits. And he has the hands to match the rest of him, heavy-hanging, scar-knuckled.

Beside him was a little Chinese businessman in a neat dark suit, wearing pince-nez glasses. The sharp way he looks through those pince-nez at us makes him a ringer for Henry Morgenthau. One glance told me Morgenthau was there to say "sic 'em" to Ears.

"Get a load of this," I whispered to Guy Malott. Malott is the red-haired, skinny, six-foot-three end of the Las Vegas gaming partnership of Malott and McCool. I'm McCool, the short and apoplectic end.

"Ten gets you five," I went on hurriedly, "that we must have hurt Jimmie Lee in that Chinatown game last night. I thought he could stand losing a few odd grand better than this."

A faint cool breeze prickled my scalp. Ears and Morgenthau had sidled closer, looking the other way.

Guy Malott made a move I have long ago tabbed as indicating gathering wrath on his part. He slouched lower in his waiting room chair and flicked at his

Nobody was going to make suckers out of the gambling partnership of Malott and McCool. They'd rather die than be laughed at—and plenty of characters in L.A. were only too glad to help.

COCK CROW

mirror-polished, hand-stitched cowboy boots with a silk handkerchief.

"It was Lee's own fault," he snapped. "The local talent shouldn't have tried to false card a couple of visiting firemen from Las Vegas. Just because we are known to run an honest game over there doesn't mean we are a couple of suckers, or chumps. My Greek bottom was better than his second deal, that's all."

Sucker. Chump. It is the sore spot, the hidden canker deep inside Guy Malott. To be played for a reuben rubs him raw. Because this sleepy-eyed, red-headed, freckled bean-pole looks the part, and knows it. To the eye of the roving con man, or small time Hemingway with a slugged deck, Malott looks ripe to be had, with "cow" written all over him.

Just to keep the record straight, Guy Malott does own a ranch. He runs cattle and dudes. They keep his pockets stuffed with nice green stuff that ain't hay. But handling a deck of pasteboards is his true calling.

You'd never believe hands as big and freckled and bony as his could be that deft—until you see his second deal.

He rolled a gasper now, and scratched a match on the sole of one glittering boot. "This Celestial reception committee is not for Malott and McCool," he drawled.

"No?" I came back. "Then why the bulge under that big Chink's twenty dollar suit, if they're only waiting for a train? Why do they keep hanging around. . ."

"Wong Duck," Malott cut in.

"Come again?"

"Wong Duck. What do you remember about a Chinese named Wong Duck, who did a spot of plunging in our house of chance in Las Vegas last spring?"

I had to laugh. Malott's freckles went under in a brick-red flush. "What do I remember?" I asked. "Only that a Chinese ranch cook from Stockton by that name bounced a five grand check on us. The whole town of Las Vegas is ribbing us blue, ever since. And you're the lad who cashed the check."

By

FERGUS

TRUSLOW

MALOTT flicked the silk handkerchief at his boots, viciously. "The Stockton bank cleared Wong Duck's first checks by phone. How did I know he was tossing his life savings on the tables around town in three days of play? I thought he had syndicated backing. So I let him make a chump out of me. When he's scraping the bottom of the barrel, I cash his last check for five grand on that same Stockton bank. Wong Duck drops the money next door and blows town."

"And now," I goaded, "you can't walk down Fremont Street without putting the boys in stitches."

Malott's pink eyelashes drooped sleepily over freckled lids. That was a storm warning. "Yeah?" he drawled. "Well, they can unstitch themselves any time now. Look over by the coffee counter."

Sure enough, a little jumpy Chinese in shabby clothes was swigging coffee with a big goldfish mouth. He has nervous eyebrows and a hat that is still round, just like they sell them off the shelves in the hat store.

"It's Wong Duck, all right," I admitted. "But who is the girl?"

A tall, slim, cool-looking number who modeled a nice pair of nylons inched closer to Wong Duck while we watched. He got a casing, but good, from long, narrow gray eyes. The girl looked a little white around the mouth, but determined.

The little Chinese businessman hissed satisfaction.

"O. K.," I whispered to Malott, "so it seems that the Oriental strong-arm squad is here for Wong Duck. So let them have him."

"And leave me on the books as a chump for five grand's worth?" Malott heaved his red thatch to his six-three of altitude, suddenly. "No sale, McCool. I'm collecting. One way or another, I'm collecting before I go back to Las Vegas."

But he wasn't. Wong Duck spotted Malott. His eyebrows bounced right up against the square set brim of his hat. For a second or two the goldfish mouth tried to blow bubbles. Then he grabbed his straw kiester and took off through the crowd, an umbrella under his arm.

The tall gray-eyed doll took off after him. So did Morgenthau and Ears. Malott whirled on me. "This is what comes of not carrying the right tools. Where's that German souvenir gun you took in playing poker last night in Jimmie Lee's place?"

"The Walther automatic? It's in my bag in the checkroom. But we've got no cartridges. Anyway, the L.A. cops wouldn't like."

"Never mind the details. I need something that looks like authority."

At the check counter Malott cyclone through my Gladstone like a customs man looking for morphine or seditious literature. He came up with a Walther P.P. 7.65 with fancy chased slide and grips.

"No Chinaman," he drawled furiously, "can make me the laughing stock of Las Vegas. Come on, McCool. I'm going to nail him before he dives into a hole."

The check girl's eyes were barrel hoops, looking at the Walther. As we headed for the front doors, I saw her beckoning to a station flattie.

Chinatown is close to L.A.'s Union Station. A good strong redcap could stand on the front steps and lob your baggage right over into Olvera Street or drop it in front of the Hop Sing Tong frat house, depending on whether you are in the mood for tortillas or shark-fin soup.

So two minutes later Guy Malott and I were loping through dingy streets that smell like the Shanghai bund.

Ahead of us Wong Duck is a flitting shade that tarryeth not. He still has his umbrella and straw suitcase when he pops into an alley.

Malott shoved me after him. "You tail him from this end. Take it slow. I'll run around this short block. We'll mousetrap him in the alley mouth on the other side."

But fate, and five .32 slugs decreed otherwise.

Whoever triggered that automatic knew his business. I heard five stitches dropped in a long ripple. It reached my ears just as the click of Malott's boot-heels on fog-wet paving sounded

somewhere ahead of me. Malott's steps broke into a run. So did the sound of a woman's heels, running away. Or maybe it was only the echo of Malott's cowboy boots bouncing off alley walls. I never did know.

I rounded a dog-leg turn in the alley, panting. Malott stood there in a yellow glow of light from a Chinese shop window. A straw kiester lay at his feet. Also an umbrella. Also something that looked very much like a heap of shabby old clothes.

Malott wiped his hands on his silk bandanna after turning the bundle of old clothes over. "Wong Duck is a dead duck," he said in flat, taut tones. "Somebody decided to put in a previous claim, looks like."

"Didn't you see it?"

"Nope. Just missed. Guess they got out of the alley just before I turned the corner."

"Well, let's leave it on the books and get out of here," I urged.

Malott kept on wiping his hands on the silk handkerchief, stubbornly. "Not so fast. He's bound to belong to a tong, or benevolent brotherhood or something. They all do. Seems like I've always heard they take up a dead brother's debts. Celestial honor. Chinese noblesse oblige, or whatnot. Maybe they'll take up the five grand check he bounced on me in Las Vegas."

My heart was going like a trip-hammer. "Look," I said slowly and patiently, the way you do talking to a child, "you hear that police whistle down in the next block? And what do you think that baggage check girl thought when you dug the Walther out of my Gladstone? Would she know you just wanted to *scare* a Chinaman?"

BY THIS time running feet were all around us. To my ears, they sounded flat, as in cop. The Chinese inside the shop doused the light suddenly as a prowl car turned into the alley. The prowlies felt their way along slow. The spot on their car probed every doorway.

"Maybe you're right," Malott had to admit. "We'll duck around the corner here, to Jimmie Lee's restaurant. Maybe we better wait it out a spell."

Whiffy garbage cans and a pair of solid stone Chinese temple dogs three feet high guarded the door to Jimmie Lee's eatery. The temple dogs had logging chains padlocked around their stomachs to keep drunks from carrying them off.

The place is only a front. Jimmie Lee is a gambler. You can see the sky in the upstairs room where Jimmie deals draw and blackjack.

A shuffling old Chink with a wobbly upper lip took our card from Malott. "You wait 'long here," he squeaked. He did a quick fade into the kitchen.

We sat in a back booth for a couple of hundred years listening to sirens outside and drinking hot weak green tea out of cups without handles, like they give tourists who stumble into the place by accident.

The hot tea burned my mouth. But it didn't get down to business on the soles of my feet, where I needed it.

"I hope you're satisfied," I told Malott. "Now we'll have to hide out in this town like a couple of clumsy burglars."

Guy Malott only crossed his beanpole legs. He passed the time by flicking at a polished boot with his silk handkerchief.

"Nobody makes a chump out of me," he insisted stubbornly.

"Anybody makes a chump out of you," Jimmie Lee's voice said behind us, "he's good. Very good."

Jimmie Lee wears a permanent twinkle, behind flat-temple horn rim specs like a lawyer's. He is about my height, meaning he's short. But I wear a seventeen collar, and put on a purple necktie every morning so it will match my complexion when I get sore. Jimmie Lee is pale and permanently calm. Rumors reaching as far as Las Vegas say he is a very smooth boy with a gun.

Lee gave us his small-boned hand in a quick, nervous shake. It felt like a handful of wires. "Cop trouble, huh?" he twinkled, when Malott explained. "O. K. Always glad to help a couple of visiting firemen."

He led us out through a steamy kitchen. "Nothing upstairs tonight to hold the attention of a pair of big-time operators like Malott and McCool," he kidded. "But there's something else going on that might interest you."

We followed him across a dirty little court behind the restaurant, dodging rows of garbage cans in the dark by their smell.

What we found on the other side wasn't any secret underground passage or tunnel like you read about in Chinatown. It was just a plank with cleats nailed on it. The plank stuck up out of an open basement window in a brick warehouse.

"Look out for a loose cleat halfway down," Jimmie Lee advised. "Or you'll take some splinters back to Las Vegas with you."

Down in the basement, windows on three sides let in dim light from the streets. Lee pushed back a sliding firedoor. We went through and he shut it. A crack of light showed under another door. We went through that.

Walking into the white glare of a cargo light rigged over blood-spattered sand blinded me. But I knew what was going on by the smell.

The air was close as a monkey's hutch in here. Sweat. Dirty folding money was being waved around. And fresh split rooster blood.

". . .a stag, weight, 4 pounds, 14 ounces," a reedy-voiced pitmaster in shirt sleeves was announcing. "Give or take two ounces. Bred by Holohan, here."

He held up a gamecock with steel gaffs fastened to the stumps of its natural spurs.

The bleary blue orbs of a big, flat-faced Irishman sitting at pitside followed the bird proudly. He gave everybody a brassy grin from a mouth full of old gold jackets.

"All comers," he said thickly.

A bald ruddy sport who looked familiar to me limped forward with a bird under his arm. But a Mexican got there first.

The lad with the gimp turned back and sat down beside me. He had a clubfoot. I recognized him then. He had brown eyes, friendly as a spaniel pup's. "Gil Morgan is the name," he said. "Remember me? I dropped a goodly chunk of my inheritance in Las Vegas last year."

I admitted I remembered taking some of it. But we didn't talk much. This was my first cock-fight.

"Bill your birds," the pitmaster sang out.

Holohan gripped his rooster in fingers big and puffy as weiners. It stuck out a snaky neck to peck at the Mexican's battler. "This Shawneck'll sing the Ave Maria over your bird," he boasted. The Irishman's eyes showed a gleam of bleary cunning.

The Mexican flared round on him, pulling out a handful of green. Holohan covered, with a brassy grin of satisfaction.

EVERYBODY was busy getting down. Now that I had a chance to look around, I saw a lot of familiar faces in the crowd. The L.A. gambling syndicates had a couple of boys on hand to watch things. There were visitors from El Centro and Tijuana, up to do the big city. Malott and I had seen them all in Las Vegas at one time or another.

Gil Morgan listened to Malott telling Jimmie Lee some details of the shooting out in the street. "Ill wind that blows nobody good," he told us in his mellow Welsh voice. "Here's a chance to get some of my heritage back. I've got a century says Holohan's bird whips the Mexican's."

I got down on Morgan's offer. "He don't," I said.

"Pit your birds!" shrilled the pitmaster.

Two feathered chunks of battle met four feet off the ground. Steel gaffs flickered. Both cocks shuffled and struck like chain lightning. Those strokes were faster than you could see.

The only sound in the crowded cellar was the feathery battering of wing-butts and gaffed feet. The tension got into me.

I was only breathing half the time. Malott felt it too. I could tell by the way his freckled eyelids narrowed.

Holohan watched his Shawlneck take a bloody ripping from the Mexican bird's spurs. His flat face didn't show what he felt. But his hands did. The big puffy fingers laced and twisted. His knuckles popped like firecrackers in the silence.

The Shawlneck didn't have quit in him. He crowed victory finally. One of his needle gaffs punctured the Mexican bird's brain.

Like I said, it was my first main. I came out from under the anesthetic two hours later and three C's poorer. Gil Morgan offered grinning condolences while he put away a fistful of our folding money.

"Why don't you two boys put up at the family manse over in Pasadena for a couple of days?" he suggested. "My maiden aunt, who owns the place, won't mind. It'll give your cop trouble a chance to wear off. And last, but not least, I'll have a chance to get back some more of my squandered substance. We'll pass the time with a little genteel draw poker. How about it?"

"I'm agreeable," I said. Malott nodded. "Much obliged."

Guy Malott and I stayed behind in the outer basement after the crowd left. Jimmie Lee wanted to see if the homicide squad had gone back to pinochle at Central Station yet.

Malott prowled the floor nervously while we waited. "Psst. McCool, come over here." He summoned me to a street window on the far corner of the cluttered floor.

I strolled over. "This window," Malott whispered hoarsely. "Take a look out of it."

I did. Something about the view depressed me, suddenly and chillingly. Across an alley a Chinese shop window was lighted up again, now the cops were gone.

Its glow of yellow light gleamed on the fog-wet alley paving where Wong Duck had gotten in the way of five .32 slugs, just two hours before.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Gentlemen of Las Vegas

"GOT ANY matches?" Malott wanted to know. "I'm fresh out."

I seemed to be standing ankle deep in icewater. "Nary a match, if it's for striking a light to look for empty brass on the floor in here," I gulped. "Nix, Malott. Wong Duck's death is no skin off my nose. Let's just get back to Las Vegas, and forget the whole thing."

Even in the half-dark, I could see Malott's freckles arranging themselves in a scowl. "Go back, to have the finger of scorn pointed at us on Fremont Street the rest of our days? Certainly not. Strike a light, McCool."

I forced my unwilling fingers to fumble a lucifer out. Before I could strike it, Jimmie Lee saved the day by coming back. He twinkled at us through his horn rims. "O.K., fellas. You better take it on the Arthur Duffy now. Gil Morgan's waiting in his car at the front door. Come back soon, fellas."

"That we will," I heard Malott mutter, under his breath.

The die was cast. The big, skinny, red-headed vaquero would never give up now. He'd got the idea somebody was playing him for a chump.

So I wake up in the morning and there's a judge standing there looking at me with cold gray eyes. Black robes he has on. He totes a law book under one arm. The stern set of his upper lip says he's there to throw the book at me. I almost ducked under the covers. Then I saw it was just an oil painting in a big gold frame on the wall.

I sat up in a strange bed. It was a big quarter-acre job with an awning over it. Guy Malott was holding down the other side of the tick. His pink eyebrows were screwed up tight in a frown. He must've been dreaming somebody is trying to take him, as a rube.

I poked Malott awake. He woke up still scowling. "Where are we?" I wanted to know.

"Pasadena," Malott yawned. "One of those big, old-fashioned houses just off

Orange Grove Drive, not far from the Colorado Street bridge. We are guests of Gil Morgan and his maiden aunt. Remember? Only auntie doesn't know it yet. We got here in the middle of the night."

We got dressed and went downstairs. Instead of using the dinky, slow elevator Gil Morgan brought us up in last night, we hit the stairs. Morgan's boot-heels rang on a wide sweep of polished hardwood, going down.

"You'll go over big," I whispered. "Maiden aunts in lavender and old lace go nuts over guys like you. It's your freckles and red hair. Don't forget to show her some card tricks. You'll be her boy."

A chalky-fingered old Italian butler with brilliant black eyes in a face like aged parchment showed us out to a brick terrace by a swimming pool. "Miss Larrabee is waiting breakfast for you, gentlemen."

Miss Larrabee was waiting breakfast for us, all right. But she didn't have on lavender and old lace.

She was about twenty. She wore something red, with plenty of cleavage. The Johnson office withdraws its seal of approval for less than that, in the movies.

Long narrow gray eyes widened when she saw us. She gasped and jumped half out of her chair, spilling coffee on a spread newspaper.

Slowly, she sank back in her chair with wildcat grace. The gray eyes narrowed down on us then, like they'd narrowed at Wong Duck in the Union Station last night.

You could practically hear her brain ticking over like a pari-mutuel totalizer, figuring the odds. Her hands were shaking. "Oh! You must be Gil's guests. Mr. Malott and Mr. McCool. Luigi told me. I'm Gil's aunt. Luigi, bring more coffee, please."

The Italian butler moved our chairs up for us with chalky old fingers and went away. Gil Morgan came gimping across the lawn, singing something cheery in his mellow Welsh voice. He greeted us all with snickers at the gag he'd pulled. I hardly heard the kidding about the Larrabee doll being his maiden aunt. I couldn't pry my eyes off the headlines in the morning Times.

GAMBLING MURDER IN CHINATOWN, they said. *OUT OF TOWN KILLERS HUNTED. GUNMEN BELIEVED PROMINENT IN LAS VEGAS GAMING CIRCLES . . .*

The kind of stuff the cops give out when they figure they have a couple of interesting suckers, if they can catch them.

"What do you boys think of Marjorie as a maiden aunt?" Gil Morgan was chortling. "Bit of a shock, wasn't it? Was to me too. Hadn't seen her in years, up to a month ago. She's been raised in boarding schools in the East. She and I are the last of the Mohicans in this family. You see, Gramps married again as an old widower, and got him a beautiful daughter. Marjorie owns the house, and Luigi. I'm just a poor relation living on her bounty. But you boys are welcome to den up here for a few days. Aren't they, Marjorie?"

Marjorie Larrabie said we were. Her voice sounded like she had toast crumbs down her throat.

Guy Malott's eyes were sleepy under pink eyelashes. "We accept your hospitality on condition you drop in at our dude ranch for a return stay, Miss Larrabee," he drawled. "But haven't we met somewhere before, sometime?"

"I can't imagine where," she said coldly. "I've never been in Las Vegas."

With that she got up and swept away from the table. The way her upper lip went long and Presbyterian when she got mad made her a ringer for the judge in black robes in that picture up in our room. But her try at a frigid departure sort of fell flat. The red dress wasn't made for frigid departures.

Gil Morgan whistled, reading the account of the murder we were wanted for. "Wong Duck, a Stockton gambler!" he snorted. "Why, old Wong was no gambler. Not a pro, that is. He was my Uncle Charley's ranch cook for years. Took care of him up to the day he died."

Guy Malott pricked up his freckled ears. I sat forward on the edge of my

chair. "Your Uncle Charley's ranch cook? Is that Marjorie's uncle, too?"

"Nope. Uncle Charley is—was—Marjorie's oldest half-brother. His will is up for probate right now. She takes a nice piece of money from it. When it's finally settled. The court hasn't passed on the will yet. Details holding it up. But this Wong Duck—well, that's one for the books. Wonder who knocked him off, and why?"

Malott frowned. "The town clowns say McCool and I did. This Wong Duck bounced a five grand check on us a couple of months back. The cops may have picked it off the grapevine already."

HE WENT on to tell Morgan about Wong Duck's three-day career as a plunger in Las Vegas. Gil Morgan got a mellow laugh out of that.

"Can't understand the old Chink busting loose with anything bigger than a dime. He saved his wages all the years he worked for Uncle Charley. Of course, I don't know how things went up there in Stockton after the family quarrel. Uncle Charley fought with Gramps and my father over politics in '34 and walked out. They never spoke again, to the day of their deaths. So Uncle Charley left the bulk of his estate to Marjorie. I'm just a contingent remainderman. She was only a small child at the time of the family fight. Uncle Charley didn't extend his grudge as far as her. Ah well, let's forget it. We'll go riffle the pasteboards over a bottle in the library."

In the dark-paneled library, Morgan rang for Luigi. "Pull the drapes, Luigi. And bring us the makings for champagne cocktails. This everlasting sunshine gives me the creeps."

Luigi looked disapproving, but mixed the first round himself. With slow, chalky old fingers he muddled a lump of sugar in each of three big wineglasses. He added a drop of bitters, a half-jigger of brandy. He topped each glass off brimfull with champagne chilled to where it put frost on the stems of the glasses.

He went out of the library with a backward glance of disapproval you could feel coming right through the closed door.

"Great old boy, Luigi," Gil Morgan sighed happily, tasting his drink. "Gramps won him in a game of stud in Florence, Italy, in 1906. We've had him ever since."

We played a little draw. I got up now and then to practice mixing champagne cocktails so I wouldn't forget how Luigi did it. Maybe I got a little too much brandy in the fourth round. It burst inside me like a rosy sunrise.

I felt as if a great stone had been rolled away from the mouth of my tomb, and I could go forth to Las Vegas now. Small matters like murdered Chinamen didn't seem to matter any more.

But not on Malott did four rounds of champagne cocktails have this rare effect. The lines of worry on his freckled brow only deepened as he drank. While Morgan dealt, now, he pulled out his silk handkerchief and snapped it at his polished hand-stitched boots.

"We'll need to borrow a car this afternoon, Gil. We want to slide back down to Chinatown and do a little snooping."

Morgan stopped dealing so fast he marred a card. "Hey! It's a mortal cinch you'll get picked up if you go fooling around down there in the daytime! Where's your sense of odds? The cops will—"

"The cops," I said bitterly, reaching for the bottle of brandy to firm my drink up a little. The stone had rolled back across the door of my tomb. "Surely," I said sarcastically, "you don't think they would make a chump out of my partner, Guy Malott, by heaving us both in the can?"

Malott reddened up, but he didn't have a comeback.

Morgan shrugged. "You can take my car if you wait until dark. But don't make an accessory out of me by getting caught. McCool, you'll find a fresh deck in the desk drawer yonder. I've spoiled this one."

If I hadn't had that fourth drink I wouldn't have pulled the desk drawer out so far. In that case I never would have

found the nice little .32 Colt auto with ivory grips. It was way in the back of the drawer, behind half-a-dozen virgin decks in wrappers.

Gil Morgan's back was to me. I picked the gun up and sniffed its muzzle. You always read about finding the odor of cordite, even if we use practically nothing but loads with a nitro-cellulose base in this country when we shoot Chinamen in back alleys. But the .32 with the ivory grips didn't even smell of that. It just smelt clean and oiled.

Guy Malott saw this routine of mine over Morgan's shoulder. He didn't even blink a pink eyelash. I went back to the table with a fresh deck. "Riffle 'em," Gil Morgan invited.

It was five-thirty in the P.M. and Chinatown's street lights were coming on whitely in the dusk when Malott and I parked Morgan's new little Stude in front of Jimmie Lee's chow mein emporium.

"We'll have to get a car of our own," Malott frowned. "It may take us weeks to turn up the operator who creamed Wong Duck. There's no point in giving the cops a chance to lag Morgan for lending us aid and material assistance."

"Why stick around L.A. until the cops lag anybody?" I countered. "Why not light a shuck for Las Vegas?"

Malott shook his head stubbornly. "The Wong Duck killing is charged to us on the books. Besides, we couldn't show our noses on Fremont Street, even apart from being extradited. The town fathers wouldn't put up with it. People might laugh themselves to death. It would be manslaughter."

"O. K.," I said. "But since we are playing sleuth, perforce, what about that dude .32 of Gil Morgan's we saw in the library?"

"Well, what about it?"

"I talked to Miss Larrabee's cook. Cook says Morgan is very, very good with it. He riddles tin cans out behind the greenhouses, and stuff. Don't you figure it's mighty coincidental Morgan is drawing cards in this game when Wong Duck was his Uncle Charlie's ranch cook?"

Malott shook his head again. "The only coincidence is our running into Wong Duck in the Union Station in the first place. All these old California families have Chinese servants who've been with them since the year one. For this particular Chinaman to take off for Chinatown the way he did when we spooked him was natural. It is no coincidence that Gil Morgan happened to be in Chinatown last night, because Morgan is a cock-fighting man, and Jimmie Lee's seems to be the number one spot for the sport in downtown L.A. Nope, you're close. But no seegar."

I SAW what he meant. We'd already discussed Gil Morgan's maiden aunt privately. We don't know how deep she is in this thing. But we agree it is plenty.

We went in to the same back booth and drank the same hot, pale green tea from cups without handles. The shuffling old Chinaman with the wobbly upper lip told us Jimmie Lee wasn't in.

I tried to ask the old Celestial if he could lay his hands on some Colt .32 auto loads anywhere. But he only wiped his hands on his dirty apron and made yelping noises. "No sale," I decided.

The old boy came back with a plate of fortune-telling tea-cakes. You bite into one, and get some good advice from Confucius, printed in English with a union printers' label.

I bit into one of the cakes now. It said: *Submit Graciously to Authority.*

On the plate beside the tea-cakes was something small and heavy wrapped in a scrap of Chinese newspaper. I opened it. It was a box of Colt .32 automatic ammunition.

I love Chinatown.

Loading the Walther P.P.'s clip under the tablecloth, I raised an eyebrow at Malott. "What next?"

"Out through the kitchen and take a look for stray hulls under the window in that warehouse. Wong Duck got it from there, sure."

On the way out through the steamy kitchen I slipped the old boy a twenty for his trouble. He yelped a little when

he saw where we were going. But he didn't follow us.

The garbage cans out in the little court didn't smell any better than they had last night. Malott went straight to the window. He wedged a polished boot heel against the sash and shoved. It rasped open, hinged at the top.

"Wait out here," Malott ordered. "Don't let anybody disturb me."

He dropped into thick dark inside. I waited. The little court filled up slowly with night. Traffic noise seemed to get louder out on the streets. Malott didn't come back.

I put my head in the window. "What's keeping you?" I wanted to know.

Guy Malott didn't answer. Only, somewhere in there cloth caught on a nail, and twanged faintly, softly.

I got the safety off the Walther and dropped in through the basement window. "Malott?" I said hoarsely.

No answer.

It took me fifteen minutes, inching around the wall, to get as far as the sliding metal fire door to the sub-basement. I crawled. I was careful passing any crates and boxes along the way. For one thing, the place smelled of rats. You could hear them scuttle in the dark, too. The sweat popped out all over me when I heard them. I knew a guy who got a rat bite on his finger once. His hand swelled up as big as an Arizona grapefruit. When it went down he was never the same guy. Instead of his old smooth second deal, you'd have thought he was trying out for amateur night.

What I finally put my hand down on in the dark wasn't a rat. But it scared me just as bad. It was one of Guy Malott's slick-shined cowboy boots. Its toe pointed straight up at the ceiling. The rest of him lay inside the opened fire door.

CHAPTER THREE

Damned Homicidal, These Chinese

MY HEART stopped until I found his still going. "Malott!" I whispered. "For heaven's sake, speak to me!"

My hoarse whisper did it. The guy who'd downed Malott was waiting his chance, somewhere behind a box or crate. He took it now. Shoe leather scraped brick wall frantically. A shadow blocked the open window.

For a second I couldn't remember if I'd jacked the top round into the chamber when I'd slipped the full clip in.

Then my thumb found the indicator pin sticking up above the hammer. On a Walther Polizei Pistole, that tells you there's a bean in the barrel. So I lined up and let drive.

The red spurt of muzzle blast pointed into the other corner. Malott had me by the elbow. "McCool, you damn fool!" he swore.

He waited for echoes to stop making four-cushion billiards off brick walls. "What if you'd spoiled him? We'd only have another waltz with the law to worry about. Put that German rod away until I tell you it's O.K. to use it."

Malott was all right, then. I managed some sort of a growl at him for messing up my shot. But a couple of tons of dead weight had been lifted off me. The air in here wasn't close and choking any more. A sweat came out on me, and eased me some, too.

Malott scrambled over to the window that gave on the alley where Wong Duck had stepped in front of five. A lucifer flared. Malott was down on hands and knees among busted wooden crates and rat droppings. I heard him grunt satisfaction.

He stood up with a brass .32 hull in his freckled fingers. "This is what he came to look for," Malott decided.

I scratched matches and looked for more empty shells. There weren't any.

"Holohan must have got the other four, just now. I walked in on him before he could find this last one," Malott told me.

"Holohan? You mean the big, flat-faced guy with the gold teeth we saw matching birds in here last night?"

"The same." Malott rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "He laid me like a rug when I came in here a few minutes ago. I heard a noise over there by the fire-door. Like a fool I went over for a look-

see. Curtains. Holohan's fist came out of the dark. I never even saw it coming."

"How did you know it was Holohan if you never saw him?"

"Remember how he cracked his knuckles last night at pit-side? When I came to he was still squatting beside me here in the dark. You had him blocked on the getaway. He got nervous waiting. He popped those knuckles of his just like last night. Yep. It was Holohan."

We crawled out through the window to the little cluttered court. My shot had fetched out the old Chinaman with the wobbly upper lip. He had a cleaver. He waved it at us and yelped fit to break up religious services over in the Kong Chow Buddhist temple on Ferguson Alley. Malott quieted him with another twenty. I guess the old boy had had a pretty good day.

Luigi had been mighty smooth at mixing champagne cocktails that morning. But he had a fine Italian hand for Martinis, too. Back in the dark-paneled library of Marjorie Larrabee's big old house in Pasadena, Malott and I sipped samples of his work and sparred politely with Gil Morgan's maiden aunt.

Marjorie Larrabee lounged in a chair like a ramrod, wearing a slinky, wispy silk hostess gown of steel-gray that just matched her eyes.

Gil Morgan was dressing for dinner upstairs. His mellow Welsh tenor reached us through closed doors.

Guy Malott flicked at his polished boots with his handkerchief, and at the girl with a sleepy, pink-lashed glance. He'd just passed out another invite to the dude ranch. It had fallen flatter than a busted flush.

He tried another opening. "Gil—er—told us something of the family history today, Miss Larrabee. To use a gambler's term, you seem to have hit the jackpot. I mean, when the will is probated."

Gil Morgan's maiden aunt ramrodded a little straighter, spilling the Martini in her fingers.

"It's true I benefit by Uncle Charley's will. But it's not my fault that Gil was named only as a remainderman. I've told Gil he's always welcome to live here in the family home. You can hardly blame me for the way Uncle Charley chose to draw his will."

Methinks the lady doth protest too much, I was thinking, when Luigi's cough came at my elbow. Maybe he read my mind. Anyway, he managed to put cold disapproval at our nosiness into that cough.

His black eyes glittered angrily in his old parchment face as he filled our glasses brim-full and bulging, without spilling a drop.

The look he gave Malott and me said the next drink he mixed for us would be slightly flavored with arsenic.

Then he went away to answer a phone ringing somewhere. "For you, Miss Marjorie," he said, when he came back. "Stockton is calling, long-distance."

Gil Morgan's maiden aunt swished away to talk on the phone in privacy. Luigi vanished, too. Guy Malott looked at me. "From Stockton," he drawled.

WE BOTH looked at the extension phone out in the hall. A couple of furlongs of open, polished parquet floor lay between it and us. "No sale," I whispered. "One footstep out there and Luigi would be back in a flash."

Before I knew what he was doing, Malott had his hand-stitched boots off and parked beside his chair. "Keep your fingers crossed," he said.

He ghosted across the bare hall in stocking feet, without a sound, and lifted the handset.

It seemed like forever he stood there with the phone pressed against his ear. But he was back in the library with his boots on again when Gil Morgan gimped down the stairs, still singing in his fruity tenor.

Things were a little stiff at dinner. I didn't have a chance to waylay Malott until we got back upstairs to our room.

Malott flung his skinny six-foot-three of length on the canopied bed.

"What was it?" I demanded. "That phone call, I mean?"

"Stockton. You heard Luigi say Stockton, didn't you?"

Malott had mooched a handful of lichee nuts in Jimmie Lee's restaurant in Chinatown. He lay there cracking the thin shells with his teeth, just looking dumb in his freckled way.

When Malott looks like that it makes my seventeen collar feel a size too small.

"Come on," I snarled. "Give!"

"It was a lawyer in Stockton. He was upset by what he read in today's papers about Wong Duck being shot down. He has been checking on Wong Duck's moves for Marjorie. He isn't too happy about the whole thing, now that murder raises its ugly head."

I stopped pacing the floor. "So she's been casing Wong Duck. O.K., what else?"

"The legal eagle in Stockton reports that Wong Duck was in very bad with a Chinese Burial Association. It seems he was local treasurer up there. That is, until he blew the dough entrusted to him."

"Ah?" I said. "Maybe he dropped it in Las Vegas?"

"Correct. He's been working the debt off ever since as a kind of slave of the other members of the Burial Association. But the local odds in Stockton are, he won't live to pay off. For one thing not even Chinamen live two hundred years. For another, Dame Rumor says Wong Duck was into an L.A. gambler named Jimmie Lee. For big money. Dame Rumor further says that Jimmie Lee was irked at his inability to square himself."

I loosened my necktie.

"That still isn't all," Malott went on calmly. "When the lawyer wants to know how a sheltered flower like Marjorie happens to get mixed into such matters as murder, she tells him."

"How did it happen?" I stooged, knowing Malott. You have to drag it out of him.

"She received a telephone threat from some Chinese who forgot to give his name. Dire events would take place if she failed to meet Wong Duck in the Union Station last night when he arrived from Stockton. Unless she listens to Wong Duck, and acts upon what he says, unspeakable Oriental punishments will fall upon her whole household. That's why she showed when she did last night. She claims that's all she knows."

"It sounds a little corny for an alibi," I suggested.

Guy Malott swung his polished cowboy boots off the canopied bed. He pulled a .32 Colt automatic with ivory grips out of a hip pocket. "Corny is the word, all right. I think you'll admit it justifies our taking this rod down in the wine cellar to get a sample hull. I want to compare it with the one we found in the warehouse."

"Is that Gil Morgan's gun? The one we saw in the desk drawer downstairs?"

"Yep. I hooked it from the desk drawer tonight after dinner. Gil may have knocked Wong Duck off as a favor to his maiden aunt. If so, a sample of brass from this gun will tally with the empty we found down in the warehouse in Chinatown this afternoon."

"That is, if he used this same gun. But how do we get down in the wine cellar to fire a test round? All the wine cellars I ever heard of in houses like this one were locked. The master keeps the key on a chain in his vest pocket."

"Gil Morgan hasn't worn a vest in years. I kidded around with the maid a little. She tells me all the wine cellar keys were lost long ago. The place is wide open. Gil wears a beaten path in and out of it."

"What if we get caught?"

"We won't. Gil's disappeared somewhere for the evening. Marjorie Larrabee is in her own room up here. The cook and maid have gone. That leaves Luigi. You go scout him out. Find him. We've got to have him spotted."

Luigi wasn't in the house. I didn't look in the bedroom closets. But I looked everywhere else. Finally, I made a check of the grounds. That's how I found him.

The sound made by a spade delving earth was the pay-off. I sneaked up on it. Luigi's old bent back was stooped to the work. I watched him from a corner of the greenhouses while he buried something. He covered it up, carefully.

By then I was fading back to the house to give Guy Malott the office. Things were now O.K. for a Cook's tour of the wine cellar.

MALOTT'S face was wooden as we closed the cellar door and snapped on the lights. I knew how he felt. I had a sneaky, underhanded, guilty feeling crawling inside of me, myself. It's no fun trying to hang a murder on people when you've eaten bread and salt with them, at their table.

Malott glanced at me and shrugged, defensively. "It's this or be played for a couple of chumps."

I knew what the answer to that one was.

The wine cellar, not very surprisingly, smelt damp and winy. Wooden bins of bottles lying on their sides lined both sides of the place.

Malott's eye fell on a barrel in a far corner. Worn and musty Brussels carpet hung out of it. "Funny place to find an old carpet. But it's just what the doctor ordered."

"Sure," I agreed. "Fire a round into that barrel and the carpeting soaks up the push behind it. You can muffle the shot with a fold of carpet around the gun, too."

Malott was wrapping the top layer of carpet around Gil Morgan's automatic as I spoke. Suddenly he froze.

"What's the matter?" I queried.

Malott sniffed at a burnt hole in the top layer of carpet. "Looks like a powder burn."

"Fresh?" I said, feeling my scalp prickle.

Malott shrugged. "*Quien sabe?*" His finger latched around the trigger.

The shot only made a chug like an old-fashioned hand churn's plunger coming down. But it sounded like we were right in the churn.

Malott examined the new, smoldering spot on the carpet. The old one was a twin to it. He picked up the ejected brass and looked around for anything else on the floor.

"You think somebody else fired a shot into that barrel?" I put in..

He nodded. "Turn it over, McCool. I want to see did the bullet come out the bottom."

It hadn't. "Dig," my partner ordered.

We pulled a couple of million layers of musty, dirty-smelling carpet out of the barrel. Clear down at the bottom we found a pair of .32 slugs. "What does this prove except that a .32 slug will go through a lot of carpet?" I wanted to know.

Malott shrugged, pocketing the two bullets. "I'll tell you that when I've looked at the empty brass cases under a strong reading glass I saw up in the library. I can't compare the slugs. Only a ballistics man with a microscope could do that. But the marks any individual automatic leaves on an ejected shell are easy to—"

"Shh!" I cut in. "Listen."

Somebody was coming down the wine-cellar steps.

"Get that carpet back in the barrel," Malott whispered.

We made a crude job of putting things back the way we found them. Just in time. The door opened. Marjorie Larrabee's long narrow gray eyes questioned us under lowered lashes. They said plenty. When she spoke, she said something else: "Thirsty, gentlemen?"

Malott nodded, his freckles submerged in a sheepish, brick-red flush. We were both fingering bottles in the wine bins.

Gil Morgan's maiden aunt looked at the fat-bellied bottle Malott was toying with. "That's a Chablis, Mr. Malott. It's nice with fish. But you'll find the champagne Mr. McCool has his hands on goes better on a guilty conscience."

Malott's ears were still red as she led us up the cellar steps. "If you'll wait for me in the library," Marjorie Larrabee said, "I'll get you an ice-bucket and a couple of glasses. You and Mr. McCool can take the champagne up to your room, if you wish."

When we were alone in the library, Malott got out his two specimens of empty brass. Under a strong reading glass, he looked them over. He let me see the faint scratches that showed under an oblique light.

"Same gun," he decided. "But with a difference. The impression of the breech block is the same on each case. Extractor and ejector marks on both are the same. Except that the empty we found in Chinatown today has a secondary extractor mark made when the slide went forward, and touched the rim doing it."

"So what?" I snapped. I was fidgeting for fear Gil's maiden aunt would walk in on us. She might get ideas if she saw us looking at that brass under a strong light.

"So the empty we found in the warehouse today was hand-loaded into the chamber—not fed from a string in a clip."

"How do you know?"

"Besides the secondary mark of the extractor on that one, it lacks the fine scratches the guide lips of a magazine put on a brass casing. Look at this one we just fired from a clip down in the cellar and you'll see the difference."

"Wait a minute," I said, my heart skipping a beat. "You mean somebody is trying to make Gil Morgan look guilty. The empty cartridge we found today was from his gun. But it was planted there!"

"Just that. Whoever wanted a specimen of brass to plant there forgot that it was supposed to be one of five shots fired from a clip. This planted shell was hand-loaded into the chamber. The chances are it was a single round, fired right here in the wine cellar."

"Two gets you one Holohan was there to plant that hull today," I mused. "He might have gotten it from Luigi or the girl, or the other servants. But why would Holohan want to throw suspicion on Gil Morgan?"

"That," Guy Malott drawled, "is something you ought to ask Holohan sometime, when you run into him."

Knowing Malott, I left it at that. We went into the kitchen to help Marjorie Larrabee with the ice-bucket.

She was at the back door, listening out into the night. Her gray eyes were angry. Her upper lip had gone long and Presbyterian again. "Listen," she ordered.

WE LISTENED. A gamecock crowed lustily somewhere out in the grounds around the house. "I thought I'd seen lights out in the old carriage house the last couple of nights," Gil Morgan's maiden aunt said. "I'm going to look into this. Coming, gentlemen?"

We went along for the ride. We couldn't very well refuse. I had a hunch what we'd find out there. And so did Malott, by the innocent droop of his pink eyelashes.

Gil Morgan was gimping around the carriage house with a fighting cock under each arm when Marjorie burst in on him with us behind her.

Morgan just stood there with his mouth open. His friendly spaniel-brown eyes went to Malott and me. They found no help there. Malott and I weren't having any of this.

The two birds under his arms stuck out snaky necks and tried to peck each other. Both had yellow sparks for eyes and scars of old gaff-wounds on their comb-trimmed heads.

"Gil Morgan, what are those—those ugly creatures?" Gil's aunt spoke severely, as if she were forty years older and wore a white wig.

"Just a couple of stags," Gil came back weakly. "I—er—well, train them out here. I didn't think you'd mind, Marge."

"Are those gamecocks?" his female relative shot back, driving him further into the corner. "Just because I'm a woman, I s'pose you thought I wouldn't know the difference!"

She lifted the hem of her wispy, steel-gray hostess gown off the floor as if the cement were crawling with pollution. One glance at the wire cages and sacks of feed in the corner and she snapped: "Get them out of here!"

"But I've got a lot of money tied up in them," he protested. "Give me until tomorrow, anyway. There's a big main coming off up in a canyon out near Oxnard. I'll find somebody there to take them off my hands. I know, you think it's cruel, and not a sport. But these birds have been bred for centuries, just

to fight. They like it. It's not cruel if they like it, is it?"

That pulled the cork on her wrath again. Malott and I beat a retreat while she was still giving Gil the usual feminine song-and-dance about cruelty to roosters. Up in our room, we settled down to polish off the quart of champagne. It was good and cold by now.

About three glasses later, we heard both Morgan and the girl come upstairs and go down the hall to their rooms. You could tell Morgan's step by his gimp.

Guy Malott was idly toying with a brass ashtray he'd picked up from our bedside table. It had an Italian motto stamped in the metal, around the edge. "When did this ashtray get into our room?" he wanted to know. "It wasn't here before dinner. You know what it says, in Italian?"

"Nope," I admitted. "My knowledge of the tongue of Dante and D'Annunzio is fast slipping away from me since my finishing school days."

"Well, I can read it from Spanish. It says: *'Guests are like fish—after three days they stink.'*"

"Luigi," I grunted. "I guess he figures we're a bad influence on Gil Morgan, or something. That reminds me, Luigi buried something out by the greenhouses earlier tonight. I meant to look into the matter. Now's a good time."

Malott stayed behind, scowling into his champagne glass, and turning two empty brass cartridge cases over and over in his big, freckled hand.

Outside everything was quiet. The grounds of the big, rambling old estate seemed to be asleep. I got a spade from a tool house, and found the spot Luigi had been digging in.

The dirt was soft. A foot down, I hit something wrapped in gunnysacking. I threw away the spade and unwrapped it.

A lucifer showed me a pair of dead gamecocks. Blood still oozed from their fresh gaff-wounds. One bird had a puncture in its coppery red breast feathers. Its neck had been wrung. The other cock had a spur puncture right through its brain.

I covered them up again. The spade I left where I'd found it.

Going back around the swimming pool toward the house, you had to pass the big bougainvillea vine dripping off one corner of the bath house. I got a whiff of sour rice wine from the shadows, just as I passed it.

It stopped me flat-footed, my scalp prickling. The Walther was in my right hip pocket. My hand didn't get there quick enough. Shoe leather gritted, behind me. A twisted cloth came over my head, hoop-wise. It hit me across the throat like an iron bar, and came tight.

CHAPTER FOUR

For Whom the Cock Crows

HE MUST have been watching me breathe, like they say the guy does who flips the switch on you in the electric chair. The idea is to catch you on the downbeat, with empty lungs.

My head was spinning in seconds. I couldn't get the safety off the Walther. Steel fingers held my wrist in a vise.

Everything was red and black by turns, now. I clawed feebly with my left hand at the strangling cloth. I missed it, and found somebody's ear. That ear was cauliflowered like a Philadelphia beaten biscuit.

Damned homicidal, these Chinese! I was thinking as black won out over red, and I went under. . .

I opened my eyes knowing I was dead. A clammy graveyard drizzle was soaking me to the skin. Guy Malott stood over me.

Then I saw the sprinkling can in his hand. It made me mad enough to want to live again. I sat up and took a blind swing at where his beanpole legs ought to be.

"McCool!" my partner snapped. "Come out of it! What's the idea of this gold-bricking?"

I could only croak at him for a while. I felt around on the grass until I found the Walther. The safety was still on. "We've had callers," I finally gasped.

I told him about Ears while he steered

me into the house. My legs were still rubbery. "It was the big hunk of flesh we saw in the Union Station last night," I wheezed, feeling my raw throat. "I wish we had stayed in Las Vegas."

Malott had me propped against the elevator door by then. The door was shut. The elevator hummed faintly, and we heard its door slide open upstairs on the second floor.

When it came back we got in. A woman's perfume hung in the dinky car. We both sniffed.

Malott scowled. His pink-lashed eyes got sleepy and stubborn. "We'll go into this further in the morning, McCool," he promised.

I stayed awake long enough to tell him about the two dead gamecocks Luigi had buried. "He must've been trying to help Gil Morgan keep his guilty secret from Marjorie," I yawned, feeling the sore hinges of my jaw. "But Morgan should have known enough to gag his roosters before letting them fight. One cock-a-doodle-doo in the middle of the night and the cat was out of the bag. He should've known better. Say, Malott—how'd you happen to find me, anyhow?"

"I heard somebody on the stairs, after you went down. I followed. You were sleeping like a babe when I stumbled over you. Better get some sleep, now. You'll need it, or I miss my guess."

At breakfast, I burnt my mouth on hot coffee over the *Examiner*. It announced that the D.A.'s office had sent a special investigator to Las Vegas to check on things.

I shivered over the *Times*, and burnt my mouth some more. It did everything but name us, and tell where we could be found.

"Is it hot enough for you, Mr. McCool?" Marjorie Larrabee asked sweetly, her gray eyes wide and innocent. "I mean the coffee, of course. Luigi, see that Mr. Malott's is hot, too."

That crack set Malott to flicking at his boots. It was getting to be a nervous twitch with him, in this household.

Malott had arranged with Jimmie Lee to deliver us a rented car this morning. Also a spare gun. When the smooth Americanized little Lee showed up, he gave us his quick handshake all around, like a handful of wires. His twinkle, behind the wide-temple horn rims, might well have been painted on a china dog or cat.

Morgan, gimping. led us all into the library, pulled the drapes against morning sun. He rang for Luigi. The old Italian servant read his mind. When he answered the ring he carried the makings for champagne cocktails on a large silver tray.

His glare spoke volumes. Two gentlemen from Las Vegas were bad enough—but a Chinese gambler. . . He coughed.

Morgan mixed the first round. We had a few hands of draw. "Action, boys," Morgan pleaded. "I've got time for just a few hands. There's a big main up in a canyon near Oxnard. I'm toting my birds up there this morning. How about you, Lee? Matching any roosters today?"

Lee twinkled through his horn rims, and admitted he was.

Guy Malott drew four cards. He bored in smoothly on the subject of gamecocks. "Where," he wanted to know "can McCool and I pick up a few birds of a good strain to take back to Las Vegas? We've decided to introduce the sport to our native heath."

I opened my mouth to say that as far as I was concerned, I wasn't in the market for any roosters, liking my chicken fried. Also that there were plenty of Mexicans in Las Vegas who had already heard, in a roundabout way, of the sport of cockfighting.

But the sleepy droop of Malott's pink eyelashes warned me. I shut up.

Jimmie Lee's fine-boned hand added chips to the kitty. "You want Gay Doms, there's an old Mex named Fernandez has the best strain. If it's Blues, try Jaques, up to Oxnard. Tatoris being Jap birds, they got unpopular around here during the war. But they're coming back now. You can find them if you look. Holohan, out in the Valley, has Irish Shawlnecks. He might sell you a few stags—stags are young, unfought birds—and some hens for breeding."

THE little Americanized Chinese scribbled addresses on one of his restaurant cards and handed it over. "You can say I sent you."

Guy Malott mixed the fourth round of drinks. It had the same rosy sunburst effect inside me as yesterday's. Malott handed Jimmie Lee a nice fresh cold one and watched it brighten the luster of his shoebutton twinkle. "By the way, Jimmie," he asked casually, "do you know any local Chinese with scrambled ears?"

Lee started. "Only one." He smiled, being just as casual as Malott. "He is the muscle man for the Benevolent Burial Association. Their headquarters is in the alley next door to my place. Quite a meeting of the association's big brass the night Wong Duck was liquidated."

Lee smiled. The smile said he wouldn't be talking any more, and would I please deal the pasteboards. I dealt them.

Before noon Gil Morgan had made his excuses, and pulled out for Oxnard. His gamecocks were shut up in cages under canvas in the back seat of his sedan. Jimmie Lee had left earlier.

Morgan asked us if we wanted to go along. Malott declined with thanks. "We have other fish to fry, now we've got a car from Lee."

The other fish was Holohan. Marjorie Larrabee wasn't around when we drove out through the old house's porte-cochere. Only Luigi was on hand to see us off. His polite cough said he hoped we'd never come back. I wondered if the glittering eyes in that parchment face could read my mind.

If they did, they read about cops. I am frankly allergic to the L.A. police. To me the bright sunshine felt like a searchlight focused on us as we drove away.

Holohan lived pretty well out toward Van Nuys on one of the little walnut-shaded streets just off Magnolia. His cottage was a white frame job set away back from the street. He'd left the hose running too long on the lawn by the front door. Malott's boot-heels sank into grassy muck with sucking noises. They left square holes. Malott swore. He is choosy about his boots.

We rang the bell. Nobody answered. We knocked. Nobody answered that, either.

We went around to the back. Clean-swept chicken runs fenced with wire lined both sides of a long back yard. Poor-looking lemon trees dangled green fruit.

Holohan kept his bird runs clean, I'll say that for him. Not even a twig. Not even a match stick. The water and feed troughs weren't foul, like in a farmer's hen-house. They were enameled pans, scrubbed hospital clean.

I got too close to a fence. A Shawl-neck cock hurled himself at the wire in front of my face like a feathered buzz-bomb. He beat the mesh with his wing-butts, trying to get through. When I backed away, he gave out with a shrill, derisive crow of victory.

"Nice strain of birds," I grinned sheepishly. "Holohan knows his eggs."

We found the back door unlocked. Malott eased inside, I followed, making sure the Walther hadn't dropped out of my pocket anywhere along the way.

Holohan's own living quarters weren't as clean as his bird runs. A two-weeks' supply of dirty dishes overflowed the sink. A choice old beer aroma made the house smell like a brewery.

Malott tapped a half-emptied glass of suds with a freckled forefinger. "Holohan must have been here today. Bubbles still rising in this glass."

I poked into the bedroom. The shades were pulled in here. The sun sent a dull amber glow through them. The place smelled of stale bedding.

By the light from the doorway, I could see Holohan was home, all right. He just wasn't answering any doorbells, is all.

Malott swore, and pushed past to look at him.

Holohan sat on the floor with his back to an iron bedpost. His big flat face was purple. A twisted cloth around his neck and the bedpost, kept his heavy chin from sagging forward. His tongue stuck out a little between nicotine-brown, gold-jacketed teeth.

Malott pried one of the dead man's fingers out of its spasm curl in the palm

of his hand. He did it gingerly, like he expected to hear it pop. "He feels warm. But there's no way of telling how long, exactly, it was."

I went back to the glass of beer on the kitchen table and took a taste. It wasn't flat in my mouth. Just the same, I spit it out. Not that I don't like beer. But Holohan had put salt in his.

"This brew isn't an hour old," I called to Malott.

On the kitchen table were scraps of leather, and needles and pack thread. Also a pair of little leather pads, like boxing gloves. Holohan had been sewing on the things, you could see that.

The little leather boxing gloves—only they didn't have thumbs—had been whipped up out of an old suede glove, judging by the scraps around. They even had laces.

I took them in to Malott. "What're these things?"

Guy Malott hardly gave them a glance. "Just pads, for covering a gamecock's spurs, so they won't cut his sparring partner up in training matches. But look here, McCool, at these pictures on the wall."

He had let the shades up. I saw that he'd gone pale, so his freckles looked dirty on him.

A series of five or six framed snapshot enlargements on the wall showed Holohan with a girl whose face looked familiar, even if she did wear pigtails and school-girl clothes.

I ran a finger around under my collar. You'd never take those long narrow gray eyes for anybody else's.

The air in Holohan's bedroom had been shut up long enough to feel stale and warm when we came in. But now it seemed cold enough to snow in here. "So O.K.," I said, finally, "it's her. What do we do now?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Dead Game

MALOTT rummaged around in a clutter on the bedside stand. He came up with a telephone. He dialed the operator. I recognized the number he gave. It was a Sycamore number—Marjorie Larrabee's Pasadena manse.

"Luigi?" Malott said, when somebody answered. "Let me speak to Miss Larrabee."

He knitted pink eyebrows in a scowl and listened to the scratchy noise in the receiver. "How long ago did she leave?"

The phone scratched some more. Malott hung up. "Come on, McCool," he said, starting for the door.

"Come on where?" I asked. We were piling into our rented car out at the curb by the time I caught up with him to ask it.

Malott pulled away from the curb so fast it slammed the door on my side. "Oxnard," he said. "Remember? There's a cocking main up in one of those canyons near the town."

We barreled out Ventura Boulevard so fast it made my scalp crawl. We didn't want any traffic tickets at this stage of the game. I protested, but it only put more lead in Malott's hand-stitched boot.

"We'd better move right along," he said. "Another hand of aces and eights is being passed out."

Aces and eights being a dead man's hand, I naturally got the idea. "Who is slated for posies this time?"

"Luigi says Marjorie Larrabee got a phone call a while ago, from some Chinaman. This time she was told that Gil Morgan won't be coming back from the mains."

"Did she call in the law?"

"She did not. She found a card to the mains around the house and got the gun out of the library. She's headed for Oxnard."

"So we're following," I snorted. "And just how do you figure a couple of non-union rooster rooters like us will even find an illegal cockfight pulled off up in a hidden canyon in a country full of hidden canyons?"

"Remember the little Mex who comes to Las Vegas every year to play the wheel in our place? Tony Verea runs a bar in Oxnard. He'll get us there."

I didn't ask any more questions the rest of the way over the Conejo grade. I didn't want to take Malott's eyes off those turns. Not the way we were traveling. Being wrapped around a live-oak in my prime is a death with very little sales appeal in it for me.

Dried-up little Tony Verea was so glad to see us in Oxnard that it took us three drinks on the house before we could get him to listen.

When he heard, he reached for pen and ink and a bar card. He made fancy purple flourishes in Spanish script on the back of the card. That was our pass. Give that to the look-outs at the mouth of the canyon, and we were in, he said. Tony sent one of his dozen or so kids with us to show us the way.

The lad steered us through the back country to the canyon road, and dropped off to hitch a ride back to town. He made the silver clackers Malott gave him rattle like dice at his ear. "Las Vegas!" he grinned.

The canyon road, after we passed the guards who took Tony Verea's card, was just a wagon track. It wound up into the hills under sycamores and oaks.

Halfway up, we passed a little lateral feeder canyon. Behind barbed wire fence, a black Ford sedan was nosing out of the brush. A fat deputy in harness jumped out, wire cutters ready.

"Law!" I told Malott. "Looks like a raid."

The fat deputy looked up from cutting wire fence. He bawled out a stop order at us. Malott didn't stop. I heard the law car start out of the brush as we passed.

"It's a raid, all right," Malott agreed calmly. "But it'll take them a minute or two to get through that fence. Somebody tipped off the law-and-order element about this main. There'll be confusion, and maybe shooting."

Ahead of us, suddenly, all the width of the canyon was taken up by parked cars. Beyond that was the cockpit, under the trees. You couldn't see it. But you knew it was there. Because maybe two hundred cash customers, mostly Mexican field workers, were packed around it.

A tight silence gripped the crowd. You could hear the thud, and feathery hammering in the cockpit. A couple of needle-gaffed birds were having it out.

By the sweaty, excited look of the Mexican crowd, the mains had been going on for some time.

Guy Malott left our car right in the road. "You work one side of the crowd. I'll take the other. Work fast. Find Marjorie Larrabee. Stick close. Don't let her see you. She might blast you on sight. Keep that German rod handy, but don't use it until you see me go into action first. Catch?"

Finding Marjorie Larrabee was easy. She was the only woman in that canyon. When I caught sight of her, she was easing through the crowd, along the the edges. She was white around the mouth.

Her long narrow gray eyes were busy sifting the crowd. She had her hand in a black, shiny patent-leather bag.

It had taken me about thirty seconds to find her. That was good. Because I had just about thirty-five seconds. That's when a little dark butterball of a Mexican with a fistful of folding money saw the johns. "*Los policías!*" he screeched.

IT WAS like blowing smoke in a bee-hive. A roar of excited voices rose instantly. It was a combined yell from the winners, to guys who owed them money, and from hitch-hikers hollering to the guys they'd come with in trucks and jalopies.

The mob burst for their parked cars in a wild, bombshell rush. The parked law car blocking the road didn't stop them. Beat-up old jalopies began to roar through a haze of dust. Somewhere a shot ripped out. Then two more. I guessed that would be the law, shooting into the air to stop the stampede.

Dodging a pick-up truck loaded with excited Mexicans in the fog of dust, I lost Marjorie Larrabee for a second. .

Guy Malott loomed up, grabbed her. He shoved her behind a big sycamore. He shoved me after her. "Keep her there!" he yelled.

She spat at me like a wildcat when I tried to hold her. "You—you low gambler!" she choked. "Take your hands off me!" She kicked me in the shins.

"What's the idea of wishing this wildcat on me?" I asked Malott.

Sycamore bark showered off the tree. It stung my face. Another slug tore the trunk before I caught on that this went with the shots I heard echoing through the canyon.

Two shadows in the dust fog were closing in on us, shooting.

"Hey!" I protested. "Those two deputies are shooting at us!"

Malott's borrowed .38 was in his big freckled lunch-hook. "They're not deputies," he said. "Come on in, any time, McCool."

So I took the nearest guy with the Walther. He went down, stiffly.

I let Marjorie Larrabee go, then. Malott had downed the other lad. But I took the precaution of taking the ivory-gripped .32 away from her. She'd gotten it out of her bag and was trying to trepan my skull with its butt.

After that, I went over for a look at the shadow I'd downed in the dust. It was Luigi. The old Italian had copped a nice clean one. Dust was settling on his glazed eyeballs. His parchment skin looked about the same dead as alive. You'd almost expect to hear his quiet little butler's cough.

Malott was bending over his man. I saw the clubfoot first. Then Gil Morgan's voice, cramped with agony, said: "Nice going, Malott. Cigarette?"

Malott lit a smoke and stuck it in his mouth. Jimmie Lee drifted up about then. And Marjorie Larrabee had come back with the fat deputy in harness, and his running mate. She must have told them plenty. Their eyes were big and their trigger fingers ready for anything.

"Take it slow, boys," Gil Morgan's mellow Welsh voice was fogging up in his throat. "You're a couple of stanzas too late. Malott and McCool are in the clear. Don't blame them, Marjorie."

"Gil!" The girl's face went white and sick at the big spreading red bloches on Morgan's sport shirt.

One look at where three .38 slugs had gone through him and you wondered why he was sticking around this long. But he wanted to talk. "Officer. . ."

"Yeah?" the fat deputy was excited. He'd come to knock over a rooster fight, and had found murder.

Morgan grinned faintly at Malott around his cigarette. "About that Chinatown killing in Los Angeles," he said. "Malott and McCool are in the clear on that. I shot Wong Duck from a basement window."

Morgan spoke thickly, with an effort. His face was turning fish-belly white.

"Oh, Gil—but why!" Marjorie Larrabee's hands were clenched until knuckle-bones showed through tanned skin.

Morgan shook his head. He was fading fast.

Guy Malott said quietly: "Gil, you

nod if I'm right. Let me give the answers. First place, you killed Wong Duck because he was your Uncle Charley's heir under a later will than the one about to be probated. You didn't want him throwing a monkey-wrench into probate proceedings. Right?"

Gil Morgan nodded.

Malott went on. "Your Uncle Charley made a will after the family quarrel—maybe shortly before he died. Wong Duck nursed him along for years. So Wong Duck took the kitty on this new will. But you probably made a surprise visit to the Stockton ranch, got your hands on it, and destroyed it."

Morgan managed another nod, but it was weaker.

"Wong Duck," Malott explained, "went on a big gambling spree when his boss died. The Chinaman had been told he'd be rich. He didn't wait for a probate court to give him the green light. He didn't know anything about American courts and law except that they frowned on lotteries. So he just waited for the money to pour in like his dead boss had promised. While he was waiting, he dropped his life savings in Las Vegas. He also dropped the money belonging to the Burial Association, of which he was treasurer in the Stockton area. On top of that, he got into Jimmie Lee for a considerable piece of money. You had Chinatown contacts who told you all this, didn't you?"

Gil Morgan tried to grin. "Sure," he whispered.

"Through Luigi," Malott told him, "You knew the brass hats in the Burial Association were making a desperate try to get some of their dough back from Marjorie Larrabee, who would benefit under the old will. They knew they couldn't bring forward the will that had made Wong Duck heir. But they also knew their nuisance value in probate proceedings. They hoped to scare Marjorie Larrabee into showing at Union Station the night we saw her there, to get her to meet Wong Duck and listen to his side of the case. A settlement out of court was their goal."

GIL MORGAN couldn't nod any more. He just blinked a "yes."

"Through your Chinatown contacts," Malott went on, "you knew the Burial Association brass hats would be waiting up for Wong Duck across the alley from Jimmie Lee's warehouse. All you needed was an alibi to let you be on hand. The cock-fighting racket was made to order. You weren't worried so much about an alibi for the police, as one for Chinatown. You wanted to keep a whole skin. So, with the help of Holohan, an old family servant who raised gamecocks, you cooked up the alibi of posing as an old hand at the sport of matching roosters. That's where you tipped your own pitch. Your knowledge of the sport was practically nil."

"Wait a minute," I put in. "If Holohan shared this deal with Morgan, who choked Holohan to death out in that cottage of his near Van Nuys? what about the Chinese with the scrambled ears? Wouldn't it be him who did for Holohan?"

"Ears made an attempt on your life, or just gave you a good scare, because he'd been sent after us to Pasadena to see what the score was, and you jumped him in the dark, there by the bathhouse. You see, the Burial Association may have thought you and I creamed Wong Duck because of that bad check; they had plenty of company there. Luckily, Marjorie followed you downstairs last night and scared Ears away. She probably saved your life."

"But Holohan—" I began again.

"Holohan's death was strictly Gil Morgan's doing. Right, Morgan?"

Gil Morgan's lips formed the word "yes," while the deputies bent close.

"Holohan," my partner explained, "went along as far as creaming Wong Duck. What's a dead Chinaman between friends to an old Irish gardener? Holohan helped Morgan in lots of ways. Even to planting an empty shell from Morgan's automatic under the window in Lee's warehouse."

"How would that help Morgan? It would make him look guilty."

"No, Any ballistics man would see that shell was hand-loaded into the gun's chamber. It was therefore not one of the clip of five that did for Wong Duck. It was so obviously a plant it made Gil Morgan look like the innocent victim of a frame. Besides, Morgan wouldn't use the same gun for killing the Chinaman.

"Holohan went along this far. But when it came to the next step on Gil Morgan's blueprint, he'd balk. He'd never stand for rubbing Marjorie Larrabee out. Holohan had a lot of pictures of her when she was a kid. He wouldn't be likely to help kill her now. So Holohan had to go."

"You mean Morgan was going to murder her here today," I said, feeling sea-sickish. "He got her up here with a fake phone call. The raid on the mains would cover a little shooting. She'd stop a stray bullet. Or the law would think she'd been bucking Chinatown in some obsure way."

"Check. Morgan was a remainderman. With Marjorie pre-deceasing him, he'd get the bulk of the estate, under the old will. You can see his slant on it. He hardly knew her after they grew up, by his own admission. She was only related to him by half-blood. He was stony broke and living on her generosity in his own old family home. That rankles, always. Add it all up and you have plenty of motive for a guy like Gil Morgan, who likes to take a chance. Am I right, Morgan?"

But Gil Morgan was busy turning in his chips at the cashier's cage.

Marjorie Larrabee had turned away, shuddering. I guess she'd heard enough.

"What about Luigi?" I wanted to know.

"Luigi had practically raised Gil Morgan, as some servants do, in these California families. He couldn't say no, even at the end, though it must have torn him apart inside, when it came to Marjorie. He played the hand out to the last card. He got here for the showdown in time to warn Gil Morgan we were cutting in, due to the time we lost in Oxnard.

"Luigi was Morgan's right hand. He buried those two dead gamecocks last night because he was smart enough to know what Gil Morgan didn't—that a bird owner doesn't train his cocks by letting them fight with gaffs on. He got out there to the carriage house, found Gil had let a couple of birds kill each other, and quick got rid of the evidence that Gil wasn't the old hand at the game he claimed to be. He knew a real cocker would put little leather boxing gloves on over the birds' natural stumps of spurs, so they can't cut each other up.

"Morgan made one other mistake, too. He referred to a couple of birds with old gaff scars as 'stags.' A 'stag' is a green, unfought bird. So Gil, in spite of the trouble he went to in order to make those birds crow in the carriage house and get caught keeping gamecocks around, was only a greenhorn who needed an alibi with feathers on it."

The fat harness deputy was wheezing as he wrote in a notebook. Morgan's eyes were shut. Permanently.

"Too bad, in a way." I sighed. "Gil Morgan wasn't a bad guy at all, aside from his homicidal ways."

"He shouldn't have played a couple of visiting firemen for chumps," Malott said coldly.

Gil Morgan's maiden aunt was waiting for us when we turned away. "I. . I insist that you let me take up Wong Duck's check, Mr. Malott. I want to thank you, too, Mr. McCool. You've both been wonderful. And I mean it about the check. After all, Wong Duck would have been obliged to make good the debt. And I can well afford it. It's the only thing I can do in return."

Guy Malott blushed until his freckles went down for the third time. "Accepted, Miss Larrabee," he drawled gallantly. "But only on condition you promise to take it out in room and board at our dude spread in Nevada. Ranch life will do you lots of good."

Her long narrow gray eyes were saying "yes" and measuring him for size before he got it out of his mouth.

Once a chump, always a chump.

Don't

NOW she knew she was on the thin edge of time. She lay quietly, her cheek against the hreadbare carpet, and there was no sound within the four walls of her flat except the rasp of her shallow breathing. She was no longer aware of light—only a faint red mist that had aken the place of light. That was how she knew.

The light was there, of course. It came in crimson splashes from a sign on the all-night garage across Cottage Grove Avenue, and for a while it had given her a worm's-eye view of the couch where Jonesy lay, the three chairs, the upset lamp, the shattered fragments of the white plaster dog. It had showed her the thread of blood across the bosom of her maize-yellow dress, and she had thought, *you don't die from a scratch like that.*

Now she knew that you did, and dying, her mind groped through the mist like frantic fingers, trying to reach Jonesy, trying to shake him from his whiskey sleep.

Jonesy didn't move. She would have known if he had moved by the pop and creak of the couch springs. She tried to picture him lying there, but nothing

Struggling backward, she tore at his hands with her fingernails.

LOOK BEHIND YOU!

The masked man had entered Jeanie Henderson's apartment via the window. . . . Now as his fingers closed around her throat she thought, *This is one of those things you read about—and it's happening right now—to you!*

about him clung to her memory except those plaid socks of his that were louder than a brass band . . .

"Hot, aren't they, honey?" he had said of his socks, grinning at her across the table. Grinning his stupid drunken grin he had said other things, none of them new. He only thought they were new.

"You've sure got a line, mister," she flattered him, there at the Blue Cat where she had picked him up; where he thought he had picked *her* up.

He sent a furtive glance over his shoulder and then said warily: "Mr. Jones, honey." The grin again. "*The* Mr. Jones."

That wasn't new either. Her life had been filled with Joneses who were not Joneses and Smiths who were not Smiths. But this was the one in the plaid socks of orange and yellow on Kelly green.

He was just like all the other small town sports who wanted to paint a red stripe a mile wide across Chicago. He felt her leg under the table and flashed his roll to give her the idea. It was strictly a second-hand idea—she'd given it to him when she'd picked him up—but he acted as though he had a patent on it. He had showed her how well he could hold his liquor. Twelve double ryes was his load. She had kept track in her head, calculating her own slim margin from the house net. He bought her collinses without knowing they were minus gin. . . The same old gyp, and Jonesy was like all the Joneses, all the Smiths and the Browns and the Johnsons.

This one is a pipe, she decided there at the Cat. Her only worry was that he'd pass out before she could get him away from the joint.

"Come on, Jonesy," she pleaded, bare arms clinging to him, dark eyes drowsing, acting as lush as he had a right to expect her to be. "Jeanie's gotta go sleepy-bye."

He stood up reluctantly as though he didn't want to push that head of his up above the crowd. He tried to see on all sides of himself at once. Queer, she thought, the way he keeps looking back.

"What's wrong, Jonesy?" she asked.

"Nothing," he mumbled. "Nothing's wrong. Why? Do I look like something's wrong?" He hung on to her, his fingers up under her armpit, his eyes hot and

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

bright in his flushed young face. "You're high, tha's a trouble. Higher'n a Georgia pine, Jeanie—Jeanie witha light brown hair."

Her hair wasn't light brown. It was darker than the dark, and it spread from her bloodless profile like a blot of ink on the worn carpet on the floor of her flat. But somewhere, she thought, there's somebody with light brown hair, and that's why he's Jones. There's always somebody who cares when they don't give their right names. . . .

She hadn't cared—not when she'd picked him up. She had her eye on that roll he kept flaunting and nothing else. She didn't care where he got the money; it was what became of it that interested her. The way he'd been bending his elbow she knew that if she didn't get it somebody else would. Some other grab-and-run artist around a dark corner. Some creeper in a panel joint. Or the smutty little hack driver who piloted customers to the Cat and, if they were drunk enough, rolled them for their dough on the way back. To her Jonesy was just another apple asking to be picked.

She got him out of the Cat, past the unattached barflies, past the knowing eyes of the little hack driver. She walked him along Cottage Grove, sometimes lugging half his weight. He wanted to sing of Jeanie with the light brown hair, but she kept him quiet. Save the singing for tomorrow, sucker, she thought coldly, knowing that tomorrow he wouldn't sing, neither of Jeanie nor to the cops. They never went to the cops when the didn't give their right names. They threatened and cursed, but they didn't know any words for her that she hadn't already heard.

She got him up the stairs, into her flat, and as she turned to lock the door his shadow staggered off somewhere along the wall—she didn't care where. She wouldn't have cared if he'd fallen on his stupid face, now that she had him where she wanted him. Turning, she found him seated on the edge of the couch, hat and overcoat still on, eyes watching her. It was strange the way he watched her—like a stray dog that hoped to be asked in out of the cold yet was ready to slink away if she stamped her foot. His grin was tentative. If he'd had a tail, he'd have wagged it.

"You lock 'at door, Jeanie?"

"Why—sure," she said, wondering. "We don't want to be disturbed, do we, Jonesy?" Her smile was slow and warm, but the way he acted she might as well have patted his head and called him nice Rover. He sighed, rocked over onto the couch, and drew his legs up one at a time.

"Tha's a pal, Jeanie. You keep 'em out. Keep ever'body out." He closed his eyes, then immediately opened them. He pinned her flat against the door with his eyes. "You won't doublecross me, Jeanie? Huh, Jeanie?"

She worked up a laugh. "No. How could I? Why should I?"

His eyelids drooped. "Tha's a smart girl, Jeanie," he mumbled. He snuggled down, and a cushion pushed his hat down over his eyes.

For a moment she stood there thinking, what the hell is this I've brought home—a boy to raise? Or maybe he was somebody the cops were after. Well, if that was the way it was, it was a fine thing. Unless the cops came looking for him here. She'd have to think about that, after she got his roll. She shrugged off her fur jacket and decided that what she needed right now was a good stiff drink.

THE door into the kitchenette was propped open by the white plaster dog. Her watch-dog, guardian of her virtue, she thought ironically, pushing it aside with the satin toe of her slipper. Hulick had sent it to her from that tank town in Indiana where he lived. There were reminders of Hulick's mauve courtship all over the flat—the dog, the miniature cedar chest full of pink stationery, the gilt box that had contained chocolates, the perfume she'd never opened, the calendars he sent each year to let her know he was still waiting—all corny, yet somehow wistful.

Hulick's current calendar hung on the

inner surface of the cupboard door where it caught her eyes as she reached for a glass. The year 1941, the day December 7, she noticed. As though it was important. As though the small hours of this morning could be different from the small hours of other mornings. As though her eyeballs didn't burn from cigarette smoke and her throat ache from forced laughter. As though her feet weren't killing her. As though her head didn't throb with remembered din from the Blue Cat. As though the guy in the plaid socks, that lush on the coach in the next room, would turn out to be . . .

Her lips quirked into a sort of smile as she stared at the calendar. "Sometimes, Hulick," she said softly, "you get in my hair."

She turned quickly to the refrigerator, was looking for the ice pick to chip ice for her drink when December 7, 1941, began to be different, important, a date to edge in black. A small stir of sound reached her from the other end of the flat, from the bedroom door, she thought. Jonesy? It was impossible to associate Jonesy, his big feet and loud socks, with small sounds.

Then she knew that first cold stab of panic. The latch on the bedroom window was broken. She'd broken it that morning. She had awakened to find the room stifling. She hadn't been able to twist the cranky latch. She'd gone to the kitchen to get the ice pick to use as a tool. When that had failed, she'd lost her patience and smashed the latch with the sole plate of her electric iron. Somebody had come up the fire escape to enter the flat through the bedroom window. She could feel the cold draft from the window creeping beneath the kitchenette door to coil about her ankles. Somebody was in the living room besides Jonesy. Somebody who'd had an eye on Jonesy or Jonesy's roll.

She burst into the living room, her scream one part fear to three parts fury. The prowler was there, beside the couch —a man, faceless except for hard bright eyes above a white triangle of handkerchief.

"Chiseler!" she named him. Then, swooping to pick up the white plaster dog, she was obscene and specific about the kind of chiseler he was. She threw the dog at him. He ducked, lurched into the little table that supported the only lamp. The ice pick was there on the table. It fell with the lamp. In that instant of darkness he got to the door. He was there, trying to open the door in the next flash of neon from the sign across the street. She flung herself at his back, but he turned to slam his fist into her mouth. She must have screamed with the hurt, for his hands came, outreaching hers, and his voice came, too—low, quivering, terrible.

"Shut up . . . Dirty little tramp!"

She thought as his fingers closed about her throat, it's one of those things you read about—*PRETTY BRUNETTE FOUND STRANGLED*—and it's happening right now. To you . . . She tore at his hands with her fingernails, struggling backward to the center of the room. Her right foot came down on something that rolled, and she was thrown to her knees, breaking his hold. The ice pick! It was down on the floor somewhere. If she could get her hands on *that* . . . She patted the carpet frantically, knowing that he was down there too, patting. She began a prayer, "Oh God—" when light came in a cruel flash that showed her the ice pick, its blade prophetically red, its handle swallowed in the fist of her murderer . . .

Now she knew she was dying. Her brain drowsed fitfully to come awake with a start as from a nightmare, to remember that Jonesy was asleep on the couch. He was the one in the plaid socks, her last sucker, and he was caught in the same swift undertow that was dragging her down. She pitied him. She, dying, pitied the one who was left alive, and her mind cried out to him in an effort to break through his deadly drunken stupor.

Get up, Jonesy. Stand up in those hot socks and get the hell out of here. That's an ice pick in your left hand. That stuff is blood. If they find you here like this, they won't look any

further. You'll be elected. Jonesy, you'll be *it*.

Jonesy mumbled in his sleep. It sounded as though he asked what time it was.

Late, Jonesy. Much later than you think. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Outsider

THE night train to Louisville was late. Kellam didn't know how late, and to him it didn't matter. You put minutes beside years and the minutes were lost in the long shadow. The time, to his way of reckoning, was five years after murder.

The fat bald man with the Yorkshire terrier eyebrows who sat in the seat ahead of Kellam was more conventional about telling time. He used a watch. "Uhm . . . seven thirty-eight," he said with lip-pursing nicety. "We're twenty-seven minutes behind schedule." He was speaking to Kellam. He had been trying to work up a conversation with Kellam ever since they had left Chicago. He probably would have shared Kellam's seat except that Kellam managed to sprawl all over it.

Kellam knew the bald man was a cop. He didn't know how he knew unless it was a certain fixity about the bald man's eyes, a dull hardness that suggested they'd seen everything twice. Then when Kellam had got off at Indianapolis to stretch his legs, the bald man had followed wearily like a person who has spent half his life on his feet and would have preferred to spend the rest of it sitting down. Just a tired disillusioned cop with a job to do, and it looked like Kellam was his job.

Kellam stood up. He sidled out into the aisle and headed along the swaying coach toward the men's room at the end. He could feel the bald man's eyes upon his back, and he thought, if you follow me in here, fathead, I'll flush you out on the track. But the bald man made no attempt to follow, and Kellam went inside and latched the door. For a while he stood in front of the lavatory mirror and studied the face in the glass as though it belonged to somebody he didn't want to forget. It was, he thought, the face of somebody he'd nearly forgotten. It wasn't a good face—dark and rather brooding, too old for his thirty-five years, with fly-away eyebrows and flat black eyes of the sort that keep their secrets well. It wasn't a bad face either. It was, he decided, just a face, and he washed it.

After he'd used half a dozen paper towels, he took out his wallet, flipped it open to the card compartment, and removed several folded bits of paper. One was a seven year old money order receipt which he dropped into the toilet. There were two oblong pieces of flimsy white stock folded together, the worn creases black with dirt—guest registration cards from a third-rate Chicago hotel, both dated December 7, 1941. One was signed *John Jones* and carried a Los Angeles address, while the other bore the signature *R. T. Jones,* presumably from Indianapolis. The handwriting on the two slips was entire different except in one respect: Both were the work of left-handed penmen. . . . The Jones Boys, he called them, and they had bothered him for a long time. Possibly they would always bother him. Because, he thought, no matter which direction you go, you always stumble over the stuff that lies behind you. He folded the slips for perhaps the hundredth time and put them back inside his wallet.

The card that was left in his hand was the one he wanted. It was a form, printed on manila, and rubber stamped by a New York draft board. It stated that one Peter Brakowitz had been placed in class 1-C. Kellam inserted the card beneath the transparent window of the identification compartment, put the wallet under his coat and beneath his right arm. The pressure of his arm would keep it there until he wanted to drop it.

On his way back to his seat, he dropped the wallet alongside the bald man, pretended not to notice until he'd

gone a couple of steps farther. Then he turned, watched the bald man's pudgy fingers fumble the wallet so that it dropped again, this time wide open.

"Butterfingers," Kellam said acidly.

The bald man straightened, his face pink. His smile was like a ripple on a plate of borscht. It didn't mean a thing. "You wouldn't get very far without this, son," he said. "Not the way prices are nowadays."

Kellam took the wallet. "Thanks." He sat down. He extended stocky legs at an angle on the opposite cushion, propped his left elbow on the sill where the draft came through. His coat, his hat, and his bag were on the seat beside him.

The conductor came in from the vestibule, tracking wet snow with his arctics. He leaned against the door to close it, then ambled along the aisle, his ropey hands brushing the corners of seat backs.

"Bardstown," he announced through his nose. "Bardstown."

KELLAM thought, this is it. You're home. It's all over but the shouting. And there won't be any shouting. The shouting was for Ben, or maybe there were only tears. . .

He was going home just for tonight. Tomorrow he'd get away somewhere. Anywhere. And get plastered. St. Louis maybe. They had good taverns there. His mind hummed, "St. Louis woman, with all your diamond rings . . ." Which was not a bad idea either. Some cute little trick like the redheaded girl in the too short skirt who sat across the aisle. Some babe with a memory like a mirror, who kept her brains in her legs, who wouldn't want to know what he'd been doing these past five years. After that . . .?

A slight bewildered frown gathered at Kellam's brows. He never got beyond that point in his planning; never beyond the roaring drunk and the lady-for-a-night. It was as though between himself and anything stable there was a wall of glass against which he bumbled like a trapped and clumsy fly.

It frightened him a little. . . .

The train had stopped. Kellam stared out at the Bardstown loading platform, his attitude suggesting something less than casual interest. It was as though he found welcome relief in the lights outside, in the absence of motion, after plunging through the snow-flecked dark for nearly an hour. He didn't look as though he intended to move for a long time.

"Makes a nice picture, doesn't it?"

The bald man again. He was staring out at the falling snow against the lights.

Kellam said: "Does it?"

"Ever do any photography?"

"No." And why don't you go to hell? . . . Kellam slid farther down into his seat and closed his eyes. The bald man stood up, as though he could read minds, and clumped on tired flat feet along the aisle. Kellam relaxed. Now he felt fine. Good old Brakowitz. . . .

Out on the Bardstown platform an expressman hauled away a hand truck, his labored breath trailing fog. There was only one other person in front of the squat green station—a tall young man, thin, his shoulders hunched up inside a long gray overcoat, arms straight down, hands jammed into pockets so he was all one width like the letter "I" with a low-crowned brown hat for a dot. Eighteen or nineteen years ago, Kellam remembered, this same Rowley Barns had stood in front of the sixth grade class to read a composition titled *MY AMBITION*.

"My ambition is to be a journalist with a bodyguard and expose rackets like Lee Tracy in a picture at the Bijou where there was a murder and Lee Tracy solved the whole thing . . ."

Kellam couldn't remember the exact words, but that was the gist of it. Afterwards the whole class had given Rowley the bird. . . . "Yah, you need a bodyguard. Two of 'em besides your ma!" "Rowley's about as much like Lee Tracy as your old Aunt Minnie." Stuff like that.

And that's Bardstown, Kellam thought. It had always jeered ambition, had mistrusted the new and different. Its Front Street was rutted by the stolid

tread of dead men's shoes. Shriveled within its muddied outskirts, dying the economic death of towns, Bardstown was like some old hag who dragged her bones about to pick up chips for a smoldering fire and busied her tongue with evil senile mumbling. It talked only to itself. But it always talked.

He smiled a little. He'd given Bardstown something to talk about, something to jeer. He might have given it a whole lot more. . . .

"Ba . . . awd . . . Baw . . . awd." The conductor's call broke in on Kellam's reverie. Out on the platform Rowley Barns turned his back to wind-driven snow and entered the station. A soft brown felt hat with a bald head under it bounded like a rabbit beneath Kellam's window, moving toward the steps of the coach.

Now, Kellam thought. Now—

The redheaded girl in the too short skirt stared out of the window on her side of the train at the red and green signal lights crawling through the dark and thought of something to say. She had been trying to think of something—something that would give *him* the idea—ever since she had selected this seat across the aisle from the only man in the coach who looked—well, interesting. She was going to say, "My, it's drafty in this car—" not to anyone in particular, but loud enough for him to hear. Then she would glance across the aisle and smile if he smiled. She might even smile if he didn't. Her astrology magazine for December, 1946, had advised her that today was a good day to travel, to make new contacts, with the evening favorable to romance. and you couldn't expect the stars to accomplish anything if you positively refused to cooperate. So she was going to smile. Definitely.

She thought he might say, "Yes, it is cold in here. I wonder if there's more heat in the car ahead." or behind. she never did know where she was on a train. They'd go to another car to see, and she'd think it warmer. Naturally they'd share a seat together. . . . He ought to be grateful to her for saving him from that old fat bald-headed bore—and get to talking. They might hit it off, you never could tell.

"My . . ." she began. But then turning her head to be ready with the smile, she left her mouth open. Because he wasn't there. His coat and hat and bag weren't there either. And neither was the fat bald man.

She uttered a *damn* nobody heard, bounced around in her seat, tugged hopelessly at her skirt. Now there was nothing in her immediate future except Louisville and gobs and gobs of Grandmother Woodward's prune whip served with newsy bits about cousins she'd never seen. Ye gods! You couldn't even depend on the stars anymore. . . .

BEYOND the station, out along the freight siding, Kellam's tracks lay black behind him where the soles of his shoes had lifted wet snow from packed cinders. When he got through the yard gate at the foot of Front Street he stopped and stood looking westward. Falling snow draped white net across the town. It was like something on exhibit you were not supposed to touch. A town of ghosts beyond the edge of the earth, he thought. You'd have to be dead to touch it.

He didn't expect to touch it. He couldn't pick up where he'd left off as though he'd just stepped out for a pack of cigarettes. Not now. Not after five years. He didn't belong. He'd been so damned busy making a place for Ben he'd forgot to make one for himself. Ben was secure in his hero's niche, and here he was, the outsider, just looking in.

Kellam's lips quirked. Funny, he thought, you can play with cards you've stacked yourself and still get gipped . . .

He drew a breath like a swimmer about to plunge, shifted his bag to his right hand, and started down the street. Toward lights. Toward people. Brakowitz can't help you here, he thought. They don't know you, but they think they do. They know damned well you're not Brakowitz. You're Ben's brother. You're that Kellam boy they all knew would come slinking home some day.

So you slink, see? You keep your head down. The snow gets in your eyes.

Down among the lights snow got in other eyes than his. People brushed by hurriedly without looking up. He was just another guy going home to a fire on a chilly night. He passed the hardware store, Prager's Bakery, an appliance shop that hadn't been there five years ago. He braved the glare from the marquee of the Bijou, and there somebody turned. Or he thought somebody turned, hearing the sudden scuff of sole leather on concrete. He didn't look back, and nobody hailed him. He passed the pool hall, the plumbing shop, then George's Tavern where the door was opening. Somebody inside said, "Geez, was that Brad Kellam just went . . ." and the door slammed.

He thought, now it'll start—the talking. His palms were moist. The linings of his gloves were mushy with the sweat. He clenched his hands . . . Keep going. Don't look back. Only a little further, and it's only for tonight. Tomorrow you can get away. You can start over. Start being you . . . There's the Sweet Shop —remember the pastoral murals?—then the florist's . . . Bill the barber across the street. Good lord, is that revolving pole of his still working? . . . Don't hurry. You limp when you hurry . . . There's the store—Kellam's Grocery. Still the same old sign. No neon for the old man. Nothing's changed. Remember the criss-cross stacks of white and yellow soap, the wood boxes of smoked herring, the strings of dried figs, the stone crocks of pickles, the penny candies?

The store was closed of course, yet Kellam's gaze clung to the dimly lighted interior as he passed. He could picture the old man standing tall and straight in his long white apron, a gentle smile on his thin face, squinting a bit at the scale as he weighed a pound of rice and a little more, slipping two cigars into Alf Jenner's pocket when Alf paid his bill, stooping to talk to kids . . .

Kellam crossed the street at the corner. Hagen's Drugstore was sporting a new glass front, he noticed. Which meant that old Hagen must have died and Walt had taken over. Walt has just given the dead man's shoes a coat of polish, Kellam thought. He looked in through the plate glass windows in passing, secure in the comparative dark outside. There was Walt in a starched white tunic, looking like a doctor in a vitamin ad as he sold some patent remedy to an old woman with a shawl on her head. There was the high school crowd around the soda fountain. And there, up near the door, was Rowley Barns again, waiting selfconsciously as he had waited at the station; as he would wait anywhere. A funny guy, Rowley, quiet and shy, given to slow shy glances, always hanging around the fringes, lost in a crowd of three . . .

Kellam turned into North Street, and there ahead was the City Hall. Two stories of dull red brick, it housed the fire and police departments as well as the administrative offices. It was his old hang-out. As a Bardstown cop he'd done everything from dog-catching to raiding Queeny Mae's place down by the tracks. Ten more years of that, he thought, and you'd have developed eyes like that fathead on the train.

On the snow-covered lawn of the city hall they'd erected a stark white signboard; Bardsville's Roll of Honor. Kellam's eyes passed quickly down the alphabetical list, looking for Ben. There it was: Benjamin Jason Kellam in bold black letters, and the neat gold star. Ben in his hero's niche, safe, dead . . . You were a great guy, Ben. You were, like hell!

His laugh was short, harsh, and it startled him. He jerked his eyes from the stark white signboard, and as he kept on up the short, inclined block he thought, you've got to cut this out. Don't look behind you. Tonight will soon be yesterday. You've got tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. You've got months and years of tomorrows.

He reached High Street where the elms on either side rubbed white-burdened shoulders. Beautiful, he thought. And here you come along and stick your ugly sour mug into the pic-

ture again. What's your gripe anyway?

He was within two blocks of home when he saw the woman.

SHE came slim and gray and wraith-like out of the white blur made by the corner street lamp through the falling snow. Kellam's pace slowed. Jane? The thought stirred warmly. Why should he think it was Jane when, at this distance, it could be anybody? Conscience maybe, after what he'd done to her. Or it was something else . . . Whoever it was, he didn't want to meet her. He turned abruptly, crossed to the other side of the street, kept on west, conscious of the neat quick squeak her footsteps made on the snow. Jane would like that. He pictured Jane walking, the rhythm of her movements, the flash of her long lovely legs. Hell, it could be anybody. Any woman in Bardstown. He didn't want to know who it was. He didn't care. Unless it *was* Jane.

He glanced across the street.

She was there, just opposite, standing on the curb, an alert silhouette, poised as a deer for flight. And then she came running across the street toward him.

"Brad? Brad Kellam?" A whisper with a querying inflection, it rode the damp night air. Jane Fray's voice. It rooted him to the spot.

She came up panting, faced him in the dark. "It *is* Brad, isn't it?"

"Hi, Janie." He'd been waiting until he could make it sound casual. He hadn't waited long enough.

Her laughter trembled, filled in the awkward silence. Her gloved fingers touched his sleeve, only his sleeve, yet something got through to the flesh beneath. She gave his arm a little shake.

"You weren't avoiding me, were you, Brad?"

"Maybe," he said, "I was making it easier for you to avoid me."

He felt her draw away, wondering. He wondered a little himself. He wondered why he had to go around making a square peg of himself. After all, as she saw it, he was the brother of the guy she had been going to marry. Being Jane, she probably wouldn't have thought of avoiding him regardless of what Bardstown had said.

"Oh, Brad—" she drew a breath. She was trying to say something when there really wasn't anything to say. "I—I know how you must feel."

Do you? he thought ironically.

"It doesn't do any good to tell you I'm sorry."

Sorry about Ben, he thought, staring at the place in the dark where her face would be. Memory lent soft luminescence. He saw the warm brown eyes, the angel's brow with the fine light brown hair flowing away from it, the soft sweet mouth, the curve of her throat . . . He didn't want a cigarette, but he lit one anyway to see if his mind had exaggerated. It hadn't. She was like that. Beautiful . . . He closed the lighter with an angry snap. It would have been better not to have seen her at all.

She said simply: "I'm glad you're back."

"Thanks, Janie."

"I'll run on now." She started moving away; moving out of his life. "I know you're in a hurry to get home. But you'll come see me, won't you? Soon?"

"Soon," he said, lying. He'd killed the thing she loved. Whatever it was that she loved—the ghost of a man who had never existed.

"Then 'bye for now."

"'Bye."

She turned briskly, and he not so briskly. They started walking in opposite directions. He listened to their footsteps stretching the distance, drawing it clear out to infinity. That was all right. She didn't matter.

But, he thought, you keep telling yourself she doesn't matter. Who're you trying to kid anyway?

He walked the two blocks, crossed the street to the Kellam place. It wasn't much of a house. Standing on top of a steep terrace it looked tall and thin and tired, like the old man in his white apron, he thought. And, like the old man, it smiled gently through lighted windows . . . He'll be in there, Kellam thought, in the leather lounge chair,

with his pipe and some fine old book. And Aunt Sarah in the patent rocker, crocheting. Potholders again, for the church bazaar. Nothing's changed. This could be the night you went away. It could be any night.

The steps that approached the unrelieved door had recently been swept. He climbed them, and his breath came quick and shallow . . . Better ring the bell. It'll be less of a shock that way . . . He fumbled his traveling bag over into his left hand, got his right up to the bell handle, twirled it. The bell gave out a nervous jangle. Immediately there was a pattering of footsteps, and a child's voice called, "I'll go, Mama." The light above the door came on.

Mama? Some kid in there, acting as though it belonged. Some kid tugging to get the door open. Kellam looked down at a round, imp's face enclosed parenthetically by stiff blond pigtails. Bold blue eyes stared at him and became progressively less bold. Kellam stood there, silent. Something's wrong, his mind hammered. The right house, but this kid—?

"Wh—whatchu want, Mister?" The door closed to a crack just large enough for the imp face. The eyes had a frightened look. "Whatchu want? I'll call my mama!" It was a threat.

"I—" Kellam moistened cold lips. "Is Mr. Kellam—"

The imp head was shaking, the stiff pigtails whipping pink gingham shoulders. "He don't live here anymore. He shot hisself. With a gun!" The door slammed. Small feet pattered off somewhere.

Kellam stood in emptiness, listening to echoes within his brain. Dead. Shot himself. He doesn't live here. Kellam shook his head. Not Dad. Not that gentle smiling old man. He wouldn't kill himself. Not unless—a new sort of dread flowed coldly through him. Not unless Dad learned the truth. And that couldn't be. The trail was too well covered. Or was it? What about the fat bald man on the train—that cop? What had *he* been after? Was it the murder still, after all these years? Kellam had thought it something else, but it could be the murder . . .

Kellam turned on the steps. Snow falling out of the black sky touched his bewildered upturned face. He wiped absently at a runnel on his cheek with the back of his hand. His feet scuffed through the thin skim of snow, unconsciously seeking the old familiar worn spots in the stone that hugged his insteps comfortably. His toes clung through his shoes.

"Damn you, Ben," he whispered. "Damn you."

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Again

HE MUST have stood on the steps for five minutes. A car had pulled up in front of the house, and he hadn't been conscious of its arrival. It was just there. The man who got out was wearing a skimpy leather jacket that didn't look as though it could be buttoned across his broad chest. His shirt was open at the neck, and he wore no hat. Bristling red hair had faded to a yellowish-gray at the temples.

That's Hulick, Kellam thought. Paul Hulick who worked at the creamery when Ben did.

Hulick came up the steps with his arms swinging, his feet wide apart so that his walk was more like a wallow. His great red face had settled into sullen lines. The wrinkles on his forehead were deep and black. He eyed Kellam as a stranger.

"Something I can do for you?" It wasn't any sort of an offer. It was the same as, "Who the hell are you and what do you want?"

Kellam thought, he doesn't belong here either, yet he's here, and it doesn't matter. Hulick had stopped two steps below where Kellam stood. His thick lips fell open, his yellowish eyes widened in recognition and then narrowed curiously.

"Well, I'll be damned. When did you get back?"

"Just now. You're living here?"

Hulick nodded. "I've had a room here since January when I got out of the Navy. I guess it was Ben's room—yours and Ben. Your aunt didn't know you were coming back."

"Who's the kid?" Kellam jerked his head toward the door.

"Debby, my sister's kid. Sis and Debby moved in last month. Your dad's room." Something was piling up inside Hulick. Kellam could see it in the yellowish eyes. Resentment maybe, simmering in the eyes. Hulick said, "Sis' husband got his in the Philippines."

Kellam thought, what am I supposed to do, squirm? A lot of guys got theirs. Brakowitz, for one . . . Then, as Hulick came up and passed Kellam to get to the door, Kellam caught Hulick's sleeve. Hulick looked at him over a leather shoulder.

"Were you here when Dad—killed himself?"

Hulick said: "I wasn't in the house, no. I was living here, if that's what you mean. I'm running the grocery now for your aunt." He pushed the door open, went on in the house. Kellam followed, closing the door. The little girl in the pink gingham dress came flying along the hall from the kitchen, and Hulick stooped to catch her as she sprang into his arms. She squealed as he tossed her lightly on his shoulder.

"Is too high, Uncle Paul!" she gasped, then seeing Kellam, she was no longer afraid of height. She was afraid of Kellam. Hulick, lugging the child, took heavy plunging steps to the stairs.

Kellam looked between the two oak columns on either side of the wide doorway on his right. Aunt Sarah was alone in the front room, sitting in the patent rocker, her plump fingers busy with crochet hook and red twine. She hadn't heard him enter. Hulick's heavy footsteps on the stairway had masked any sound that Kellam had made. He dropped his hat and bag onto the walnut settle, stepped between the oak columns.

"Aunt Sarah—"

The crochet hook stopped winking, pricked up as though it listened. Sarah Kellam raised black deeply-set eyes that were odd in the face of a fleshy woman. Her mountainous and undivided bosom rose against black satin. The crochet hook dropped with a thin *ting* as it struck the platform of the rocker, but the heavy face remained impassive.

"So you came back, Bradley." Her voice was like tearing old velvet, a soft sound that left dry particles of itself suspended in the air.

Kellam moistened his lips. His hands moved upward, seeking pockets, then feel back, dangled. She let him dangle. Nobody, he thought, can let you dangle like Aunt Sarah.

He said: "I heard about Dad. Just now. The kid . . ."

"Then you were the one at the door a few minutes ago?" The black eyes winced. "I'm sorry, Bradley. I'm sorry you had to find out—like that."

He went over to her chair, picked up the crochet hook, handed it to her. She tipped up a firm dry cheek to be kissed.

"It was probably no worse than getting a telegram," she said practically. "I sent you a wire, of course. There was nothing to go on except the New York postmark on the cards you sent Christmases and birthdays. Your father tried wiring you when Ben was killed in Belgium." She gave him a searching look. "Where *were* you, Bradley?"

He thought, she's old. She worshipped Ben.

He said: "New York's a big town. I was all over it." He went over to the brown lounge chair and sat down, hands curling on the arms where the leather had mellowed beneath his father's slim restless fingers. His own hands were quiet. They were strong and blunt and ugly. He thought of Brakowitz's hands . . .

"You were with the New York police?" she asked.

He shook his head, fishing for a cigarette. "With Grumman. Somebody had to build the planes." He watched the steel crochet hook going on about its business. Silence piled up within the room, great cold drifts of it like snow. He lighted his cigarette, blew smoke

through the lighter flame. And he waited.

Finally she said: "You know about Ben?"

"Yes," he said quickly. Maybe too quickly, for the crochet hook stopped wagging and there was a quality of shrewdness about its glint. He added, "I ran into Jane Fray on the way here. She told me."

"Poor dear Jane! They were to be married when Ben got back—if he had gotten back. He wrote to Jane regularly and she kept us posted on his whereabouts. We never heard directly from him." The crochet hook drooped an instant, then lashed on, busying the plump fingers, dulling retrospect. "That foolish, foolish quarrel Ben had with your father. If only they could have patched that up before—before—" Aunt Sarah swallowed audibly.

Kellam thought, that phony quarrel, you mean. Ben had trumped up an argument with the old man as an excuse for leaving home that night. He'd had to leave, to hide, to bury himself somewhere . . . He'd buried himself, all right. But not deep enough.

Aunt Sarah was saying: "Poor boy! He was always so impulsive."

HE THOUGHT dryly, that's a nice word for Ben . . . A small scar he carried beneath his forelock throbbed suddenly, remembering Ben's little impulses. They'd gone hunting, he and Ben, and there had been an argument over who had bagged a certain squirrel. Suddenly he found himself facing a Ben he hadn't known existed—a Ben who would kill in a fit of unbridled fury. He'd fought for his life, and afterwards he'd lied to Dad and Aunt Sarah about the gash in his forehead, and so kept the Ben of the contorted face and froth-flecked lips a stranger.

That, he thought, was the beginning. There's always a beginning if you look back far enough . . .

Aunt Sarah, with the annoying persistency of a fly, returned to the same old question. "Where were you, Bradley, and what were you doing these past five years."

His laugh was harsh. "I told you. Making planes."

She tapped her teeth with the crochet hook. "Let me see, it was December second that Ben went away in a huff. Then two days later, you left. Why, Bradley? Was it to look for Ben?"

He studied the ash of his cigarette. That much of the truth couldn't hurt her. Couldn't hurt anybody.

"Yes."

"But you didn't find him?"

He got up to avoid her eyes, went over to the tile-faced fireplace, and flipped his cigarette back of the screen. "I overrated my ability as a cop, I guess. I couldn't find him. I was looking for him when the Japs struck."

Now smile, he thought. Register uneasy candor. It's not for Ben. To hell with Ben. It's for the old lady.

He brought out the uneasy smile. "I thought I'd better duck in somewhere until it blew over."

Aunt Sarah didn't say anything. The crochet hook didn't say anything either. It was as though they'd put their heads together and decided, Brad is honest anyway, his one saving virtue . . . He started over to her chair, moving slowly to conceal the limp. Paul Hulick's heavy plunging footsteps were on the stair, then in the hall. The front door opened, slammed a wedge of cold air into the room. Directly overhead—his father's room—the kid in pigtails pattered about, a woman stamped a foot. "Debby, put that down!" Debby put something down violently. And then the silence gathered.

"Aunt Sarah—" Kellam watched the crochet hook become attentive. "Tell me, why did Dad—do it?"

The black eyes appealed to him. "Must we? It's been such a short while ago. Seven weeks. Not tonight, Bradley dear."

"I've got to know. I've got a right to know. What was his reason?"

"Reason? With Ben gone? And not hearing from you except those cards? He simply must have had more than he could bear, poor man."

"There was a letter, wasn't there? Some sort of explanation?"

She shook her gray head. "No, Bradley. No letter. It was obvious." She lifted her hands from her work, opened them in an empty gesture. "The way things were."

"How were things?" He felt like a cop again, getting at hard questions the hard way.

"He was alone that night. I was sitting up with Edna Eberhard—Edna was sick—and Paul Hulick was on the late shift at the creamery. Your father—locked himself in. Both doors were locked on the inside." She was staring into space, her mind adrift. "There was the gun in his hand."

"He was alone, yet the doors were locked on the inside? What doors? Where was he?"

"The basement," she said. "That was where we found him—Paul and I—that morning. Paul was so helpful. So good. He's been my staff, my good right arm."

He was thinking, why the basement? Why lock himself in the basement if he was alone in the house? Kellam's pulse quickened. Hope began pushing up through the shock and the numbness.

"Where did he get the gun, Aunt Sarah?" he asked.

"I—I don't know. It was around here somewhere." She moved uneasily in the chair. The rocker springs creaked. "It was your gun, Bradley. That revolver with the long nose he gave you. On your sixteenth birthday, wasn't it? And Ben was fourteen."

A twenty-two caliber revolver for target work. Maybe ten years ago Aunt Sarah had nagged at him to put it away somewhere, because she wouldn't move it to dust, she was that afraid of guns. He'd stored it in the zinc trunk in the basement—the trunk that had been allotted to Ben and him. They'd kept their boyhood treasures in that trunk, then their sporting equipment. There had been only one key to the trunk, and they'd made a secret of its hiding place . . .

Kellam moved over toward the doorway. Aunt Sarah stirred in her chair.

"Let me get you something to eat, Bradley. Gracious, you're probably starved!" She started to get up, but he checked her with a shake of his head, and she settled back.

"No, thanks," he said. "I want to look around a little." He smiled. "It's been a long time."

"Ages," she said.

HE WENT out into the hall, to the right where shadows deepened along the stairway. He pushed open the door into the kitchen, then the door at the top of the basement steps, flicked the switch, went down the steps. The basement was one large room except for the car-siding partitions that formed the fruit closet and coal bin. Nothing had changed. There was the old hot-air furnace spreading itself like a giant octopus, the fire bright through the draft holes in the door. There was the work bench, tools racked at the back, their edges shining and sharp. The old man had been careful of his tools. There were the trunks on wood horses to protect them from the damp—the zinc trunk that had been Ben's and his.

Kellam stepped over to the door of the fruit closet, reached up to a narrow crevice above the lintel. They'd kept the trunk key there. Here in the basement they'd shared other secrets. They'd smoked their first cigarettes here, blowing the smoke into the furnace door. Then there was the secret window . . . He ran his fingers along the crack, located the trunk key half buried in the dust of years. He moved over to the trunk, his heart hammering, his palms sweating. Whoever had opened the trunk had not used the key. He bent over to examine the [illegible] at the back. The ends of the huge pins were brightly scarred. [illegible] driven out the pins with hammer and punch to get into the trunk and had then carefully replaced them.

Kellam unlocked the trunk with the key, raised the lid. There was the cloth with which he had wrapped the revolver for storing. There was a pasteboard box of twenty-two caliber cartridges, half of the contents scattered among the other things—the skates, baseball equipment,

boxing gloves, a deflated football gray with mold, even an engine from Ben's electric train. Most of the stuff was Ben's. He thought, you open an old trunk, and it's a door to the past, but you walk through into the present. Because, in a way, the trunk explained Ben. Ben the baby, deprived of his mother at birth, cheated by life, and here were the things that an over-indulgent father and maiden aunt had provided as a substitute for Ben's loss. Here were the things Ben had cried for. And sometimes crying hadn't been enough . . .

A slim blue book at the back of the trunk caught Kellam's eye, not because it was important but because there should have been another book, similar except bound in red. The blue book was the Bardstown High School annual for 1933, the year Ben had graduated. The missing red volume had been published by Brad's graduating class two years before. He felt certain his own yearbook had been stored in the trunk along with Ben's. Unless it happened to be upstairs in their room—the room that Hulick had rented—among the old school books.

Queer, he thought. The gun and the book . . .

He closed and locked the trunk, returned the key to its hiding place. Then he went over to the window nearest the stairway. The secret window, Ben and he had called it years ago. Its latch was frozen tight with rust, and it looked deceptively secure. Ben had discovered its secret that time when Aunt Sarah had locked the boys out of the basement because the apples and pears in the fruit closet had been disappearing faster than her careful rationing could account for . . . Trust Ben to get what he wanted . . . Actually, while the screws had rusted to the latch-plate at the bottom, the wood of the frame beneath had rotted, so that a stout blow on the bottom of the sash from the outside would knock the screws loose from the rotted wood, allowing the sash to swing upward without disturbing the locked position of the rusty latch. Through this window he and Ben had continued their raids on the fruit closet in spite of the locked doors.

Kellam reached for the latch handle and yanked. The window didn't budge. He tried a second time, but still the screws held. He stepped back, lit a cigarette, frowned up at the window. Then he walked back to the work bench, picked up a wrecking bar and hammer, was about to return to the window when the putty knife in the rack caught his eye. Its blade was dirty, coated with some hardened yellow substance—some sort of plastic. It wasn't like the old man at all to put away a dirty tool.

He went back to the window, drove the chisel end of the wrecking bar in under the latch plate, pried down. Rusted metal snapped, but the two screws held doggedly to the wood frame, firmly imbedded in hardened plastic which had been forced into the enlarged holes.

Now he could put the picture together, a piece at a time. Somebody had entered the basement through the window—somebody who wanted something out of the zinc trunk. The old man, alone in the house, had heard sounds in the basement, had come down to investigate. But that time, the somebody had got the trunk open, and there was the revolver and its ammunition. The spilled box of cartridges demonstrated the haste with which the gun had been loaded. Cornered, the somebody had shot to kill. Then he'd put the gun in the old man's dead hand. He'd closed the trunk again, had bolted the door at the top of the steps on the inside. Then, before leaving by the window, he had filled the screw holes with wood plastic, concealing the means of entry, precluding any idea of robbery and murder.

Kellam carried the tools back to the bench. He dropped his cigarette on the floor, twisted it out under his heel. He returned to the stairs, stopped there, his eyes raised to the silhouette of Aunt Sarah as black and buxom as a well-preserved base-burner stove.

"Bradley Kellam, what on earth are you doing down there?"

As though he was still a kid, up to mischief. He thought, we were never anything else to her, Ben and I. We never grew up in her eyes.

He said: "Dad didn't take his own life. I thought you'd like to know."

Black satin whispered. Sarah Kellam reeled on the top step, one plump hand going out to catch the rail. She steadied herself. "But how—how do you know? How could it be?"

"Somebody got in through the window. Dad cornered the somebody and was killed."

"But—but who?"

He didn't know. As far as he knew only Ben and himself had ever discovered the secret of the basement window. And Ben was dead, buried in a shallow grave scooped from the grudging crowded earth . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Backward Glances

KELLAM sat on the edge of the bed in the room that had been Ben's and his; the room that was now Paul Hulick's. He thought, now where are you? It was nearly ten P.M. by Hulick's noisy alarm clock, less than three hours until tomorrow. An hour ago tomorrow had seemed a fairly stable thing—St. Louis, the roaring drunk, the girl. Now tomorrow was as nebulous as the day after. You tried running ahead and you fell over the stuff that lay behind.

Well, he thought, you might try walking backward for a while.

In front of him, against the wall, was a three-shelf sectional bookcase of fumed oak. He had come up here with the idea of searching for the missing high school annual. Most of the books in the case were Ben's and his, but Hulick had added a few of his own. Maybe, in order to make room for his own small library, Hulick had pushed some of the other books to the back of the case.

Kellam lifted the glass front of the second section, pushed it back on its tracks and started to take out Hulick's books. A dictionary, two text books on dairy practice, a Bible, an omnibus of Western fiction. He piled these on his lap, then reached into the opening, groping behind the books that remained. No annual. Nothing. As he withdrew his arm, the books on his lap toppled, spilled to the floor. Kellam stooped, picked up one of the dairy books, then put it down again. The Bible had fallen open, and lying across its pages was a pink envelope, nearly square, addressed to Paul Hulick in a round, almost childish hand. It had been postmarked at Chicago, the date, April 10, 1939.

He picked up the envelope, took out the single sheet of pink paper, and read the short note.

> Dear Paul:
> I got your sweet letter, and the reason I haven't answered is that I have been thinking it over as you said I should. I have thought and thought, and have come to the conclusion that marriage just doesn't appeal to me. I want a career. I want to be a dancer and see my name in lights. I don't want to seem ungrateful—it was the sweetest thing that ever happened to me—but I guess I'm not the marrying kind, and I'm not your type. You'd better forget about me.
> Jeanie.

Jeanie. It could be any Jeanie. Any stage-struck Jeanie in the city of Chicago. Kellam folded the note, and his fingertips left moist marks on the pink paper. He put it back inside the envelope, put the envelope in the same part of the Bible. He picked up the books, placed them back in the case, closed the glass front. He stood up. He sidled along the bed, stumbled over a castercup at the foot of the bed, clutched the white enameled iron of the stead . . . Jeanie. The name stuck in his mind. Chicago . . . He got away from the bed, went over to the bureau. There was a calendar hanging beside the bureau mirror with a lithographed pastoral scene advertising the Bardstown Dairy where Hulick worked. This was the sixth of December. Tomorrow, the seventh, was blacked out on the calendar. Hulick, somebody, had blotted out tomorrow by

rubbing the small square with a soft lead pencil.

Remember Pearl Harbor? Or was it Chicago that Hulick remembered?

He turned toward the door, took half a step, and stopped. Somebody was out in the hall. He heard the whisper of slippered feet. He watched the knob turning.

"Paul, can I come in a second?"

Paul's sister. She was already in, standing in the half-open door, a thin pale girl with stiff-looking blond hair like that of the pigtailed imp. She'd been pretty, but she'd let herself go; she'd let tears of self-pity wash prettiness out of her face, leaving it sharp as bones in the desert.

She stared at Kellam, and her right hand went up to gather the collar of her ugly gray blanket-cloth robe about her throat as though, along with dodging the draft, Bardstown had also convicted him of rape. Fancied outrage lent her a kind of dishevelled dignity.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for something," he said coolly and thought, poor little pigtailed imp!

"Sneaking into Paul's room and him not here—you've got your nerve, you have! You—you—" She swallowed. There was saliva at the corners of her mouth. She wanted to tell him off. Especially she wanted to be able to tell Bardstown how she told him off. "You've got your nerve coming back here at all!"

He didn't say anything. He didn't know that there was anything he could say. He took hold of the doorknob, widened the opening, stepped behind the girl. He went out into the hall, down the steps, and behind him was the quiet of her loathing.

The front room was empty, one small lamp left burning. Aunt Sarah had made up a bed for him on the couch and then had gone to her own room.

Kellam put on hat and coat and left the house.

It was colder now. Wind out of the east drove dry sharp flakes of snow before it. He walked down High Street to North and then across to Front. Store windows were dark, and the few people on the street were couples closely linked hurrying home from the Bijou. Any minute now Bardstown would roll up its sidewalks. What life the night had left spent itself in George's Tavern down near the tracks.

Kellam peered through a clear space in the glass of the steamy door, saw Paul Hulick half way down the crowded bar, his broad back bowed, the tail of his short leather jacket sticking up above the line of his belt. Kellam opened the door and went in.

Heads turned. Quiet rippled along the bar to the end, and the small forced talk came rippling back. That was all. The Bardstown freeze, and it didn't matter. He moved along the bar and as he came directly behind Hulick somebody called, "Hi there, Bradley." Some rebel, he thought and turning saw Rowley Barns alone in one of the booths along the side of the room. A smile twitched Kellam's lips. It was like collecting an old debt from a deadbeat, because there'd been many a time when he'd gone out of his way to be decent to Rowley. Now he was the outsider, and Rowley, while he didn't exactly belong, at least hung on to the fringe of things.

KELLAM went over to the booth. Rowley tried to stand up, but the edge of the fixed table struck him thigh-high and he sat down hard. He flushed self-consciously, though nobody laughed.

Kellam said: "How've you been?"

Rowley pulled a slim small-boned hand out from under the table. He proffered it shyly. "I'm fine. Sit down, won't you?"

Kellam slid into the booth to sit opposite Rowley. He couldn't see that Rowley had changed much. Rowley at thirty-four was still a lot like Rowley at twelve, still about as much like Lee Tracy as your old Aunt Minnie. He glanced over his right shoulder, noticed that Paul Hulick was watching them in the mirror back of the bar.

Rowley said: "I heard you were back, Bradley. Gosh, it's been a long time. Lotsa water under the bridge."

"And not all water," Kellam said, noticing the shot glass in front of Rowley.

Rowley looked pleased. The idea that Kellam thought he had taken to drink pleased him. He said, "No, it's not all water. A man can still buy liquor, such as it is." He banged on the table with the shot glass to signal the waitress once more.

Kellam looked at the waitress who came over to the booth. She was blond and wide with a sulky mouth heavily rouged, and she stood with her weight on one hip. She picked up Rowley's shot glass and rolled it in pink palms.

"You want another?" she asked, and when Rowley nodded she shifted her weight to the other hip and looked at Kellam. It was, he thought, a smooth job of weight-shifting.

He said: "Whatever Rowley is drinking, but double."

"On second thought," Rowley said, "make mine double. It doesn't take so long." He liked the sound of what he said and tried not to smile.

The waitress went away, and Kellam said, "That's the first woman I ever saw who looks at you with her hips."

"Does she?" Rowley gave the waitress one of his slow shy glances. "She's pretty heavy." He flushed.

"You mean she's pretty comma heavy."

Rowley laughed. "I guess so." He hid his embarrassment by digging out cigarettes and offered the pack to Kellam. Kellam took one, put it to his lips, and leaned across toward Rowley's lighter.

"Still at the bank?" he asked, straightening.

Rowley nodded. "Same old grind. I couldn't even get off to fight a war. My heart . . ." He left it up in the air as though thinking this might be a subject painful to Kellam. "Last year I built a house," he said irrelevantly.

"Yeah?" Kellam stared at the smooth boyish face, wondering. The soft dark eyes slid off somewhere, dreaming.

"It was a nice house."

You couldn't tell whether Rowley was just making conversation or whether he really wanted to tell you something. He'd always been like that.

"What's the matter—did it burn down?"

Rowley looked puzzled. "No. Why?"

"You said it *was* a nice house. I just wondered."

"It still is. I live there, out on Abbott Road. That is, I rattle around in it."

So that was it. A girl. A girl had come into Rowley's life at last, and he'd built a house for her. Something had happened, and now he lived there alone. It explained his being here, drinking . . . Poor devil, Kellam thought.

The waitress came with their drinks, and as she reached for the bill that Rowley had placed on the table, Kellam caught her hand. "Wait a minute, honey." She pulled her hand away, but waited. Kellam raised his glass, tossed off the contents, put the glass down and nudged it toward the girl.

"Do it again, honey."

Across the table, Rowley Barns blinked dazedly. Then he raised his glass and followed suit. He put the empty glass down, strangling. The waitress gave him a look of contempt, picked up both glasses, and trotted back to the bar.

Kellam said: "I like to watch her trot."

Rowley didn't say anything. He couldn't. He took out his handkerchief and wiped tears out of his eyes. At the bar a man nudged Paul Hulick. Hulick didn't nudge back, but he was watching in the mirror. All the men at the bar were watching. They were listening too, in spite of the small talk they passed around.

"Let's get pickled, Bradley," Rowley said finally. "Let's get so stiff George has to sweep us out with the trash."

Kellam made a face. "It's too cold out there. Even for trash." His voice raised a notch higher. "Let's just have a few more and then go get us a couple of babes."

"Here? In Bardstown?" Rowley's grapes were sour.

Kellam nodded. "You got a point there. Bardstown babes are stinkers.

With the possible exception of honey, here." He looked up at the waitress and grinned. She put the drinks down on the table, snatched the money, and turned with a toss of her head.

There was virtual silence along the bar now. You could hear the creak of the stools, the scrape of sole leather on the rail, the tinkle of ice.

Kellam fingered his glass. "Chicago is the place for babes," he said and winked. "For the chassis with class, try Chicago." He nodded, leering. "That is not a bad slogan if they ever have another world's fair up there. Listen, Rowley boy, I know a twist in Chicago by the name of Jeanie—Jeanie—" Kellam snapped his fingers a couple of time. "Jeanie Henderson! That's it. Jeanie Henderson."

At the bar, Paul Hulick put down his glass slowly. His back straightened.

"She's a bit of all right, huh?" Rowley asked about Jeanie.

"All right? My friend, that's libel. Jeanie was—" Kellam molded Jeanie out of thin air. He gave Jeanie three distinct and intimate pats. He lifted his eyebrows. "But was she expensive."

"She was, huh?" Rowley batted his eyes.

Kellam snickered. He crooked his finger at Rowley. "Bend an ear. Lemme tell you something about Jeanie." He leaned across the table, and Rowley leaned over uneasily. Kellam put a hand up to his mouth and said, "Now, you laugh like hell." He straightened, laughing, and Rowley laughed too, a timid little laugh.

PAUL HULICK'S stool creaked as it turned. Hulick slid to his feet, took a deep breath. His yellowish eyes were on Kellam, his red face sullen. He seemed oblivious to interested spectators about him. George, behind the bar, looked anxiously from Hulick to Kellam as Hulick took wallowing steps toward the booth. Rowley Barns noticed Hulick for the first time and hitched himself over into the booth corner.

He said: "Something's about to happen."

It didn't happen. Hulick was suddenly eclipsed by somebody who came padding from the back of the room somewhere to the end of the booth where Rowley and Kellam sat. The paunch of the somebody jutted over the end of the table. Kellam's eyes traveled up the paunch to a blue necktie, to a round fat face, to hard blue eyes that had seen everything twice, to a felt hat placed well back on the bald head like a halo of cinnamon. The thick lips smiled. The eyes didn't. They tried smiling, but they were too tired to make it.

"I'll be damned," Kellam said, "if it isn't a small world. Two men on a train and they both think they're going to Louisville—no, that's not it. Two men, each of whom thinks the other is going to Louisville . . . Let it go. Rowley, I want you to meet a cop from Chicago."

The smile on the fat face went limp. The cop squatted into the booth on Rowley's side and Rowley, as always, shrank from the nearness of a stranger. The cop engulfed Rowley's thin hand with his own for a moment.

"Kane is the name," he said. Then his eyes got back to Kellam. "How're you, Brakowitz?"

Kellam glanced toward the front of the tavern, saw the broad black leather back of Hulick going out through the door. He looked back at the old cop. He said, "Brakowitz is okay."

"Brakowitz?" Rowley repeated dully.

The men at the bar were quiet, listening. Kellam dug down into his trousers pocket, took out a nickel and slotted it in the juke box control at the end of the booth.

He said, "I knew these things were good for something." He pressed a button. Any button.

Fat man Kane asked: "How did you know I was a cop?"

"I'll tell you, sweetheart," Kellam said coldly. "I looked in the glass in the men's room on the train, and asked the mirror what I'd look like in thirty years if I kept on being a cop. And guess what—I'd look just like you. So I decided I'd take up selling brushes."

"You're a cop?"

The hard eyes narrowed slightly. "I was, yes."

The juke box came on blasting, providing the privacy of noise. The men at the bar once more hunched over their drinks.

Rowley said: "He was a swell cop."

"Thanks, Rowley."

Kane dipped into his breast pocket for a cigar. He eyed Kellam. "You know, I never forget a face. I saw one mighty like yours once in the Chicago morgue."

Kellam nodded. "Dead-pan Davie, my friends call me. Ask anybody in Bardstown and they'll tell you I haven't a drop of red blood in my veins. I'm a zombie."

Kane shook his head. "The guy I'm talking about wasn't dead. He was looking for somebody. Some body."

"Oh," Kellam said. "He didn't find it, I trust?"

Kane sighed. "I don't know. I'm damned if I know." He peeled off cellophane. "And you knew Jeanie Henderson?"

"Sure." Kellam crossed his fingers. "We were like that. I was just telling Rowley. What a girl! Flesh like warm cream, lips like wine, hair like spun glass—"

"Her hair was black," Kane said dryly.

"Don't rush me. Hair like spun glass —black glass. You've seen black glass. haven't you? Or haven't you been in any classy bathrooms lately?"

"What do you mean, her hair was?" Rowley injected timidly. "Something happen to her?"

Kane said: "Something did." He pinched the end off his cigar with his thumb and finger nails. "An ice pick happened to her. You didn't see it in the papers, son, you were so busy reading about what the Japs did at Pearl Harbor and wondering how soon you'd be in uniform."

Rowley flushed. "I got a bad ticker . . ." But nobody cared, so he let it drop.

Kane lit his cigar. It smelled expensive. "Yup, one of her boyfriends. He came piling out of her flat at about eight o'clock on the morning of December seven, five years ago. One of Jeanie's neighbors saw him with blood on his hands. She screamed, and the guy lunged at her. She got in back of her door in time and phoned the cops. Less than five minutes later we had that block sewed up like that." He crushed the cigar wrapper in his big hand. He looked at Kellam and said. "The guy got it. I know. I gave it to him."

Kellam didn't say anything for a moment. His eyes met the hard tired eyes across the table steadily. He thought, take it easy. Watch this old son-of-a-gun. You've got to say something, but watch that inflection.

HE SAID: "You mean you shot him." It was flat, no inflection. It was all right.

Kane nodded. "A bad break. I fired low, but that was the time the guy picked out to stumble." He slapped the back of his neck. "Right through there."

"Gee!" Rowley shuddered in his corner.

"Case closed, huh?"

The tired blue eyes looked troubled. The thick mouth, with unbelievable daintiness, sipped smoke from the tip of the cigar. "Maybe," Kane said. "There wasn't a damned thing with which we could indentify the guy. No cards in his wallet, all his clothes new. His hotel key took us to the Ridgeway, but somebody had snitched a couple of registration cards from the hotel desk. It looked funny. The guy's name was Jones—the clerk remembered that much—and we went through his room. Still nothing to identify him by."

Kellam took a shallow breath. His chest felt as though there were wide leather straps about it. He said, "So what?"

"Well," Kane went on, "you'd think so what, except that we weren't satisfied that Jones was the only guy who'd been in Jeanie Henderson's apartment that night."

Kellam closed his eyes for an instant. He thought, good lord . . .

Kane said: "The latch on Jeanie's

bedroom window had been smashed. It opened onto the fire escape. On the fire escape grill just two feet below the sill we found a little bitty piece of aluminum, round, and about the size of a milk bottle cap. It was the lens cap off a Leica camera."

Kellam thought the beating of his heart was audible. He picked up what was left of his drink and polished it off.

Kane's voice droned on. "Jones, the lad that ran into my bullet, didn't have no camera on him. There was no camera in his room at the Ridgeway. So who was the other guy? Why were *two* registration cards copped from the Ridgeway?"

"Gee!" Rowley said again. "But the Jones fellah ran, didn't he? Doesn't that prove something?"

Kane said: "The postmortem showed Jones was so sopped up with alcohol he wouldn't have known what the hell he was doing." He smoked in silence a moment and then addressed Kellam.

"Ever kill a man, Brakowitz, and then wonder if you maybe killed the wrong guy? It gets you, down here." He tapped his paunch.

Kellam laughed harshly. "That's your liver, pal. You've probably got sclerosis."

"Hey, wait a minute," Rowley said, blinking. "Who's this Brakowitz who keeps getting into the conversation?"

Kellam looked at him. "That's my pen name, Rowley. I'm really the author of best-sellers which make me a lot of dough, but they're so damned filthy I don't want the family name on 'em."

"Yeah?" Rowley looked as though he half believed it. Then Kane poked him gently with a fat forefinger, and Rowley shiveled a little.

"What's his real name, son, when he's not writing books?"

Rowley moistened his lips. His soft eyes bleered at Kellam. "Why—why, that's his name—Brakowitz."

Kane smiled. "Now look, son, I can ask any six guys at the bar what his name is and they'll tell me. I'm asking you because it's convenient."

Kellam nodded at Rowley.

"Go ahead. It's all right."

Rowley said: "It's Bradley Kellam, and he's a right guy."

Kane tipped ash from his cigar, squeezed himself out of the booth, and stood up. "I'll be seeing you boys around." And his tired flat feet took him to the front of the tavern and out the door.

Rowley spread himself a little on the seat. "Gosh, I'd hate to be a cop."

Kellam didn't say anything. He picked up his shot glass and banged the table with it. The waitress came over, picked up the two glasses, and went back to the bar. She was on her way back with refills when Kellam stood up.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he said to Rowley.

"Sure, but—" Rowley tried to stand, but the edge of the table slapped him back down again. He slid along the seat and got out that way, hanging onto the back of the booth. "Our drinks, Bradley."

"On the fly," Kellam said. He'd stopped the waitress, was putting a five dollar bill on her tray. He picked up a glass, put it to his mouth and tipped it. The liquor didn't do any good, he thought, it never does, and put down the empty glass. He felt as though the floor was crumbling beneath him.

He said: "Come on, let's get out of here before the damn place caves in."

Rowley, glass in hand, took a quick sip, put the drink down on the girl's tray unfinished. "Keep the change," he murmured and tagged unsteadily after Kellam to the front door. Kellam was standing there, looking out. To the right, just at the edge of his field of vision, he saw a black leather sleeved arm. Paul Hulick. He turned, bumping into Rowley, caught Rowley to keep the latter on his feet.

"Back door, Rowley boy. I don't want to ruin my reputation."

Somebody at the bar laughed—he didn't know who. He went on back through a room piled high with beer cases and liquor cartons. Rowley tailed him, stumbling, grasping at him from behind.

"Wait, Brad—"

He didn't wait. He went through the door into the alley where the snow had rutted beneath car wheels, had packed slick. Kellam hurried, limping. Just to get away somewhere. Anywhere. To get away from the past.

"Not so fast," Rowley pleaded. "This ice— When I was a kid I slipped once—"

You couldn't outrun the past, Kellam thought hopelessly. It was an avalanche of years roaring down upon him. It was a pack of wolves snarling at his heels . . . Don't look behind you. That's the only way. Stop remembering. Don't even think . . .

"Brad, these darned ruts—" Rowley, floundering forward, caught Kellam's left arm, came close to pulling them both down onto the snow. "I'm a li'l high, Brad. I got a car. I shouldun walk in my condition." His high taut laugh bordered hysteria. He waved widely in the direction of Front Street.

Kellam said: "O.K." He turned out of the mouth of the alley, Rowley hanging onto his arm, fearful of the crusted snow that popped and crackled beneath their feet, walking stiff-kneed like an old man with brittle bones. They came to Rowley's car, a black coupe parked near the corner, its doors locked.

"If you'll throw down a coupla keyholes," Rowley said, giggling. His keys tinkled frostily.

Kellam waited. He looked back toward the tavern, back through the swirling snow. He didn't see Hulick. Across the street on the second floor of the Lindel Block the corner window above the little dry goods store was lighted. It was a warm rosy light. Jane Fray's flat. She'd moved there after her mother had died. Dimly he saw her shadow moving across the light.

And this, he thought, is tomorrow . . .

Rowley said triumphantly: "Made it!" He opened the door of the car. "Hop in. Or you wanna drive?"

Kellam shook his head. "You go ahead. I'll walk home."

Rowley caught his arm. "I said you could drive. To my place. You can't go home. It mus' be crowded, and I gotta guest room." He giggled. "Pink sheets, even."

Kellam brushed Rowley's hand down. "Thanks. You go ahead. Maybe I'll be around later."

Rowley stood for a moment in hurt silence. Then he sighed, turned, got into the coupe, and plugged at the starter. "G' night, Bradley." His voice was small and distant. His wheels spun, cutting down through the brittle crust to find traction.

Kellam waited on the curb until the two red tail lamps of Rowley's car were lost in the distance. Then he crossed the street.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Last Sucker

HE SPOKE softly against the panel of her door: "It's Brad Kellam." Then he stood waiting.

Jane's voice spoke to him from the other side. "It's awfully late, Brad— isn't it?"

He stood doggedly. "While there's doubt there's hope," he said and thought, I must be a little high.

Her laugh had a nervous lilt. "All right. Just a minute."

It was longer than a minute. She'd zipped on something of satin that was neither rose nor beige but was like the light from her window shining through the snow; it fitted her slim waist, suggested the curve of her hips, then fell away in frosty folds to the floor. Her hair still followed the swift strokes of the brush that wasn't there, floating away from her fresh clean face, alive and electric. Her lips smiled gently for him . . . For Ben's brother, he thought dully. Remember?

He said quickly: "Either your face was plenty dirty or that's a very slow zipper."

She laughed. "I'm sorry I took so long. Come in."

He stepped through the door and looked around at blond wood against warm gray walls, at the bold splashes

of color. "This isn't Bardstown," he said.

"No, it's my hide-away from Bardstown and from Attorney Phineas J. Crump's hidebound office. Not a Morris chair nor a platform rocker in the place. And, confidentially, Queen Victoria died at the threshold."

He glanced back over his shoulder. "So that's what I wiped my feet on out there."

They both laughed, yet it was not laughter.

He took off his coat, draped it over a chair, put his hat on top of it. She sat down on one end of a Chinese modern sofa, her hands resting quietly in her lap, palms up, fingers curved. He stood for a moment, looking at her. She wasn't smiling. Her smile was a special thing; it meant something.

"How was it, Brad?"

She meant his homecoming. He took out a pack of cigarettes, tore off the corner slowly, neatly. "Oh, so-so. Let's leave all that on the other side of the door. With Queen Victoria."

"All right."

But you couldn't, of course. The past was as thin gray smoke creeping in under the door. Ben was there in the room with them, the ghost of a man who had never existed . . . Kellam took a short breath.

"Cigarette?"

She took one. He held his lighter, watching her face, the sweep of her long dark lashes, the way her cheeks hollowed as she drew flame into the cigarette. He lit one for himself and then sat down at the other end of the sofa . . . There's room for Ben between, he thought.

She crossed her knees, smoothing the satin over her thigh with her palm. Her brown eyes meeting his were frank and interested.

"What are you going to do, Brad?"

This is tomorrow, he thought, and she doesn't know about tomorrow. She's talking about the day after tomorrow, and I don't know about that . . . He shrugged.

"No plans. Why? Any suggestions?"

Her eyes went off somewhere, beyond his reach, and his, following eagerly, encountered the blond wood bookshelves on the other side of the room. Which reminded him of something he'd better take care of right now before he got in to tomorrow.

"Say, have you got the old high school annual for '31?"

She glanced back at his face, wondering. "Why, yes. Of course. It's in the bookcase."

"May I see it? Somebody went south with mine. "

She got up. Satin had a seductive voice. He watched her moving away to the bookcase, watched her smooth her skirt down across her hips as she crouched down in front of the shelves, looking.

"It's right here somewhere." Her lovely head tilted, looking for the book.

Outside, the clock on the Bardstown National chimed the half-hour. Half past midnight. Thirty minutes into tomorrow—

He thought, To hell with the book. What good will it do? I won't bring any of them back. They wouldn't want to come back. Not to Bardstown. Not to a clip-joint in Chicago. This is tomorrow, and you're about half tight. There she is—the girl. What are you waiting for? Are you going to step aside again for Ben?

He stood up, stealthy about it, his eyes on her. She was busy, looking for the book. She wouldn't find it. It wasn't there, and it didn't matter anyway. He moved in, stalking.

"That's the strangest thing, Brad. It isn't there, and I can't imagine—" She stood up, turned, saw his face . It frightened her, that face of his.

"Brad—" It sounded small and trapped.

He caught her in his arms, laughing. Not Brad, he thought. Ben. Can't you see it's Ben?

It was all of his cruel strength against hers and his kiss crushing her mouth. Then suddenly it was her kiss too. Their kiss. He knew it wasn't tomorrow but the day after tomorrow. It was a glimpse through the glass of the future he couldn't touch . . .

HE LET her go. He let her fall back against the bookshelves. She stood there, palms flat against the books, a wisp of light brown hair straggling across her brow, her eyes misty. Or it was his eyes that were misty. He turned with an effort, limped over to the chair where his coat and hat were, picked them up.

"Brad—" her voice followed to the door. He had his hand on the knob.

"Wait." Her footsteps followed him, and he couldn't wait.

"Listen to me, Brad. Who is Brakowitz?"

He stopped. That stopped him where nothing else could. He turned slowly from the half-open door. He didn't look at her eyes.

"I never heard of the guy. Why?"

"Yes. Yes you have. You carry a card in your wallet. Peter Brakowitz. A draft card. I know. Tonight, after we'd met on High Street, a man stopped me. An elderly fat man. He asked where Peter Brakowitz lived, and when I said I had never heard of the man, he said, 'You were talking to him just now,' and told me about the card."

That damned fathead cop.

He said steadily: "That's just a card I carry so they won't pick me up on a draft evasion charge. Brakowitz was a pal—"

"Brad, I don't believe that."

He looked at her face, at the firm set of her mouth, at eyes determined not to believe. He shrugged.

She said, "I don't believe that. I don't believe any of the things Bardstown says about you. I never have. If you feel you can't trust me, then don't. Don't tell me a thing. But if you're going away—" She broke off, nipping her lower lip.

"I'm going away."

She pushed back the wisp of light brown hair from her brow. Her face looked pale and drawn.

"Take me with you," she whispered.

Kellam's hand dropped from the doorknob. Under his flat dark eyes, some of the color came back into her cheeks. Her smile trembled, but there was something defiant about it, a tattered flag waving.

She said: "That wasn't Bardstown's conception of a nice girl, was it?"

He hadn't been thinking that. He'd been thinking that it wouldn't work. Because of Fat Man Kane it wouldn't work. He knew Kane's breed of cop, the kind that never say die. Wherever he and Jane went, Kane would come padding after, poking into whatever happiness they could build, tearing it down bit by bit until he knew all about the slaying of Jeanie Henderson.

Jane was saying: "I think I hate Bardstown's conception of a nice girl. I hate the false codes. I hate Bardstown and the smallness of its world, its spiteful lying tongue, its absolute refusal to get its feet out of the ruts. Brad, I *am* going away from here—"

"You're running away from Ben," he interrupted tonelessly. "Isn't that it? It's not the town. It's the memory of Ben. I come along tonight, and you got the idea I've got something that can make you forget Ben."

She looked away from him. Her hands closed tight on the back of the chair. "I—I don't know. It's strange, the way I feel about Ben. There was nothing—nothing serious between us until he went away. But then his letters—his not being here—something—" She shook her head bewilderedly. "He'd changed so in absence. It was like a lovely dream, all bright with hope, and then when he was killed I woke up to find all this—ugliness—"

The slam of the door checked her. Kellam had heeled it shut. He stepped over to her, put his hands on her shoulders, guided her around to the front of the chair.

"Sit down, Jane." He sounded very tired.

She sat down slowly, eyes on his face, lips just apart. He'd put down his coat and hat. He stood in front of her, flat on his heels, feet spread a little. His eyes were a long way off, and when he spoke it was not especially to her.

"Kane will find out. He'll spill the whole rotten mess."

"Kane?"

"The fat man. The cop." His eyes came back to her, troubled with what he had seen. "You might as well hear it from me. Then Ben who was killed in Belgium never existed. He was a ghost, Janie. That's what you were in love with—a ghost.

"I—I don't understand," she murmured.

"No. I'm not being very clear, because it's one of those things that's hard to say. But the real Ben, my brother, was shot down by police in Chicago, December 7, 1941. He was wanted for the fatal stabbing of a cheap little clip-joint tart named Jeanie Henderson."

"Oh-h-h—"

He watched shock spread over her face. And then rigidity moved in against the shock so that her face was a mask. It was easier that way, talking to a mask instead of to Jane.

He said: "I had followed Ben to Chicago. I had luck tracing him. He'd registered at a third-rate hotel under the name of Jones. John Jones of Los Angeles. And then—" he took a breath, "my luck gave out. When I found him, he was in the morgue, unidentified except as the killer of Jeanie Henderson."

KELLAM lit a cigarette. He took his time about it, piecing together in his mind the intricate pattern of the past. Jane was motionless in the chair except for her hands. Her hands worked, the knuckles white, the fingertips pink where pressure had forced the blood down to their tips.

"I had to let Ben go like that," he said. "No name except Jones. I had to because cause of Dad and what Ben meant to him . . . That's one thing you've got to understand. I was thinking only of Dad. Not Ben. Not you nor I. I knew that for Dad's sake I had to, well, to resurrect Ben and give him a decent burial. And it looked as though history had given me the break I needed.

"You remember the day, how the news from Pearl Harbor blotted out everything else in the papers. That in itself was a break. If I could get out of Chicago before the police could connect me with Ben and thus identify their Mr. Jones, I knew I could carry out my plan."

Kellam's lips quirked bitterly. "It seemed like a fine idea, then. Now—" He shrugged. "Anyway, I got to New York, and the first thing I did was buy a number of greeting cards which I signed and addressed to Dad and Aunt Sarah. I took these to a mailing agency and paid them to send the cards at appropriate times. There wouldn't be any return address that anybody could follow up, but the postmark would establish my presence in New York when actually I'd be—well, I didn't know where I'd be."

"You enlisted in the Army, didn't you?" Her lips scarcely moved. Only her hands moved as though fumbling with the shattered fragments of something dear and beautiful. "You enlisted in Ben's name."

He smiled at her. "Not quite. I didn't want the scheme to bog down in court martial proceedings against me for fraudulent enlistment. Ben and I have the same initials. I couldn't have hoped to imitate Ben's left-handed scrawl anyway, so I simply signed everything B. J. Kellam in my own handwriting, which, with my finger prints, will save me from draft evasion charges if they ever catch up with me.

"Well, after enlistment, I still had to inform Dad about what Ben—the phony Ben—had done. I couldn't write a letter to him, singing Ben's name, because he might recognize the handwriting. So I had to write to somebody else."

Kellam took a deep drag on his cigarette. He looked at her, head tilted on one side. "You see, Janie?" he asked gently.

"You wrote them," she whispered, her eyes haunting him. "Every single letter. You were Ben."

He nodded, looking away. "I knew if I made the letters to you personal, you wouldn't show them to Dad and Aunt Sarah, but you would keep them informed. They were pretty personal, weren't they?"

"They—they were beautiful."

"I figured that when I got in actual combat, I'd probably get knocked off. That would finish B. J. Kellam. Ben would have a hero's death, immortality, and as for Brad—well, Brad didn't matter much to Dad . . . But it didn't turn out as I expected. It never does.

"I had a pal in the Army. Pete Brakowitz. He hadn't any family, nobody who cared. We had about the same physical classification—grade-A beef, the way the Army figures things—and we even had the same blood-type stamped on our dogtags. We were thrown together a lot." He laughed dryly. "That's a pretty good word for it, thrown. We were thrown into the Bulge, a replacement outfit, and then Brakowitz had some trouble with a Nazi mine. There just wasn't an awful lot of poor Brakowitz left—"

Jane was crying. She was sitting erect, crying without a sound.

He said: "That's where I killed your Ben—the Ben who never existed. I knew Brakowitz wouldn't care. Not after that. I took his dogtags, left mine there."

He walked to the other end of the room to find an ash tray, to get away from her tear-brimmed eyes for a moment, but he kept talking, getting it out of his system.

"That's about all. In the same action I got some of Adolph's better grade steel in my leg—carelessness, probably. The Nazis picked me up. I never did get back with the old outfit, what was left of it, so I had a ghost of a chance to see the thing through as Brakowitz. When Germany capitulated, I was sent to one of our own hospitals as Brakowitz. I've been in several of Uncle Whisker's hospitals since then, but I'll probably always limp a little.

"I got a break at the separation center. The place was staffed chiefly with jeeps —green men just out of basic. The kid at the fingerprint table didn't know what the hell he was doing, but he was doing it fast, so I deliberately smudged my thumbprint on the discharge papers. I don't know as it would make any difference anyway, as there is probably no expert comparison unless the need arises. Up to now they haven't caught up with me."

He limped going back for his hat and coat. Jane was standing now, her back toward him, her head down.

He said gently: "I think you get only two things out of war. You come fairly close to knowing the Christian concept of brotherly love, and at the same time you learn to be utterly selfish. That's paradox. It means conflict within the individual, the making of choices. I chose Dad, and I didn't give a damn about you. You were Ben's girl. You just happened to be around, and I used you. That's how it was then. Now—"

He broke off and went to the door. She still didn't turn.

"Now it's something else. But I don't want you as Ben's girl. I don't want to be just a means of your forgetting."

She turned slowly, her arms straight down, her hands clasped hard in front of her, her eyes shimmering. He guessed that was what he had been waiting for.

"Bye-bye, Janie," he said softly from the door. Then he went out and down the steps into the street. He thought, now where are you? He looked up and down Front Street, remembering Hulick and—murder. Hulick wasn't there. Nobody was there but the ghosts the snow made, swirling.

He turned right, walked along swiftly to the end of Abbott Road. There wasn't a train until morning, and he couldn't go home. He'd find Rowley Barns' new house out there somewhere, hanging on the fringe of town. He'd hit the sack, those pink sheets in Rowley's guest room. Then tomorrow he'd look around and see what was ahead.

If anything was ahead . . .

CHAPTER SIX

They Never Say Die

KELLAM stared at the blank white ceiling of Rowley Barns' guest room and thought, waking up is a hell of a way to start the day. He raised himself on one elbow, blinked

at the wintry brightness of the morning outside. Then he threw back the covers, the pink sheets, sat on the edge of the bed in the raw and looked at Rowley Barns standing in the door of the room. Rowley was fully dressed except for his tie, vest and suitcoat. He had a bubbling glass of bromo in his hand.

"Need one, Bradley?" he invited.

Kellam shook his head. He watched Rowley drink, then shudder violently. Kellam reached for his clothes.

"I hate to get up so early," Rowley apologized, "but I got to get to the bank. Breakfast is coming up."

"That's fine," Kellam said as though it was. "Lots of coffee."

"All you want."

Rowley went out. Kellam, carrying his clothes, went into the bath that connected the two bedrooms, showered, shaved, and dressed. Then he went out into the bright pleasant living room to wait for breakfast. It was a nice house Rowley had built, and he wondered who the girl had been. He wandered about the room, looking at the framed English prints on the wall, the bric-a-brac in the plaster niches beside the fireplace, the books in the built-in case. Rowley's copy of the 1931 high school annual was in the case, and Kellam took it out, went back to the lounge chair. He was thinking that Rowley had nice taste. Rowley was not a bad guy at all, if you tried to understand him. He would have made the girl a nice steady husband.

Rowley came into the adjoining dining room carrying a chrome-plated electric toaster. Kellam watched him plug the toaster cord into a convenient outlet.

He said: "You've got everything here, Rowley. What the hell was wrong with the girl?"

Rowley, placing the toaster just so, shook his head. "Nothing was wrong with her. It's just me, I guess."

"Anybody I know?"

Rowley looked up. His soft eyes had a hurt look. "Jane Fray. I thought after—well, after Ben was killed, I might have a chance. It did look good for a while, then she changed her mind. She's still in love with that brother of yours."

"I guess she is," Kellam said. "That coffee smells good."

Rowley flushed. "I'm not much of a cook." He went out into the kitchen.

Kellam opened the annual, flipped the pages idly. He looked at the funny old mugs representing the faculty—old man Platt, Miss Brewer with the glasses like automobile headlights, Slats Daley, the coach, Miss Herron who wasn't a funny old mug. Miss Hurron was not a bad looking twist; young, with a pretty, not too intelligent, face. She'd had a nice figure too, he remembered. Rowley had autographs of all of the faculty except Miss Herron, and Kellam smiled, imagining Rowley turning first hot and then cold as he tried to nerve himself up to asking the only good-looking teacher in the school for an autograph.

He turned to the pictures of the senior class. His own was there—lord, what a grin!—and Jane's . . . Jane had been pretty then, but not beautiful. He flipped the page quickly. There was Dale Washburn, Betty Kole. And Paul Hulick. Even then Hulick had looked old, but not so sullen. Queer how few autographs of his classmates Rowley had collected. Not so queer when you considered how shy and self-conscious Rowley had been and still was. Kellam had traded autographs with Rowley. So had Jane, and Jimmy Carter, the minister's son. But that was about the extent of it.

Rowley came into the dining room again, carrying a glass coffee pot. Kellam asked, "Whatever became of Jimmy Carter?"

Rowley put down the pot, gave the book in Kellam's hand a slow glance. "Oh, the minister's kid. The Carters moved away about ten years ago, didn't they? Cleveland, or someplace?"

"I guess so."

"Come on in and sit down, Bradley. It's just about ready." Rowley hovered over the table, as anxious as a housewife at company dinner.

Kellam put down the book, got up, walked into the dining room. He said: "You'd better put that annual of yours under lock and key."

Rowley looked at him blankly. "Why?"

"Somebody has been swiping them. Somebody got mine and Jane's."

"Honest?"

Kellam nodded. He looked down at the table and grinned. "Say, this is swell. Bacon and eggs."

Rowley blushed. "Better wait until you taste the stuff."

"The nose knows." Kellam sat down, and they started to eat. Rowley was quite a cook. The eggs were just right—not too hard nor too soft. The coffee was perfect but scalding hot. Kellam added a lot of cream to the coffee.

"Say, what was wrong with Paul Hulick last night?" Rowley asked suddenly, his right hand poised holding a sliver of toast.

Kellam frowned. "That's a long story, I think. He must have been in love with that girl we were talking about—that Jeanie Henderson."

"The one Kane said was murdered?"

"Uh huh."

"Did you know her, Bradley?"

Kellam looked sharply at Rowley. Rowley was thoughtfully stirring his coffee, his eyes on the cup.

"No," Kellam said. "Didn't you notice the break I made about the color of her hair?"

Rowley gave him a slow glance. "I thought maybe you were just trying to cover something up."

KELLAM didn't say anything. They ate in silence for a while. Then: "Rowley, I was just trying to remember when it was you slipped on the ice and broke your arm. Wasn't that in February of '31, when we were still in school?"

Rowley was drinking coffee. He put the cup down carefully, snatched up his napkin and coughed into it.

"Excuse me," he said. "Yes, that was in '31 . . . You want some more coffee, Brad?" He stood up. "Let me give it a shot of heat, huh?"

"O.K. If it's not too much trouble." He watched Rowley's slight form slip through the swinging door. He listened to the sounds from the kitchen—the pot scraping across the grid of the stove, the pop of the gas pilot, Rowley's footsteps moving softly about, the opening of a light door like that of a cupboard, Rowley's footsteps going back to the stove . . .

Kellam stood up quietly, stepped to the door, and went through fast. Rowley twisted away from the stove, a small flat glass bottle in his hand. His eyes, wide and frightened, were fixed on Kellam's face. He mumbled something that ended with "ants".

Kellam said: "Ants? I'm never bothered with them." He reached across the stove, picked up the glass coffee pot, carried it to the sink and emptied it. When he turned around, Rowley was still at the stove, staring down at the empty bottle of ant poison. The bottle slid through nerveless fingers, fell to the floor. He looked up slowly.

"When—when did you know?"

"Just now," Kellam said. "It just all fell together—the annual, your broken arm, this house you built for Jane, Ben, the whole thing. You should have killed me last night while I slept."

Rowley gulped. His face was white. His lips trembled. "I don't see how—what you've got, Bradley."

Kellam shrugged. "I just asked myself what Jane's high school annual and mine would have in them that yours wouldn't. And the answer—your autograph. We exchanged autographs, remember? It was your right arm you broke that February, and you learned to write with your left. You got so you could write as well with your left hand as your right. So the autograph in the annuals you stole was your left-handed signature."

Rowley put a hand up and stroked the back of his neck. His eyes were thoughtful. "I still don't see that you've got anything, Bradley," he argued timidly. "They're all gone now, every single sample of my left-hand writing."

"There's still plenty for reconstruction," Kellam said. "Let's demonstrate. When Ben lit out for Chicago five years ago, you followed him. You were in love with Jane then, jealous of Ben, and you

wanted to get something you could use to smash Ben's chances with Jane. Right?"

Rowley nodded. "I've always loved Jane. Even in high school, I used to have cold sweats and get shaky all over when she was around. And Ben always had the inside track."

"He always did. With everything."

"I hated Ben and—worse than that—I was afraid of him. Once when we were kids, he shut me down your basement and darned near scared the life out of me."

Kellam remembered now. He remembered Rowley's mother coming to Aunt Sarah about Ben's bullying of Rowley. He said, "So that's how you knew about the basement window."

Rowley nodded again. "I'd been all through your house from time to time, keeping my eyes open for that annual of yours, looking for a chance to pick it up. Then I remembered the zinc trunk in the basement and thought it might be there. I—I didn't want to kill your father when he found me there. Honest, Bradley. I've been sick ever since. But I had to. It was your father or—or I. It meant I'd go to jail, and that—that other thing would come out."

"You mean the murder of Jeanie Henderson," Kellam said. He was leaning against the sink, his arms folded. He was thinking, where will it get you? It won't bring Dad back. And the others don't matter.

Rowley kept stroking his neck. "That—that wasn't murder. I didn't want to kill her either."

Kellam said: "I'll tell you what you wanted to do. You'd followed Ben, hoping to get something on him. Ben was cutting a pretty wide swath in Chicago. You knew that. Men talk about their women to other men. That's how Ben must have got onto where he could pick up this Jeanie Henderson—from Paul Hulick. He and Paul were both working at the dairy at that time, and they were pretty thick. Hulick must have mentioned that Jeanie was a good thing. Not that it made any difference to you whether it was Jeanie or some other tart. What you had in mind was to snap a picture of Ben in what nice people call a compromising position. Then you could send the photo to Jane anonymously and break up the affair between Jane and Ben. That's why you got into Jeanie Henderson's flat that night."

"And I had to kill her," Rowley said, almost dreamily. "I had to. If she had got the ice pick first, she'd have killed me."

"Then you framed Ben."

"Then I framed Ben," Rowley said. He sounded as if it had given him a good deal of pleasure, framing Ben. "I—I felt suddenly free, Bradley. As free as air."

Kellam understood. "Until you got back to the Ridgeway hotel to check out. Then you didn't feel quite so free, did you? They couldn't find your registration slip—the one you'd signed as R. T. Jones of Indianapolis."

Rowley stared soberly. "How did you know that?"

"I was right on Ben's heels," Kellam said. "Tracing him. One of the ways of tracing a man is to hit all the hotels in town. I was lucky. I hit the Ridgeway among the first I tried. Ben had signed there, giving a Los Angeles address and using a phony name, but I'd have recognized that left-handed scrawl of his no matter what name he had used. You know, Rowley, he picked on the Jones family too."

"He did?"

"Uh huh. John Jones. Then there was R. T. Jones, also a left-handed signature, and a phony Indianapolis address. I know Indianapolis pretty well, and as soon as I spotted the address I knew it didn't even exist. There were two phonies, two Jones Boys registered at the same hotel on the same day. It worried me."

Rowley laughed softly, strangely. "I guess I overdid it. I was too darned careful. I didn't want to leave anything behind that could be traced to me. So I signed with my left hand. Then, when I thought maybe the police had picked up that registration card, I was scared stiff."

"I'll bet you were," Kellam said without feeling. "How did you feel when Jane started getting letters from Ben—the Ben you knew was dead?"

ROWLEY didn't say anything for a moment. He stared beyond Kellam, out through the window at the bright sun on the snow.

"I guess I *should* have killed you last night, Brad," he said coolly. "For keeping Ben alive. If you hadn't done that, Jane might have got the breakfast this morning. I knew it was you, of course, writing to her. And there wasn't anything I could do about it without getting myself in trouble. Well—"

He straightened away from the stove, gestured toward the dining room door. Then, as Kellam didn't accept the invitation, he smiled almost scornfully.

"You want me to go first, huh?" He went ahead of Kellam into the dining room, sat down at his place at the table, broke off a sliver of toast. Kellam sat down too.

"What are you going to do?" Rowley asked, breaking the toast into bits with his thin fingers. "Is there anything you can do—now?"

"Uh-uh," Kellam said. "I don't have to do anything. There's Kane, remember? The fat cop? He's better than halfway along with a reconstruction of the Jeanie Henderson kill, starting with that lens cap that fell off your camera. Kane shot Ben, and he knows he got the wrong man. He'll get the right one someday. He'll get to you. And when he does, he'll wear you down. I know Kane's breed. They never say die."

Rowley put a piece of toast in his mouth and munched it. "The hell with him." The oath was strange on his lips, like a thick black cigar in a baby's mouth. It meant something. Kellum, watching the smooth pale face, the jaws placidly chewing, thought he knew what it meant.

"Better to have loved and lost, eh?"

Rowley closed his eyes, nodding. "They can't touch me. Ever."

Kellam teased his lower lip thoughtfully. "Maybe I can touch you. Where it hurts. Ever stop to think why there was nothing on Ben's body that could identify him."

Rowley continued munching. "Should I have?"

"Do you know what would have happened if you hadn't followed Ben and framed him into that spot? If you had just played it straight?"

Rowley stopped chewing, stared without answering.

"I'd have got Ben myself," Kellam went on. "I'd have put him out of the picture, and you'd have had a free hand with Jane. You'd have probably won her, too, because Jane wouldn't have cared much for a murderer."

"What do you mean?"

"That Ben killed a man somewhere on the road between here and Terre Haute."

"Ran over him?"

Kellam shook his head. "No. They were both in cars, Ben and the other, coming head on. Ben had a blow-out and his car got out of control. The other man got scared, ran his car into a ditch. He got out, started an argument with Ben, and you know you couldn't cross Ben. That temper of his. Ben hit the man with the handle of the jack. I wormed the truth out of him when he got home that night, when I found blood on the jack handle. I said that for Dad's sake I'd keep quiet if the man got along all right. But if the man died, I promised myself that Ben would get what was coming to him. And the man died two days later without recovering consciousness."

Kellam stood up. He dropped a hand on one of Rowley's shoulders. He said quietly: "Gypped yourself, didn't you, son? Nobody else. Just you."

Then he went out into the living room, opened the guest closet door, got his hat and coat. Rowley was still back there at the table, head bowed over his plate. Rowley, Kellam thought, was looking back. He knew what it was to look back.

Kellam went out the door into the crisp cold morning. He had walked less than a block down Abbott Road toward

Front Street when he heard the blast of a shot muffled within the walls of a house somewhere behind him. A shotgun, he thought. Rowley . . . And the sound it made was like the slam of a gigantic door somewhere behind him.

Bardstown was coming to life, if you could call it life. It was spreading out its sidewalks for people to walk on. The tired flat feet of Fat Man Kane found Bardstown sidewalks like any others—cold and hard. But he plodded along Front Street until he found Abbott Road and there stopped to consult a dirty little notebook he carried. He looked up and said, "Hey, Brakowitz!"

Kellam stopped, stared without enthusiasm into the eyes that had seen everything twice. "Hi, sweetheart. Doing yourself any good?"

Kane nodded his round head. "Some, yes. That fellow Hulick you put the stinger in at the taproom last night knew the Henderson babe. The damn fool wanted to marry her."

"That so?"

"But he's got an alibi a yard long. Three people say he was in town the night of the killing."

Kellam asked, "Now where are you?"

"Well—" Kane teetered on tired feet, "I thought I'd go up here and see that kid I met with you last night, this Rowley Barns. The druggist remembers selling him some thirty-five millimeter film like you'd use in a Leica camera about five years ago."

Kellam looked up Abbott Road. "I don't think you'll find Rowley awake."

Kane grunted. "I'll wake him up."

You will like hell, Kellam thought.

THE train for Indianapolis from Louisville was fifteen minutes late. The redheaded girl in the too short skirt sat restlessly in the coach and flipped the pages of a movie magazine she'd bought at the station. She thought, if trains wouldn't stop at every tank town, they wouldn't always be late. . . . She looked out at a squat green station that was like a million stations she had seen. Bardstown, she read.

She crossed her knees and jerked savagely at her skirt. And then she remembered something. Bardstown! Wasn't it about here where *he* had disappeared, vanished, sort of—the one with the dark face and the past. . . . She looked up and about with renewed interest, and there *he* was, walking down the aisle with his bag in his hand. She thought, he *needs* someone. Really. Someone with an understanding heart . . . She wasn't at all sure of its location, but she knew she had an understanding heart. Now if there was some way to break the ice . . .

He was sitting down now, settling into the seat across the aisle and just ahead of her. He didn't even know she existed. And that's just the trouble, she thought.

The thought struck her. It wasn't exactly original, but it worked. You dropped something. . . . She opened her purse, dug in it, hit upon her vanity case. She'd be on the point of powdering her nose and the case would slip. Well, she might give it a little flip to make absolutely sure. Then he'd pick it up, and it would be the beginning of something. She'd give him her most understanding smile.

She gave the case a flip. She uttered a small "Oh," of dismay and leaned forward to be ready with the understanding smile. The case had landed in the middle of the aisle and not a foot in front of his seat. And he was moving over, he was standing up . . .

Kellam stood there in the aisle, and his heart was beating with hard sure strokes. Because Jane was there. She was walking toward him down the aisle carrying a trim gray suitcase, one hand outstretched a little, palm down, a smile beginning on her lips.

"Jane, I—" He thought, why talk? She's yours. Not Ben's. Not Rowley's. Yours. She's tomorrow and the day after. She's forever . . . He caught her hand, but she was so close that he felt with his lips, rather than heard, the one word she uttered: "Darling."

The redheaded girl in the too short skirt said: "Will you kindly take your big foot off my vanity case?"

But Kellam didn't hear.

MY *Dying* DAY

By
NORMAN A. DANIELS

I KNEW he was Greg Alden the moment he came along the short path through Bryant Park, that little bit of green space behind the public library. Bordered by snooty Fifth Avenue, teeming 42nd Street and comparatively quiet 41st, it's like a little oasis in a maze of traffic—human and mechanical traffic. Anyway that's how the tiny park had seemed to be when I was released from prison not long ago.

The bench I occupied—when somebody didn't beat me to it—was at the far end of the park, near Sixth Avenue. The spot is a little darker by night, a bit calmer by day.

It was four-thirty on a sun-bright summer afternoon. The lad who was approaching had his eyes fastened on me. He was a likely looking kid. Maybe twenty or twenty-two. Tall enough, slim-shouldered and tapering in the waist a bit. I'd say he was on the skinny side. His hair was average brown, tossed by the breezes now. His eyes were gray and steady. He had a rounded chin and a nose that would have looked cuter on some five feet two blonde honey.

He wore dark brown saddle shoes. His suit was pepper-and-salt in a quiet way; a hand-painted tie was set off by a white shirt. He wore no hat but carried a chocolate-colored one in his hand. As he neared my bench, he slowed up but passed me by. There wasn't much further to go until you hit the cement wall.

I shook my head stubbornly and got pasted again. . . I knew I couldn't take much more of this.

Everybody agreed Greg Alden was overdue at the loony bin—everybody but ex-shamus Rick Trent. He figured a guy who could foil four attempts on his life in as many days was a fairly bright boy.

A Rick Trent Novelette

He turned back and passed by again.

"Come sit down, Mr. Alden," I said cheerfully. "Pull up a chair. I'll turn off the radio. I'm sick of listening to market reports anyhow—and turn on the air conditioner. Take that red leather chair, please."

He had an infectious grin. People strike me that way. I don't like them or I do. I grinned back and he sat down on the bench.

"Mr. Sedley warned me you'd be a rather unusual character, Trent, but you'd have to be two-headed and six-armed to be more unusual than I am right now."

"So?" I asked softly.

"I'm wanted by every policeman in this city. All eighteen thousand of them. I passed a radio car a little while ago and heard my description being broadcast. I borrowed a match from one of the two cops in the car."

"Well," I told him, "people don't look up a private eye until they are in trouble. Why do the cops want you?"

"Insanity. I'm a dangerous lunatic. Commitment papers are already made

out. All they have to do is find me. That's why I was in such a rush to get help. Sedley was one of the few men I could trust."

"So you're nuts." I eyed him critically. If that kid was out of his mind, so was I. "Tell me about it."

He scuffed the toe of his right shoe against the concrete walk and spoke without looking up. "Maybe I am crazy. For awhile I was sure of it, but then—something happened. Funny . . . they intended to scare me, I guess, and all they did was retore my self-confidence. Somebody tried to kill me. Four different times in the past four days."

"Listen," I said, "if four attempts were made on your life and you are still alive, you can't be crazy. You're smart. Go ahead."

"Four days ago I was taking an idle stroll off the open back porch of my home. An urn fell from the second story and missed me by half an inch. It scared the hell out of me. I went back in, had a drink and decided it was just an accident, but I spoke to the housekeeper about it. Seems the urn was still up there where it belonged, without a crack and there was no debris on the ground where I saw the urn crash."

I just nodded: The beginning of his story was bad.

He said: "The next day someone shot at me. I distinctly heard the hiss of the bullet, the flat sound of a silenced rifle and I heard the slug smack into a tree right beside me. Only there was no rifle —let alone a silenced one—anywhere around. There was no bullet hole in the tree. Not even a scratch."

It was getting worse. I wondered why Sedley had even sent him to me. He stopped scuffling his shoe and gave me a sharp glance. He must have recognized the disbelief on my face for he sighed gently.

"Two days ago I received a phone call while I was at a night club. The Impresario! Over the phone somebody told me I was wanted on an important matter having to do with the first two attempts on my life. Naturally I accepted an invitation to meet this caller in an alley behind the night club. When I got there, someone jumped me. I was stabbed—twice. Not too deeply, though it hurt enough."

"That should have convinced anyone," I told him.

He shook his head. "Wait until you hear the rest of it. I set up a terrific yowl and brought a lot of cops. I told them what happened. They found an old building back there behind the alley. Somebody had given a running jump right through a large plate glass window. Some of the splinters of glass were bloody. They typed the stains and took a sample of my blood. They matched. Everything looked as if I'd busted through the window and got cut that way."

"Look," I said, "this is a matter for the police . . ."

He laughed. There was harshness and despair in it. He started rolling his hat around one finger.

"It was the police who persuaded my folks to have me put away. They say I'm crazy. There was another attempt yesterday. Are you interested, Trent, or am I wasting my breath?"

"Go ahead and talk. I'm a good listener."

"You don't believe me." He sighed again. "Well, how could I expect you to? My folks are convinced I'm off the handle; the police know it. Especially one rough detective lieutenant named Westover."

"Westover!" My sleepy eyes opened wider and I forgot the drowsiness that late summer afternoons bring upon a lazy man. "Lieutenant Westover is the guy who wants to tuck you away?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I hate his guts and he hates mine. Go on with your story and—I'm taking the case with one provision."

"You can name anything you want, including a terrific fee. I have plenty of money."

"This has nothing to do with money." I looked around. Whenever Westover was hunting, he was usually close to his quarry. "It happens I'm an ex-con.

Before I went to prison, I was a private detective. But I got into a mess and drew a stretch. I'm on parole now and Westover has sworn to pick me up for violation of parole if I even breathe too heavily. One of the provisions governing my release was that I must not return to the private eyes business. So you don't even know me if things go sour. Understand and accept that, and I'll do all I can to help you."

"I know," Alden nodded. "Sedley told me about it. Well, yesterday afternoon, I was trying to figure out whether or not I really was slipping—and thinking I must be. I took a long walk. On my way back I was hiking along the side of the highway. This car came toward me, swerved and headed straight for me. I jumped, but not quick enough. I was hit and thrown aside. When I awakened, I was in a ditch. I got up and staggered home. I told them what happened. The other three attempts were fizzles compared to this last one. I really thought that was my dying day."

"And somebody called Westover," I suggested.

"That's right. He told my folks if I showed any more signs of mental aberration to let him know and he'd investigate. Well, he came out right away. I told him about the car, said I knew it left tire marks on the road when the brakes were being slapped on because I'd seen them just before I was hit."

"There were no brake marks. Nothing," I said slowly.

"No. Not one blessed sign. To make matters worse, I'd memorized what I thought were the marker numbers on the car. Westover checked that too. They belonged to an Episcopalian Bishop whose car wasn't missing and hadn't been out of the garage. You see why they think I'm crazy?"

I lit a cigarette, blinked through a cloud of smoke for a couple of minutes and then gave it to him cold. "I'll help. I don't know what I can do, and I'll need money. I'm flatter than a salted herring. I make no guarantees and I want answers to all the questions I'll ask."

"That's agreeable, Trent. I brought two thousand dollars with me." He took a thin sheaf of big denomination bills from his pocket. "I hope this will be enough because it's likely no bank will honor my checks after the police nab me."

I reached for the dough, let my hand drop and leaned back, putting my head against the back of the bench and pulling my hat down over my eyes. I slid the words along the length of my cigarette without a lip movement. You learn how to do that in stir.

"Bad news. Westover has us spotted and he's heading this way. Play up to me."

SOMEBODY kicked my shins hard. I sat bolt upright and looked into Detective Lieutenant Westover's puss. He had one of those wide faces chiseled by diamond points into a granite head. He wasn't oily nor crude nor even rough. Not now, in broad daylight.

He said: "Alden, don't make a move. Rick, stand up."

I stood. It was the law talking and I happened to be an ex-con on parole. He patted my hips, under my arms and ran a hand down both my legs. All this with about fifty people looking on. He did it just to get my goat. I'd have been crazier than Alden was reputed to be if I'd been carrying a rod.

"O.K.," Westover said. "Let's all of us walk out of the park and take a nice car to a nice police station."

"Hey, what is this?" I yelled. "You can't pinch a guy for sitting on a park bench."

"I can when he's sitting there talking to a crazy galoot who is trying to hire him as a private shamus. And don't argue. I've got a commitment for the kid. He slipped away, but I found out he went to see Sedley. The guy who says he is your boss. That gave me the idea Sedley would send the kid here to meet you, so I thought I'd join the party. Pull out all your pockets, Trent."

I did, showing him seventeen bucks, some silver, a handkerchief, a stub of a

pencil and a movie theatre ticket stub. He looked disappointed. I knew he hoped to find a lot of dough on me which he could say Alden had turned over as a fee. The mere presence of any undue amount of money would have put me on the spot. I wasn't expected to have much.

"Let's go," Westover grunted.

I stuffed the things back into my pockets. "Who am I to argue?" I said. "Lawyers are paid to do that and Sedley will see I get a good one. You've got to prove this kid hired me. You've got to prove I know him. You've got to show a judge that the kid was trying to hire me, instead of telling me about a trip he'd just taken from Venus to the Moon."

Westover laid a thick finger alongside the corner of his mouth and pushed it up and down. "Aw, hell, why am I wasting time with you," he said finally. "Go ahead and get your lawyer. The kid will talk. He'll tell me he hired you."

"I thought he was nuts," I said sweetly.

Westover chewed that one over. The kid made up his mind for him. He gave a whoop, jumped to his feet and began streaking down the park toward Fifth Avenue. Westover lumbered after him yelling loudly. I saw a pair of plainclothesmen materialize from somewhere. The kid ran straight into their arms.

Westover came back, puffing. "All right, Trent. All right this time, because I can't prove a thing. But just one question of anybody in town about that kid and I'll have you."

I crossed my legs and grinned up at him. "It would be easier if I just walked into a bar and ordered a drink. That would send me back to stir also. I'm on a narrow path. Lieutenant. I'm going to stay there. Unless you push me off. Good afternoon. Close the door quietly on your way out."

He stalked off. I smoked another cigarette. I didn't dare move because I was parked on the kid's hat. He'd shoved it under me as I sat down after being frisked.

When I was certain Westover couldn't be around, I slipped the hat from under me, turned it over and extracted two grand from beneath the sweat band. Now I had a client. He might be as crazy as some of the stir bugs I'd seen in prison, but he was my client.

I ditched his hat and got out of there. I had things to do.

I telephoned Sedley as soon as I could. Sedley was a funny sort. I'd stumbled onto him soon after I got out of prison. He became involved in my first case as an illicit private eye and he liked me. He was wealthy enough to pick his friends and he chose me as one of them. Now he fronted for me. An ex-con on parole must have a steady job and Sedley provided me with one that required no work on my part. He backed up anything I said or did. He and his five million bucks were comfortable backing. Even a lug like Lieutenant Westover respected such a combination.

Sedley had a little more to tell me. "Rick, I think the boy is sane. I knew his people for years and there were none better or saner. He's an orphan, stinking rich and money draws flies. I ought to know. Somebody is trying to get all, or a piece of that dough away from him."

"But those dizzy stories he tells. An urn that busted but didn't bust. A bullet that hit a tree and left no mark. A stabbing with a piece of plate glass, and then being run down. It's hard to take."

"Sure it is. Don't take it if you think he's screwy. Maybe he is. I just thought the kid needed help and no regular private detective agency would raise a finger for him so long as the commitment papers were already out."

"Who petitioned for 'em and what doctor signed 'em?" I asked quickly.

"The kid's uncle, Thad Gilmore. The doctor was Paul Hale. Happens he is engaged to marry the kid's cousin, Donna Jarmon. She lives in the house with the kid and Uncle Thad. I figured the doc was too close, Trent."

"Maybe," I agreed. "Westover grabbed me too. Just before the big gorilla butted in, the kid told me he thought he was nuts too, until something happened to change his mind. He never

finished. Do you know what he meant?"

"Yes, I made him give me the whole story. Seems he received a phone call this noon. From a Jean Randolph of 874 Carmody Avenue. For a price she'd tell him who was trying to kill him."

"I'll see her," I said. "It will be rough going. Westover thinks the kid hired me and he'll have every copper in town double checking me."

CHAPTER TWO

Murder Also Goes Crazy

SHE was a lantern-jawed woman of about fifty, as starchy as the nurse's uniform she wore. She went for me like a rabbit goes for a dog.

I took a good look around the waiting room. It was done in pickled pine, knots and all. The furniture matched the walls except that the seats were fiery red. Four important looking diplomas were framed and hung on one wall. There were big brass braziers in three corners of the room, a thick rug on the floor, also a violent red, and the magazines ran to *Fortune, Scribner's* and *Mercury*. Heavy going, I thought, for nuts.

Before the starchy nurse got a word out, I said: "I must see Dr. Hale at once. It's happened half a dozen times. I go to my safe deposit vault and clip coupons off the bonds. Something makes me read the serial numbers on each bond. Read them over and over. They're printed in black and that turns to green and then red and then—the figures become women. Nudes. It's scaring the hell out of me. I can't clip my bonds in peace any more. Does that mean anything to you?"

Her mouth practically watered every time I said bonds. "Well," she offered, "there is a Freudian theory . . . but Dr. Hale is more competent to judge than I. Please be seated. I'll see if he can interview you at once."

It seemed he could. I found Dr. Hale to be a tall, young man, bronzed from being in the sun a good deal. He had clear blue eyes, a square chin and an oozing manner which you couldn't hold against him. In his job anybody would have to ooze. The women who spend their dough on psychiatrists expect that. I liked the guy.

I sat down. "Doc, there's nothing wrong with my sanity. It happens I'm trying to help Greg Alden."

Doc Hale stopped oozing and became human. "An officer, perhaps . . . ?"

"Well, hardly," I told him. "Let's say, just a friend. I don't think Greg is crazy. Do you?"

"I signed the papers, sir. Yes, I do think he is mentally unbalanced. Not a raving lunatic. He has a persecution complex and he imagines things which do not really exist."

"Like busted urns, bullet holes, men with knives, and a car that ran him down."

"Well," Dr. Hale demanded, "doesn't that sound like the workings of a disordered mind?"

I gave it to him cold. "Broken urns can be removed. The bullet might not have struck the tree, but sounded as though it did to Greg's startled ears. The stabbing could be explained away without any trouble and he really was injured in an auto accident. Besides—Greg is a wealthy young man. As such he could be the object of someone with murderous intentions."

Doc Hale flushed through the tan. "It may be of interest to you if I say that I am going to marry one of Greg's heirs and your statement is libelous."

"Aw, don't be getting on the defensive so fast, Doc. It doesn't sound well. All I want to know is whether or not Greg is mad. From the evidence placed before me, I can't see that he is."

Doc Hale seemed to be studying me intently and then he gave a curt nod as if he had just made up his mind about something. "I would like to see your credentials. As Greg's physician I cannot talk about his condition unless you prove to me that you have the right to insist upon such answers."

I gave him my blandest smile—and my biggest bluff. "O. K., Doc." I got up. "I shall institute immediate steps to get Greg out on a writ of habeas corpus. I

think he is being railroaded into an asylum because somebody wants his dough. See you again—in court."

That fixed him. He waved me back into the chair. "Very well. Rather than have this sorry business publicised, I'll tell you the truth. Four months ago Greg was on his way to Florida. On the train he met some old friends of his dead parents. A Mr. and Mrs. Conrad Faulkner. He was in their drawing room when the train left the tracks. The car turned over. Seven people were killed that night and about sixty injured. Mr. and Mrs. Faulkner were among those killed."

"What's that got to do with Greg's insanity?" I wanted to know.

"I'm getting to that. The car crumpled as they sometimes do. Greg was trapped in there. Both Mr. and Mrs. Faulkner were still alive but dying. For two solid hours he lay there between them unable to move, while they slowly died. By the time rescuers cut through with torches, Greg was screaming like a madman."

I began to see a case taking wing. "But Greg was perfectly O.K. afterwards," I argued.

"No, he was not. Just how well do you know him, anyway? The truth is, Greg had a bad concussion and was in the hospital for ten days. A concussion may lead to a mental condition, especially if the victim underwent the tortures that came upon Greg. I say he is mad and he belongs in an asylum."

"Can he be cured, Doc?" I said in an open admission of defeat.

"Time will tell that. I can't, nor any other man. He may grow progressively worse. To sum it all up, it is impossible to believe these fairy tales he has been telling. He's developed a persecution complex which will probably lead to paranoia. Now are you quite satisfied?"

"Like a man who has inhaled fifteen straight whiskies and then takes on a load of creme-de-methe. Thanks, Doc."

I GOT up again to leave in a big hurry. Then I heard the voice. There was no doubting who owned it. Lieutenant Westover was in the waiting room and demanding to be let in, patient or no patient. I stepped close to Doc.

"Listen, I'm really doing my best to help Greg. Or I was. He came to me and asked for that help. I used to be a private detective, but my license was taken away from me. Right now, in your waiting room, is a detective who'd give his right arm to throw me in the can. I'm here as a patient. With your help we can put it over."

I'll say one thing for Doc. He made up his mind fast. Without a word, he took my arm, piloted me to a long and large leather divan and indicated I was to lie down upon it. He snapped some flashing contrivance on. It played right on my face. Doc picked up a notebook and pencil. He sat down beside the divan and began asking me questions in a hushed voice.

"You are back to your ninth birthday. Think! It's all very clear to you now. Think harder. There was something which affected your life then. You know what it is. Talk! Speak up! Tell me what this event was."

I began mumbling something. The door opened with a bang and Westover lumbered over. Doc glanced at him and assumed an outraged expression and voice.

"Nurse!" he yelled. "What is the meaning of this? No one is allowed in here while I have a patient under hypnosis. You, sir, get out of here! You may be endangering this patient's mind by your presence. Get out!"

Westover fished out his badge, rubbed it on his sleeve and flashed the thing in front of Doc's nose.

"Take it easy now, Doc," he warned. "This patient of yours happens to be an ex-con . . ."

"You are not telling me anything I do not know," Doc snapped. "That's why he's here. He is endeavoring to find out what, in his youth, caused him to turn to crime the way he did. By hypnosis I take him back over his life. Now will you get out or shall I call the Chief of Police or whatever dignitary heads your department?"

"But Doc," Westover argued loudly. "This guy is a killer. He served time for bumping a guy off. I tell you he's bluffing . . ."

I kept mumbling away with my eyes tightly shut. Now and then I gave a convulsive twitch as if my mind was recalling something unpleasant. Westover watched me narrowly and then he stepped closer to the divan. He drew back one hand. I sat bolt upright and let out the weirdest shriek I could muster. It set Westover back.

Doc seized his arm and forcibly pushed him out of the office. With a gesture he warned me to be quiet and then he sat down to ask those questions in the same monotone.

"He's listening," Doc whispered in between questions. "A buzzer sounds when the outer office door opens and it hasn't sounded yet."

We kept it up for five minutes and then the buzzer buzzed. Doc Hale suddenly went limp. He pulled out his pocket handkerchief and wiped a moist forehead.

"Why on earth I acted on impulse like that, I'll never know," he berated himself. "I should have told him the truth."

"Doc, I'd have landed in jail and then to prison."

"Maybe you belong there. He said you killed a man and I believe him."

"Sure I killed a man. On a fluke. I used to have an office, like any private eye. With a substantial business and a good reputation. Then I handled a a routine blackmailing job. The guy wanted to pay off so I took his dough and met the blackmailer. Only he wanted the dough and the evidence too. He tried to get away. I caught him, there was a fight and I hit him too hard. It was a manslaughter rap, not murder, I'd have gotten off if my client had come forward with his story, but he didn't. Why should he? They'd have made him tell why he was being blackmailed and he'd paid me hard cash to keep it all secret."

"You could have subpoenaed the man," Doc said.

"I told you—he paid me to take chances. That's all there is to it, Doc."

He put his handkerchief away and offered me a hand. "Then I'm glad I did this. Mighty glad. I'll help you in any other way, too."

"Thanks, Doc," I said sincerely. "It's novel for me to meet somebody like you. Especially since we disagree about Greg."

"There can be no disagreement. Hell's bells, man, I'm trained in psychiatry."

I pacified him with a cigarette that he smoked in long drags. "Doc, if Greg hadn't told those weird stories, nobody would have suspected he was out of his mind. Not even you. Is that right?"

"We . . . ell—yes. Suppose I concede that much. Though he'd have broken in some form later on."

"Then let's assume he did see and hear and experience those things. Perhaps he is crazy, but if so, somebody made him that way. I want to know why and who. Does the name of Jean Randolph mean anything to you?"

"No," he said promptly. "It does not."

"O.K., Doc." I offered him my hand again. "I'll keep in touch."

The starched uniform unbent a little to let me out of the office door. I kept my eyes open for Westover. Undoubtedly he'd followed me or had me shadowed. There was one thing about Westover; when he nailed me, he was going to do it personally.

I TOOK some precautions against a tail and finally reached Carmody Street. I thought I knew what it was going to be like. That section was going to pot even before I was sent to prison. It seemed to have degenerated a few more notches since then.

Number 874 was a grimy gray building. A cheap light housekeeping and rooming house if I knew the signs. I climbed the stairs to the vestibule and rang the bell.

A woman with a face as red as Santa Claus's nose, peered out at me. I said: "Have you a single for about four bucks a week?"

"What do you think this is—1930?" She had a whiskey breath too. She slammed the door, but that was all I wanted. She hadn't noticed my finger spring the lock button. I waited a reasonable length of time, tried the knob and let myself in. There were tin mail boxes. An unexpectedly ritzy feature for a dive like this, but it helped me learn that Jean Randolph lived in 4H. I climbed narrow stairs carpeted with something that had been loomed thirty years ago and smelled as if it needed a cleaning. The wall paper was hanging in strips in a couple of spots. Somebody was cooking cabbage. The combination wasn't by Chanel.

I rapped on the door of 4H and a man's voice answered. I half expected that. I said: "Come on, open up. When you make a date with a man, let him in."

"What's the name?" somebody demanded.

"Greg Alden. Or should I be somebody else to get the combination to this trap?"

A key rasped and the door opened a notch. I was ready for that and put an elbow against it and a foot inside. I sent the man flying. He was small and skinny—the kind that flies easily. But he was something else too, because his hand moved toward his belt and came away holding a snub-nosed blue-black revolver that spelled deadly poison.

Let a man like this think you're afraid of him and things happen. I sneered at him, walked over with an utter disregard for the gun—except for the butterflies in my stomach—and sat down on a kitchen chair. I looked the place over carefully.

I saw a small room that hadn't been decorated in years. I saw a closet door partly open, revealing women's clothes. Flashy stuff. There was a dresser loaded down with cheap cosmetics. It had a clouded mirror, the bottom of which was liberally dusted with face powder. There were burned matches on the floor and about a hundred cigarette burns. I curled my underlip.

The skinny guy watched me closely and held that gun ready. He knew how to use the iron all right and I guessed that he had an itchy finger. I wanted a cigarette, but didn't dare reach for one. Not with him and his gun in front of me.

"Well?" I said.

"Well what?" he countered. A smart guy, thoroughly familiar with the classics.

"Where's Jean?"

"Who is Jean?" I wondered if it would go on like this all night.

"Look," I said, "I came here because somebody named Jean phoned me. There was some kind of a deal to be made. With money."

"You bring it?" He was beginning to talk human.

I opened my coat wide so he could see I carried no shoulder harness. Then I removed the sheaf of bills which Greg had given me. The skinny man's eyes lighted up. He saw a lot of gin and cheap whiskey in that roll.

"O.K.," he said. "Let's have it."

I stuck the money into my pocket again. "Oh, no. When I deal, I want to see what the other party has to offer. Furthermore, I'm doing business with Jean, not some crummy—"

He knew what I intended to say and he came at me with the gun swinging. That was exactly what I wanted. Make a heel like him use a rod for a club instead of as old Sam Colt meant it to be used, and he's yours. I ducked the swing easily, straightened up with my face an inch from his and I belted him in the middle a couple of times. He forgot all about pulling the trigger.

I spun around, grabbed his gun hand with both of mine and squeezed it until he let go of the rod. I kicked it into a corner, pushed him back against the wall and then darted over to pick up the gun. He was on the wrong end of it now.

"Spill it," I said briskly.

He gestured with his chin toward a closed door. "Jean's in there, asleep. I don't know what she wants to tell you. But it's worth plenty. Yeah—plenty. Give me back my gun."

He said it like a kid who asks a big

bad bully for his lollypop back. I shoved the gun into my belt, walked over and opened the door. That led to a bedroom as clean and tidy as the so-called sitting room. Which meant it was a pig pen. And so small that the woman couldn't get her bureau in there.

Someone was under the bedcovers. I snapped on a light. Jean seemed to be forty or so. I guessed she really was in her middle twenties, but that's what a hard life does to women. Especially when that life is spiked with sixty kinds of booze. And she surely needed makeup. I hadn't seen anybody so pale since I used to barber the poor devils who were slated for the chair in the Big House.

I REACHED down and grasped a bare shoulder. My hand came away as if the shoulder was red hot. The chill of death makes you do that. I lifted the bed covers, swallowed hard and walked back to the other room where Skinny was eating a cigarette in gigantic puffs.

"When did you see Jean last? To talk with?" I asked him.

"Why—this noon. What's the matter? Did she change her mind? Listen—show her that lettuce."

"She's got eyes only for daisies," I said. "She's dead. Somebody stuck a knife through her and it was done at least three or four hours ago. It might be well if you talked."

He let the cigarette fall to the floor. A little column of smoke spiraled up. I put my foot on the butt, grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him to his feet. I shook him until his teeth chattered like dice.

"I said talk."

"I don't know a thing. Honest—Jean was O. K. this noon. She said she was going to pack and we'd both blow tonight. She said she had something a guy would pay plenty for. But she wouldn't tell me. You see—I talk too much when I get boiled. She didn't trust me, but we were pals. Like this."

He held two fingers together in the customary and boring gesture of close friendship.

"Who was she palling around with besides you?" I asked.

"Honest, I don't know. I met her a couple of weeks ago. She was in the dumps about something, but we clicked."

They clicked. I thought about some decent girl and boy, some guy thirty-three years old like me, who meets a woman and falls for her. Love is a great thing. Two wrecks like Jean and this skinny guy also clicked. The language of love. Jean knew what was up and was scared. She wanted an out, but didn't want it alone. So—Skinny came into the picture. I doubted he knew anything much, but I had to give him a going-over anyway.

"You're in a jam," I said sweetly.

He gulped. "I didn't kill her. Hell, I wouldn't do that."

"You were right here." I pointed to the floor. "She was in there—dead." I pointed at the bedroom. "When I knocked, you didn't call her. You just let me in, with a gun in your fist. Does an innocent man act that way?"

He tried intimidation once more. His kind always do. He drew back lips in a snarl. "Well, what do you make of it, wise guy?"

"Murder! I came here to give her some dough. You knew it, bumped her and then intended to take me. Come on, you little rat, how much do you know? What did she say when she mentioned my name?"

"Honest, Mr. Alden," he pleaded, "all she said was your name and that you'd supply the dough. It would be a good deal for you and you'd pay off handsome. I don't know another thing."

"Does anybody besides you and Jean have a key to this trap?"

"How should I know that?"

"Yeah," I told him blankly. "Now sit tight while I frisk the joint. Remember, I said sit tight."

I went into the bedroom and started work. I found her handbag. It contained a couple of racing tickets, six dollars in ones and some change. There was a timetable, brand new. Apparently she had meant to run for it which meant somebody was ready to kill her if she

talked. Somebody who did, before she got the chance.

I rolled down the window shades. There was nothing jammed up in them. I searched a small closet without any luck at all. The rug had nothing but a six months' accumulation of dirt under it. I tackled the bed next, though I didn't like the job. Unless they were directly beneath the body, there were no slits or hiding places. I gave up and went back to the other room. Skinny had gone, which didn't surprise me very much. The hall door was wide open—an invitation for me to leave also. This place was no more healthy for me than it had been for Skinny.

But near the door and written on the wallpaper, I saw a phone number. There was a phone in the hall. I went to it, dropped a nickle in the slot and dialed that number. There was a good long wait. Then somebody said, "Sweiter's Delicatessen."

I stifled a groan of exasperation, but carried the thing through. "Listen, I'm calling from Jean Randolph's place. You know where it is?"

"Why not, when she's a good customer. What do you want?"

"Two combinations on rye and two bottles of beer. Half a buck extra if they're here in ten minutes."

They arrived in eight. I handed the lanky kid a dollar and a half. He was studying me rather closely. "Well," I asked, "what's the beef?"

"I was just thinking and it ain't none of my business, mister, but you better get the hell outa here. For a buck I'll tell you why."

I submitted to the mild blackmail. The kid said, "On account of if Red Sawyer finds you here with his girl—oh, boy—you better scramola, pal."

I scramolaed almost on his heels, taking the sandwiches and the beer with me. The two bottles made big lumps in my hip pockets, but I wasn't throwing any dough away. Not now. That two grand was mine, but only if I produced results and filling my stomach with food it paid for wasn't the way I did business. Any expense tab I submitted would be honest. I'd met too many guys during the past three or four years who'd played it the other way. Sing Sing is loaded with them.

On the street the sodden, dirty air of this downtown district actually smelled sweet to me after that apartment.

CHAPTER THREE

The Corpse I Fell For

BACK in my cubby hole they called and rented as a room, I ate the sandwiches and drank the beer. I looked myself over in the bathroom mirror and decided to shave. After all, I was going visiting and the kind of folks Greg Alden associated with expected a smooth chin and maybe a neater crease in a man's pants. I couldn't do anything about the crease, but I could mow down the whiskers.

I did cater to them enough to put on a fresh shirt. Then I pulled away a small section of the floor moulding and cached all but fifty bucks of Greg's money there. Carrying that much cash around would put me in a sweet spot if Westover gave me another going over.

I figured Greg could stand the price of a cab ride to his estate across the river and even a buck tip after I got there. The place looked as if it belonged in the deep South. It had tall white pillars, a rambling porch and it was set deep on an estate full of trees and shrubbery. It was lit up like a Christmas tree and there was a black, racey looking coupe parked outside the door. It had MD marker plates on it and I figured Doc Hale was among those present, which suited me fine.

The girl who answered my ring somehow reminded me of Jean Randolph. Under her rouge, powder and lipstick, she was very pale. There was plenty of cosmetics on her face too. She was young, curved in the proper places and wearing an evening gown that somehow looked modest on her. It wasn't cut down to there and with her face, you'd expect it would be.

I asked for Doc Hale and she brought

me into a big living room. I could admire that room after my own—and Jean Randolph's. It said, 'This is the home of wealth', but it said so quietly, without shrieking. Something tickled my ankles and I looked down. It was just the deep nap of the rug.

Doc came forward with his hand out. "Well, hello there. Incidentally, you failed to give me a name when you were in my office this afternoon."

"It's Rick Trent," I said, looking around. What a nice mistake that would have been if a copper had been present.

"Mr. Trent," Doc explained for the benefit of the others, "is trying to help Greg and somehow I think he will. Trent, this is Donna Jarmon, Greg's cousin and my fiancee."

I nodded to the girl who'd let me in. She went with this place, heavy makeup or not. Her smile was genuine, her handclasp warm and firm. I didn't blame Doc.

"And this," he called me over to a large upholstered chair, "is Greg's uncle Thad Gilmore."

I shook hands with a dead fish. He was old enough to be dead anyway. The flesh was pulled tight at his cheek bones. He flashed a smile graced by synthetic teeth and not very expensive ones. He grasped a gnarled cane in his hand.

There were two other people present. A Miss Harriette Hatfield and her brother Ronald. They were two of a kind. Deuces, I'd call them in any game. Thin, pulled up like butlers, and showing me more teeth in two of those stiffly polite smiles.

Doc said: "The Hatfields live next door."

"Glad to meet you," I said in my best Sing Sing cultivated manner.

Harriette held out a black-gloved hand. She was all in black. Ronnie bowed stiffly. He wore a mourning band on his sleeve. Ronnie said, "A pleasure. And now, if you will pardon my sister and me, we shall go back home. We feel it isn't a long enough time to remain out since our uncle and aunt died. Good night, everyone."

After they left, Doc grinned at me. "Wouldn't they make a pair of swell undertakers? It was their aunt and uncle who were killed in the train wreck I told you about. Now, Trent, what can we do for you?"

"Who gets control of Greg's estate if he is adjudged incompetent? Who inherits if he dies?" I asked with a little too much bluntness.

Thad Gilmore's cane came down on the floor with a smack that I felt under the soles of my shoes. "That is an insult," he shouted. "Get this man out of here."

"It was a bit direct." Donna gave me a dizzy smile. I thought there was an element of worry in it too. "I'll answer though, because if Paul says you are Greg's friend, well—then you must be. Uncle Thad will administer the estate until Greg is cured. If he should die, the estate is shared by me and Thad. With me getting it all in the event of Thad's death."

"That is none of his business, Donna," Thad screeched. "Shut up and stay that way."

"I'm sorry," I told the old coot, "but to find out things, you must ask questions. I've a few more."

"I won't answer them." Thad got up, leaning heavily on the cane. "I won't even be present, sir. If Greg is putting you up to this, you are making a bad mistake intimidating us. Greg is crazy. So are you, I imagine."

HE LIMPED out of there and I heard him climbing the stairs. Donna took my arm and led me to a divan. All three of us sat on it. She said: "Please ask me anything you like, Mr. Trent. I want to help Greg if he needs help."

I said: "Greg received a phone call today. A very important call from someone named Jean Randolph. Do you know anything about that—or her?"

Both shook their heads. I went on. "Unfortunately Miss Randolph is no longer in a position to help me, but she did offer to tell Greg who was trying to kill him. That is what makes the phone call so important."

"But this woman, whoever she is," Doc said, "can be made to talk."

"No—not Jean. She's dead. Someone didn't want her to talk. She's dead with a knife wound through her heart."

Donna covered her face quickly. Doc looked pale and shaken. I said: "Now do you see why Greg may not be insane? That those attempts on his life might be genuine? He has shown no other traits of insanity, has he?"

Doc took it well. "No, but his stories were so darned weird and then there was the concussion and being in that compartment with two slowly dying people . . . It added up to insanity."

"Let's skip it temporarily. How about a man named Red Sawyer? That name familiar?"

It wasn't and I hadn't expected it would be. People like Red Sawyer, who traveled with babes like Jean Randolph, didn't mix with types like Doc and Donna.

I asked to see the spot where the urn had fallen. An outside, overhead light showed me there wasn't even a dent in the cement floor of the patio-like back porch. I went to the balcony and looked at the urn. It certainly had not been broken and patched. Besides, by tilting it I guessed it weighed about eighty pounds. Not a toy to be carried about.

They showed me the tree which Greg said had been smacked with a bullet. There was nothing. Not a mark. I was beginning to think like Doc Hale, except that when I remembered Jean Randolph I got back my faith in Greg.

"If you don't mind," I said, "I'll look around a bit."

They didn't mind at all. I got the impression that Doc was glad to get rid of me. Probably so he could tell his girl the dirt. I borrowed a flash from Doc's car and went prowling. I didn't find a thing, though I went all the way over to the boundaries of the estate and looked at the Hatfield house for a little while. I saw Harriette pass by a window a couple of times. She was still dressed in that severe black outfit. Though, I told myself, I wouldn't give her a second glance if she wore a transparent nightie.

Back at the house I found only Donna. Doc had telephoned one of his patients and had to leave in a hurry. Donna held my arm a little too tightly, I thought. We sat down side by side.

"I suppose I'll get my fill of Paul leaving unexpectedly like this. A doctor's wife has to get used to it. Paul told me you were formerly a private detective. That must be an interesting life."

I grinned. "It is, until you have to kill a man and then go to prison for it."

"Paul told me about that too. I don't mind. I rather like you, Rick. Paul is a bit on the stuffy side, don't you think?"

"Could be," I admitted. " I don't know him well enough to pass complete judgment. He helped me out of a jam though."

"Which lends you the idea that you owe him something and you would never, never think of double-crossing him. Kiss me, Rick."

I had a conscience. After all, Doc had helped me and he was my friend. What kind of a heel would I be—kissing his girl. So I kissed her and the lipstick tasted good. I hadn't been kissed like that since before I went to prison some ten thousand years ago.

She sighed and snuggled closer to me with her head on my shoulder. "That was nice. We'll do it again, later. What did Greg tell you?"

Romance collapsed. This little tart was trying to make me so I'd talk. I wondered how far she'd go and decided to find out—in a reasonable sort of way.

"He described the attempts on his life. He told me about the phone call from Jean Randolph. That's all."

She pouted at me, pursing her lips as if she wanted to be kissed again. I wasn't playing it her way any more. "Rick, you can trust me. I'm Greg's favorite cousin."

I hardly heard her. There was a big mirror directly opposite us. I could see us and—in the reflected window above the divan—a skinny face peering in, a head cocked to listen at the slightly raised window.

I spoke in a whisper. "We've got an audience. Someone who may tell us a

lot of answers. In a moment or two ask me to get you a drink. Tell me the stuff is in the kitchen so I'll have an excuse to leave the room and be gone a few minutes."

Her hand tightened on my arm so hard that it hurt. "Rick—what if he—if he . . . ?"

"This guy is harmless because I've got his gun," I said. "He had a mighty good reason for coming here. We both want to know what it was. Go ahead—the drinks."

She asked for them in a perfectly normal voice. I said: "Sure, honey. Where are the ingredients?"

She told me they were in the kitchen and to make hers a side car, which would reasonably take a little while to build. I got up and winked at her. Then I strolled out of the room, across the wide hallway and through the dining room. I entered the kitchen, got down a few bottles off a liquor shelf and then ducked for the back door. I was out of it fast and I had Skinny's snub-nosed rod in my fist. I played with poison carrying that heater round, but right now I was glad I'd succumbed to the temptation.

I rounded the corner of the house, but Skinny had disappeared. Cursing a bit, I started hunting for him. It took me five minutes to locate the man. And when I did, it was the hard way. I fell over him, but he didn't object. Not Skinny, because somebody had busted his skull wide open. There was a sharp-edged shovel beside him with blood on its blade.

I spent ten minutes reconnoitering without any luck at all. I saw Donna standing at the back door. She was getting worried. I went back to where Skinny lay, turned him over and frisked all his pockets. There wasn't a thing in them.

I led Donna back into the living room. "He's dead—the man who was peeking in your window. Somebody crowned him with a shovel. That's bad because it means the cops and the cops mean oblivion for me. I won't be able to work around here—or see you again. I don't mind the lack of work, but you. . ."

She moistened her lips. "I'm scared, Rick. I'm scared stiff."

"Look," I said, "give me half an hour and then call the cops. Don't mention my name or give a hint anyone was here except you, Uncle Thad and Doc. The local precincts won't be looking for me, but the Manhattan police are alerted."

"Yes," she promised. "Yes, of course."

Then I heard the sirens. I ran to the window. You could see down the road from it and the car with the screaming siren had green lights. They weren't going to any fire. I twisted around at the sound of a loud bang. Uncle Thad was in the doorway, smirking at me and pounding his cane in vast delight.

"I called the police. You intimated you were some sort of an officer so I thought I'd check. I found out you are a convict and a murderer. Now let's see you get away from them."

There wasn't time to tell the old fool what I thought about him. I made the front door in half a dozen jumps, passed through it and vaulted the railing. When the police car pulled up, I was streaking across the rear of the estate. This was suddenly a very unhealthy spot.

CHAPTER FOUR

Red-Headed And Tough

BUT I'd counted only upon Uncle Thad contacting the local precinct. Instead, it seemed, he must have reached Westover because there were more radio cars swarming over the whole area. I couldn't leave the estate without running into one.

I veered north and put on some extra bursts of speed. The cars were moving slowly and throwing spotlight beams around. Twice I had to fall flat on my face to avoid being picked up in one of the rays. Suddenly I found myself close to the home of the Hatfields and I could hear half a dozen men searching the darkness for me. They were on foot and I'd never get past them.

I ran around to the front of the Hatfield house and rang the bell. It seemed like nine years while I stood there waiting for someone to let me in. Ronald,

looking more funereal than ever in a dark purple dressing gown, stood blinking at me in a mixture of surprise and alarm.

"Oh," he said, "it's the detective who is trying to help Greg Alden."

"I'm not a detective," I said, "but it happens the woods are full of them right now. They're looking for me and pretty soon they'll stumble across the body of a murdered man and probably blame me for his death."

"Murdered man?" Ronald gasped. "Why—why it's incredible."

"But true," I said. "The police don't like me very much. I want to help Greg. I can't, if I'm behind bars. So I'm asking—no begging—that you and your sister let me stay here until this blows over. Will you do it—for Greg Alden? I can't ask for my own sake because you don't even know me."

"Come inside." Ronald dropped his voice to a whisper like a conspirator. Harriette came down the steps then, gave me a blank look and asked questions of Ronald with her eyes. He gave her a clumsy explanation of what it was all about. I could see she was far from convinced so I went to work on her. Finally they agreed to let me stay there, but if any policeman came and asked questions, they would tell the truth. "We would not lie to save ourselves," Harriett told me flatly. "We shall not lie to save you. Though we both sympathize with Greg and we hope you will be able to help him."

I peeked through the drawn curtain of a window. There were flashlights concentrated in one spot just behind the Alden home. They'd found Skinny. I sat down, facing the brother and sister who perched primly side by side on a divan. I reached for a cigarette and thought better of it. There wasn't an ash tray in sight and the big house carried no whisper of stale tobacco smoke.

I said: "While we are waiting, I'd like to take the opportunity of asking two disinterested neighbors what they think about Greg's mental condition. Naturally I could not ask you this in front of his cousin or his uncle."

Harriette snorted through her thin nose. "Neither would have minded, Mr. Trent. Not in the least. Donna is a giddy, foolish child without a thought for tomorrow. Thad spends all his time trying to formulate some plan whereby he can get his hands on Greg's money. Thad is a miser."

"That's interesting," I said. "Did Greg act in an abnormal manner before either of you?"

Ronald shifted uneasily and glanced at his sister. She gave a curt nod of her head, like a queen bestowing permission for a subject to speak. Ronald cleared his throat.

"Frankly, we have never liked Greg too well. He has been a noisy neighbor and one who is utterly complacent about our rights. Yet, he did suffer with our aunt and uncle when they were killed in that train wreck. He did all possible for them. In complete fairness, my answer is no—I did not notice that Greg acted in an unreasonable manner."

"He's no more insane than any of the modern boys his age," Harriette went on. "We have cousins who have children. Related to us on Mrs. Faulkner's side. They're absolutely wild and are about Greg's age, without the benefit of his money or his education. So we cannot judge Greg too harshly. We try to be tolerant and modern."

"Thank you," I said. "This helps me want to aid Greg. Both Thad and Donna are sure he is mad. So is Dr. Hale. But then," I added smugly, "Dr. Hale would find it very profitable if Greg were out of the way and Donna came into his estate."

"We have considered that," Ronald told me. "It's quite possible and logical as well. How long will you stay here, Mr. Trent?"

I looked out of the window again. There were more flashlights than ever concentrated around the spot where Skinny lay dead with his head cleaved open. I figured if Westover was there, he'd assume I'd made my getaway. Pretty soon they'd start checking neighbors and the Hatfields meant exactly what they said. Neither would lie to save me.

"I think it's quite safe to go now," I said. "I'm very grateful."

They didn't burst into tears over my predicament. Ronald showed me to the door, but he did take a look outside before signalling me the coast was clear. I hoofed it to a bus stop nearly a mile from there. In short order I was aboard a subway express from which I transferred to a downtown local at Times Square.

MY NEXT move was obvious and necessary. There was a man named Red Sawyer who'd knock the block off anybody who hung around Jean Randolph because she was his girl. But Jean had been preparing to run for it on the strength of the dough she'd hoped to get from Greg. And she wasn't traveling with Red Sawyer either. So, I reasoned, she was afraid of Red because he must have tipped her about the information Greg would have paid for. This put Red squarely in the running.

I returned to the vicinity of Jean's neighborhood and prowled around. It was late now. Most of the places were closed or in the process of shutting their doors, but those were not the spots I wanted anyway. If I had Red Sawyer tagged right, he'd be the type to frequent the hotter spots.

I kept my eyes peeled for cops. They'd be doubly alerted now. I was in a bad mess, but there was one consolation. I was going to be picked up anyway so all rules were off. I'd do as I pleased and go where I pleased. With this determination, I entered a place called, in neon lights, a cocktail lounge. If it was any different from the old-fashioned saloon, I couldn't see it.

I looked over the row of men at the bar. I knew one, a surly safe cracker who'd served his latest stretch along with me. He recognized me too and must have figured I was in the dough for I saw him crack a smile and I'd never seen that before.

"If it ain't Ricky Trent." He shook my hand. "When they let you out, Rick?"

I told him and bought him a drink. I said: "They tell me Red Sawyer hangs around here now and then. When's the best time to see him?"

"Red drifts in and out. He don't make any special place his hangout, Ricky. That was good rye. I have to buy rot gut myself. Raises hell with my nerves, that stuff does. I'm scared I'll fumble my next job."

"You're drinking bond tonight," I said. He was going to be worth it. He knew Red and under the priming of half a dozen shots, he'd talk to his old stir-wise pal. He talked, but he didn't know very much.

Red Sawyer, it appeared, was a rough customer without many friends. He was apt to start a fight at the slightest provocation and usually won them. He hated cops, kids, animals, women, men and himself. One of those birds who got out of the wrong side of the bed when he was six months old and never went back to bed again.

The only significant thing I learned was that Red had made the rounds a couple of days before and paid up all his debts. And been paying cash ever since. He seemed to be well-heeled which was unusual for Red Sawyer. I also learned his profession consisted of waiting in an alley for some lush to come by, whack him over the head and roll the guy. Once in awhile he made a sortee with some gang working on a big job where Red's strength was required. Otherwise he lived from day to day; from drunken victim to drunken victim.

But where he lived was a major mystery. Nobody knew. I suspected he holed up in any place he could find and had made Jean Randolph's his headquarters for a time.

From experience I knew how useless it was to follow so dim a trail. I decided to go back to my hotel and see if there was any chance of getting a little sleep. If Westover had been there, he wouldn't return until tomorrow. And the night desk clerk was a pal of mine. He'd fix me up with another room under some phony name. What I really worried about was one thousand nine hundred

and fifty dollars secreted in a cubby hole behind the floor molding. It didn't belong to me.

I took a good look around the neighborhood to see if there was a police stakeout. Certain there was not, I glanced up at my room which fronted the street. The windows were dark. I walked into the hotel lobby.

A sibilant hiss stopped me on my way to the elevator. The desk clerk was frantically signalling me. I went over and he yanked me behind the desk and pushed me down out of sight.

"Rick, your room is full of law. I thought you ought to know."

I sat down on the floor. It was more comfortable than squatting and I got two tens out of my pocket. I handed these to the clerk. "Thanks, Marty. I'm in a mess right now. How long they been up there? And is one of 'em Westover?"

"Uh-huh. He came in like a roaring tornado, didn't believe me when I said you were out and he went upstairs. Twenty minutes ago he phoned down. Said if you came in and was tipped, I'd find myself behind the biggest eight ball in the world. I hate that guy, Rick."

"We'll concentrate our hatred some day," I said, "and shrivel him with it. Look, Marty, get Westover on the phone and tell him I just called in to say I was going away for a couple of days and to hold my room and mail."

Marty went over to the switchboard and made the call. I snuggled right beneath the desk this time. In a few moments Westover and a burly dick came down. Marty repeated the gist of the fake telephone call.

"I expected he'd run for it," Westover grunted. "Now listen, he'll call again. When he does, stall him and use another line to contact Headquarters. Meanwhile we'll trace the call. Do that, my friend, and I'll fix any parking ticket you ever get."

"I ain't got a car," Marty said sweetly.

"Well then—if you beat up your wife . . . "

"I ain't married," Marty purred.

"Oh hell," Westover shouted in exasperation, "if you kill somebody then."

"Gee—thanks," Marty said in wide-eyed innocence. Westover stormed out of the lobby and I came up for air. I thanked Marty again, took the self-service elevator to my floor and thrust a key into the door. It didn't turn. The door was unlocked. I figured Westover had left it that way and I just barged in.

An arm came out of the darkness, wound around my neck and dragged me inside. Before I could regain my wits, a gun butt crashed down against the back of my neck and I lost all interest.

THE ROOM was still dark when I opened my eyes. Some light came through the window though. An advertising sign in a Paris green shade lit up the room intermittently like some green hell. There were two men facing me. Outlined against the window, I could see that one of the pair was a huge bruiser. His hat was thrust to the back of his head and he had red hair. Red Sawyer! This wasn't going to be very nice.

"O.K.," I bluffed. "Take me in, but you don't have to be so damn rough about it."

Red said: "He thinks we're cops. Imagine that—the crum thinks we're cops."

"Well, aren't you?" I demanded.

"He's a dope," Red went on. "Yeah, a muscle man without any brains. Listen, Trent, the cops left. We almost walked in on them, but we heard them talking and hid out until they left and you came."

"But if you aren't cops, who are you?" I demanded.

Red Sawyer came toward me and stuck an ugly face within an inch of mine. Things were still a bit hazy and the flashing green light didn't help any, but to me Red Sawyer looked like Satan in slightly human form. Red's kisser had been pushed in so often it resembled a caricature more than a man's features. He had a breath redolent of cheap gin and onions. There was some kind of loud smelling stickum on his hair and I had momentary glimpses of stark cruelty showing in his pale gray eyes.

"You were asking around for me, pal. So I figured I'd come see you. Now, suppose we just tell each other why you wanted to see me and why I wanted to see you."

"Red Sawyer," I pretended great surprise. "You bet I want to see you. Jean mentioned your name . . ."

"You never talked to her, wise guy. She's dead."

"She wasn't dead when I got there, Red. She told me about a little deal . . ."

"She didn't talk. She was deader than you're going to be in a couple of minutes. When I stick 'em, they don't live to talk."

Well, I knew he'd killed her anyway. That was progress, though very liable to be the last I'd make on this or any other case.

Red stepped back and hauled off a blow just short of being a haymaker. It knocked me right off the chair and when I started to get up, his pal kicked my feet out from under me.

Red spoke in a hoarse whisper: "Pal, what do you know? What have you found out?"

I shook my head stubbornly and got pasted again. I knew I couldn't take very much more of this. Besides, Red Sawyer had already made up his feeble mind to kill me. I was dangerous to him—and to somebody else who must have sicked him on me. The moment I began asking around for Red, that person knew I was getting close and dangerous.

The little gun in my pocket was still there so far as I knew. If I could get that out . . . I went limp, with one arm curled under me. I moved it very slowly and then rolled over while I sent the fingers clawing into my pocket. The gun wasn't there. Red laughed and batted me some more.

"Put him in the chair and hold him there," Red ordered his companion. "He'll either talk or get his brains knocked silly."

I was under the same impression a couple of minutes later. Red made himself comfortable in another chair opposite mine and he kept swinging one open-handed blow after another until my cheeks felt like raw beef and I tasted blood in both corners of my mouth. I faked passing out and that did me about as much good as trying to get up. Red just kept hitting me.

It couldn't go on. I babbled something and Red checked another blow. With a man like Red there is no appeal to any part of his nature save one. That of avariciousness. I had to get him off my neck for a second or two. On my feet, I might make enough racket to arouse somebody. I had a neighbor who'd called down half a dozen times because I played the radio after midnight. Now, when a complaint like that would have done me some good, the guy was probably pounding the pillow at a great rate.

I said: "Red, I don't know a thing. Jean was dead when I reached her. The boy friend blew out on me and he's dead too."

"What are you giving me?" Red's hand went back. "Do you mean somebody knocked off Stoll?"

"If Stoll is the skinny guy Jean intended to run away with—yes. He's dead on the Alden estate with his head cleaved open by a shovel."

Red began grinning. "Well, what do you know? Boy, ain't that something? But that ain't what I want from you, Trent. I want everything you know about young Alden."

I was getting places. To offer Red a bribe right out of a clear sky would be disasterous because he'd smell a rat right away. I said, "Alden is crazy. But he wanted me to pussyfoot around and gave me two grand in cash . . ."

Red's eyes lighted up. "Where's the dough?"

"Cached, right in this room. Red—give me a break and it's yours."

Red reached into a hip pocket and brought out a pint of gin. He uncorcked it and handed me the bottle. "Pal—have one on the house. You need it. Then get me the two grand and we'll call the whole things quits."

Sure he would—when he had the

money and I was getting rigor mortis. Red never called it quits. I took a long pull at the bottle and nearly gagged. I'm not fussy what I drink, but that didn't happen to be gin. It was smoke, manufactured in some Bowery tenement house out of assorted garbage. I wiped my lips with the back of my hand and found them to be swollen. Somehow that surprised me a little.

I got up, with no interference from Red or his silent, trained gorilla. I took a step and my knees caved in. I had to grab at the chair. I tried it again and fell on my face. Would that sensitive bird in the next room never wake up?

"You need air, pal," Red said. "Go on over to the window and open her a little. If you want to die fast, try singing out for help."

I knew better than to attempt that. A little strength was flowing back into my muscles, but not enough to take this pair on. I knelt by the window and raised it a couple of inches. I could see down on the street below and there was a man standing in a shadowed doorway directly opposite the hotel. I reasoned that it must be one of Westover's cops.

I stood erect. "O.K., Red, I feel a lot better. Look, there's no reason why you and I can't get together on this little deal. There's a lot of dough in it, handled right, and I know all the angles. I wasn't a private eye for nothing and I learned a lot in stir too."

"Sure." Red agreed at once, lying his head off. "We'll chin about it after I see the color of your dough. And you better have it, pal. You won't like what happens if this is a phony."

I went over to the wall near the spot where my secret hiding place was located. I pretended to feel along the baseboard and then I looked up. "Red, snap on the light, will you? I've got to locate a crack in this molding."

Red obligingly turned on the lights. I stalled as long as I dared, counting the seconds under my breath. Red reminded me to get busy by a kick in the slats. I removed the section of molding, shoved my hand behind it and fumbled aimlessly. Four minutes had gone by. How long would it take Westover's man to spot the lights and come up to make the pinch?

About the time I decided it was impossible to stall any longer, somebody banged on the door. A voice of authority—the sweetest voice I'd ever heard in my life—demanded that I come out with my hands in the air.

Red pulled a gun, signaled his partner and they hurried to the door. The cop was beginning to kick at it now. In a moment he'd put a shoulder against the panels. Red leveled his gun, but he didn't shoot. What he wanted was a clean getaway. Wounding the cop would only bring a horde of others. Maybe the whole place was surrounded for all Red knew.

He yanked the door open. Westover's man almost fell in. His head ducked forward as he tripped and Red brought down the muzzle of his gun. I did a sprint for the bathroom and slammed the door. Red cursed me, but not for long. He and his pal got out of there.

So did I, after closing up the molding and making sure the cop was in no danger of dying. The corridor was full of people in various stages of undress now. My sensitive neighbor saw me and set up a yowl, pointing his finger at me. I wondered if he thought I'd had some crime radio program on.

Before more cops arrived, I was half a dozen blocks away and traveling fast.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Fourth Attempt

IT WASN'T a bad bedroom I selected for the rest of that night, though on awakening in the morning, I had trouble orienting myself. First of all, my quarters were a bit cramped and the shellacing I'd taken from Red Sawyer didn't help my stiffness any. Furthermore the floor of the car was hard and the blanket kept sliding off me.

I'd picked Doc Hale's coupe which I found parked on the street outside his apartment house. Like all doctors, he wasn't bothered by cops and tags. The

M.D. marker plate took care of that.

At nine he came out and opened the car door. He gave a little yelp when he saw me curled up on the floor. But he was quick on the take. Doc slammed the car door, ran around to the other side and got in. After he drove off a block or two, I unlimbered myself to the accompaniment of assorted grunts and groans and sat up.

"Guess I'll take a shower," I grinned at him.

"What on earth happened to you?" he asked. "Rick, your face . . ."

"I stuck it in front of the wrong fist. A character who murdered that girl with whom Greg wanted to make contact. He's in it over his filthy neck, that guy. Thanks for the use of your car as a bed."

"All right. You should have come up to my apartment. I have a spare room."

"Uh-uh, Doc. Westover must have even the boy scouts hunting me by now. Look, I need a favor. You can see Greg, can't you?"

"I—think so. What must I do?"

"Here's the way I look at it. Greg himself gave me the idea. He told me about the first three attempts on his life. They all fizzled, but—I think they were meant to fizzle. You can't drop an urn on a guy's head when he is moving around. But you can shoot a man easily enough if he is a good target and Greg was. So we have reverse situations. The first was a poor attempt at murder, the second a deliberately unsuccessful one. The third try was as phony as a confidence man's build-up. A frame—to indicate Greg dived through a window. So that wasn't meant to be murder either."

"I'm following you, but I don't understand what you're driving at," Doc said. He turned the next corner, wisely keeping to the residential districts where there were no cops.

"Greg must have subconsciously thought as I do. That the first three attempts were not against his life. In describing the fourth one he said that was his dying day. He saw the car bearing down on him. Deliberately crossing the highway to chase him, and when you try to run a man down with a fast moving car, you aren't fooling. You don't expect such an attempt to fizzle out."

"The first three attacks were false leads. The fourth very real. I've got that. What the hell does it mean, Rick?"

"They played it wrong at first. They figured by framing these attempts on Greg's life—and then removing the evidence—Greg would be declared insane. It didn't work so the fourth attempt was meant to kill him. However, the fourth attempt proved to be Greg's downfall. So now, assuming that last try was real and not a set-up like the others, we may find some clue. I want you to get Greg to describe to you the exact location of the spot where he was run down."

"I can do that," Doc said agreeably. "Who is behind it, Rick?"

"I don't know. You, maybe. Last night a man was murdered on Greg's estate. Donna didn't do it. She was with me all the time. Uncle Thad was upstairs telephoning the cops about me. Though he might have had time to slip down and do the job."

"He could use a back stairway, you know," Doc told me. "And I appreciate the fact that I have no alibi. I didn't kill that man, Rick."

I lit a cigarette. It tasted awful and I spiraled it out of the car window after two drags. "We must consider motives, Doc. Uncle Thad gets control of the estate if Greg is out of the way; inherits if Greg dies. So does Donna. But Thad is an old man. I can't see anyone his age risking his neck to murder for gain. He won't live long enough to spend the money."

"You don't know Uncle Thad," Doc chuckled. "He's noted for the fact that he siphons gasoline out of Donna's car so he won't have to buy any himself."

"Donna gets half if Greg dies; all of it when Thad goes. Thad can't live too much longer so we might as well say that Donna is the principal inheritor. Now you are going to marry Donna."

"And Greg's fortune is more than three million," Doc nodded. "Yes, I'd say I was a definite suspect."

"You're way out in front, Doc. Now,

what shall I do with myself while you are seeing Greg? Any hiding place I choose will have to be a dark one."

Doc took a key case out of his pocket. "I'll drive you to the service entrance of my apartment house. Use the freight elevator. Apartment 10C. Make yourself at home. You'll find a shower, some shaving equipment and food in the refrigerator. The cleaning woman doesn't show up until afternoon so you'll be safe."

"Thanks, Doc." I accepted the key case. "For a first rate suspect, you're a pretty good guy. I'd hate to tag you with this rap."

"But you will, if I fit the picture," Doc laughed. "O.K., Rick. You're an honest man if a stubborn one."

DOC'S apartment consisted of three typically bachelor rooms. There were medical books thrown around, trade magazines littered every table. But it was fitted out expensively. I luxuriated in a hot shower to get the kinks out. Then I attacked the stubble on my chin. That done, I helped myself to some clean underwear and a fresh shirt from Doc's wardrobe. They fit me very well.

I made coffee in a drip pot, found it too strong, but I drank it anyway. I ate four pieces of toast smeared with marmalade and felt much better. I had time to kill so I hunted up newspapers to see what they had to say about Greg and maybe me. None of the papers were recent. Like me, Doc had been too busy to read news which he knew first hand anyway.

I did find some old copies though, purposely preserved. They carried the story of the train wreck in which Greg had been hurt. Doc wasn't lying about the concussion either. Greg had a narrow squeak. There were pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Faulkner, nice looking, elderly people. The story said that Mr. Faulkner's closest relatives were the Hatfields. Mrs. Faulkner had a slew of relations, all living in Rockwell, a suburb of Boston.

I was trying to pull the threads of the affair together when Doc returned. He was plenty excited. "Your friend Westover saw me at Headquarters and put me through a mild grilling. He's right on your neck, Rick, and—while this is bad for me—I'd better tell you."

"Sure," I said. "Let's have all the sordid details. Who am I supposed to have murdered besides Jean Randolph and the skinny guy who had his head parted in the middle last night?"

"It isn't that. Westover knows for a fact that you came to my office as a private detective retained by Greg. Somebody told him and I'm the most logical person to have done so."

"Greg didn't?" I asked. "I've been afraid the kid might crack."

"He swears he hasn't said a word. Whenever he has been questioned, he merely puts a blank look on his face and lets them think he's crazy. About his being run down by that car. He recalls passing a roadside advertising sign calling attention to Miller's Milk. That was about a mile and a half north of his estate and on the same highway. He says he saw the car tires making those marks before he was hit, but when he woke up there weren't any marks."

"They can't be eliminated that easy," I said. "Doc, how badly was he hurt? Do you know?"

"I was home when he arrived. His face was a mask of blood from a long but superficial cut on his scalp. It bled very badly. He must have looked dead."

"O.K. I'm going to the scene of the accident somehow . . ."

"Take my car." Doc offered. "I can use cabs and I had it gassed up for you."

I gave him my hand. "Doc, as a suspect you're tops, but as a pal you're even better. What are you trying to do—make it tough for me if I have to expose you?"

"Perhaps." he smiled wanly. "Good luck, Rick."

I made it to Greg's without being spotted. I passed the estate with only a glance in its direction. I went by the Hatfield place too. Harriette was sitting on the front porch sunning herself and looking like bad news personified. I wondered if she ever smiled or wore anything but that long black dress.

I came to Miller's Milk sign next. I parked the car and got out to study the scene. A lot of time had passed since the accident but some of those tire marks, especially on soft shoulders, last for days. There'd been no rain so the chances of such marks still being in existence were favorable.

I didn't find a trace. Greg, according to his story, had awakened almost directly beneath the advertising sign so I waded through the knee deep grass and found a faint depression indicating someone had been sprawled out there. He'd really been at the spot then.

Back in the car I gave thought to the idea that I'd been on a wrong trail all along. That Greg really was crazy. It didn't make sense. Not after the murder of Jean and Skinny. There was something almost beneath my hand, but I couldn't recognize it.

I shifted, pulled onto the highway and went along searching for a good place to turn around. It was a narrow road, little used, but I was taking no chances on being smacked by another driver. Then I saw a second one of those Miller's Milk signs. It was half a mile beyond the first one. I had an idea, stopped and got out.

Here I found some deep tire marks made by dragging rubber. There were even traces left on the pavement where the tires had burned against the macadam. I whistled in high satisfaction because now I knew Greg wasn't dreaming or crazy.

I checked around the area and discovered a few blades of the high grass had dark smears which looked to me like blood. Greg had made a mistake in describing the scenery around the first sign. Here was good evidence that at least one of the attempts on his life was the real thing. He must have been carried to the first sign and thought that was where he had been hit.

I drove away from there, heading for the next town. I felt reasonably safe. While Westover undoubtedly had circulated my description all over the county, cops in outlying areas don't look a man over too well. I went into a bar and grill, took a booth and ordered beer and steak. The steak was tender enough, but my jaws were so sore that I could hardly eat it.

I saw a phone booth and did a little thinking before I got some change from the bartender and made a long distance call. I felt smugly satisfied when I returned to my booth.

I wasn't playing any hunch. There were facts to back up my theory, but the facts needed augmenting and improving. Any evidence I had was weak. I began to apply my alleged brain to the matter.

CHAPTER SIX

One Question

I DROPPED into a movie and spent the afternoon there. At six I was back at the bar and grill, with more beer and another steak. I still got a kick out of it. I'd been in places like this so seldom for the last three or four years.

Feeling chipper again, I telephoned Donna at Greg's house. I said: "This is me and I want a favor. In the next twenty minutes I'll drive Doc's car into the garage behind your house. Will you open the doors so I can go right in?"

"Of course, Rick. Listen, there are some old servants' quarters above the garage. I'll meet you there. I'm dying to know all that has happened."

I grinned, hung up and started the drive back. I passed the Hatfield place again. This time both Harriette and her brother were on the front porch. I honked the horn, stuck my head out and waved to them. They waved back, looking slightly surprised.

I turned into the gate of Greg's estate, scooted the coupe down the drive and aimed it at the double doors of the garage which were wide open. It was dusk now, just right for my purposes. I checked around the garage and found a pair of nipping pliers. Armed with these, I slipped over to the house. There I cut the phone wires.

Satisfied with this bit of sabotage, I headed back. Suddenly the flood lights covering the whole garage area, flashed

on. The back door opened and good old Uncle Thad hobbled down the steps. He raised his cane and came at me as if he meant it.

I ducked under the cane and pushed him up against the wall. Then I took his cane away from him. I said: "Shame on you, attacking an unarmed man this way. That shillalah is lethal."

"It would have been if I had a chance to crack it against your skull." He squirmed, trying to get out of my grip. "You're nothing but a murderer."

"So a judge once told me," I mused. "But I gave up murdering people some time ago. What will you do if I let you go?"

"Call the police. Carry out a promise I made to them in the event you showed up here again."

I released him. "Good—go ahead. I'll wait around the garage. Your cane, sir."

He took it and I got set to dodge another swing, but he had tamed down a bit. I watched him hobble back to the house. Then I entered the garage again, climbed the steep, open staircase to the servants' quarters on the second floor and pushed open the door.

It was very dark there. I heard someone breathing and I wished I'd retained Uncle Thad's cane. Someone tittered and it turned into a giggle.

"Shut the door, Rick, and come sit beside me." It was Donna. I might have known.

I found the lights and turned them on. She pouted at me, preferring the darkness, but I wasn't buying any of that. I pulled a chair over and parked on it.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Like you were an atomic bomb, beautiful. I still remember last night's kiss."

"That was only a mild sample." She plagued me.

I shook my head. "Nix, baby. You're Doc's girl and he's helped me out. I'm not double-crossing him."

"I'm not married to Doc," she argued. "Rick—I am going to marry him. Soon too. But I've been tied down all my life. Uncle Thad has been my guardian and he never let me stay out later than eight o'clock. No boy friends, no cocktails—nothing. I want one last fling."

"Well, fling yourself at somebody else," I told her flatly and with considerable reluctance. "Thad saw me just now."

"I thought he might have," she giggled. "He heard me talking to you on the phone and he was watching when I opened the garage doors. I'll bet you're a good detective because if anybody shoots you through the heart, the bullet will just glance off."

I leaned forward and patted her cheek. "Just between you and me, baby, I got an idea that Doc isn't quite as stuffy as you think. Now beat it, will you?"

She arose slowly. She was wearing blue shorts striped with yellow and a yellow blouse. She was really stacked up and knew it.

"Rick, sometimes I think Greg is out of his mind. I think all of us are crazy. Greg, Uncle Thad and me. Are you staying here overnight?"

"Maybe. Will Doc come out tonight?"

"He said he would. Shall I tell him you're here?"

"It doesn't make any difference, Donna. See you later."

I snapped off the light after she had departed, went down to the garage and found a flash. With this I inspected the building thoroughly. Then I closed the garage doors almost shut, carried a box over behind and beneath the open stairs and sat down . I wondered how long I'd have to wait.

By nine-thirty I was itching for a smoke and I didn't dare have one. By ten I was getting mildly frantic. With this scheme I'd tucked plenty of eggs in one little basket and it looked now as if they weren't going to hatch.

THEN I heard the grating of a shoe against gravel. I crept back into the darkness and waited. The garage door creaked slightly, opened further and someone came in sideways. He closed the door again, took three steps along the stairway and I moved.

I reached through the open stairs and grabbed a substantial ankle. I gave a terrific yank. The man, totally unpre-

pared for anything like this, let out a strangled yell and lost his balance. He toppled backwards. I made a running dive and landed on him. My right arm was thrust out, fingers doubled into a tight fist. In the darkness I was still sure I could connect with his jaw. I missed by a mile and landed on top of him, as stunned as he was.

He wrapped two powerful arms around me. I raised one knee and drove it deep into his stomach. We stayed that way for a minute. My knee went deeper and deeper. His embrace choked the wind out of me more and more. I finally got my other knee into position, gave an upward tug and pulled myself free.

I jumped to my feet and he was up almost as quickly. He growled something and came at me swinging. I could see his form faintly outlined because I was facing the garage doors and a little light filtered through the small, high windows.

I moved under his haymaker, came up very close to him and brought my fist along with me. A neat punch that must have jarred him some because he stopped his soft cursing and leaped back. I followed it up fast. I planted one low against the throat, another to the stomach and when he doubled up, I let go with a honey. It connected with his nose, though I'd aimed at the chin. Shows how good I am with my dukes.

The punch rocketed through my hand, arm and down my whole right side to my toes. It hurt worse than an electric shock, but it was sweet pain because it couldn't possibly have hurt me a fraction of what it had done to Red Sawyer.

I snapped on my flash. He was ice cold with blood pouring out of his nose. I searched him and took back the gun I'd originally lifted off Skinny. It was fully loaded. Red had another and more formidable weapon. I stepped outside and tossed it as far behind the garage as possible. This done I returned and tied Red up neatly.

I stuffed his mouth full of the oiliest rags I could find, but then wondered if he'd smother. Maybe his nose was broken or so badly swollen he couldn't breathe. I thought back to the lacing he'd given me and his reasons for coming here. I didn't feel so bad then. I left him there, chewing the oily rags.

Finally I crept up to the house and made quick repairs of the phone wire. Now I was all set. I opened the back door of the house and strolled inside.

"Greetings," I said affably. I was feeling very affable.

Dor and Donna were on the divan. Harriette Hatfield was perched on the edge of a chair which could have swallowed her up. Brother Ronald stood beside the fireplace, one hand dramatically poised on the mantel like a poet deep in thought.

Uncle Thad was seated when I came in, but the jumped up suddenly and there was a gun in his hand. Not an old horse pistol or age-green revolver but a brand new and plenty neat .38 automatic. The safety was at the off position and his finger was curled around the trigger.

"Ah!" he said. "I was trying to persuade the others to go out and get you."

Ronald Hatfield turned to face me and brought his hand down from the mantel. "Mr. Trent, I'm very sorry, but Thad came to our home a short while ago and telephoned Lieutenant Westover. He claims the phone here was out of order."

"So Westover is coming too," I said. "Did you actually reach him in person, Thad?"

"I called his office. They will notify him. It doesn't make any difference because any policeman can arrest you or any morgue attendant can sweep up what's left if you try to get away."

"Why Thad," I said, "that's thoughtful of you. I'm going to call Lieutenant Westover."

"The phone isn't working and you won't move," Thad growled.

Doc took a hand then. "Uncle Thad—what's the difference if he calls? Let him."

I picked up the phone. Uncle Thad's automatic was drilling against the small of my back. A very uncomfortable sensation when I recalled the position of the safety. I reached Headquarters. It seemed Westover was on his way out, but

they'd try to stop him. Pretty soon I heard him growl something.

"Good evening, Lieutenant," I said sweetly. "This is your old friend Rick Trent. I'm at the Greg Alden estate."

"Now listen, Trent," he shouted so that I had to remove the ear piece a couple of inches away. "I'm coming with a gun in my fist. . ."

"I'd much rather you came with Greg on your arm," I told him. Then I got tough. Anyway I thought I sounded tough. "Westover, I want Greg brought out here. If you don't do so, when this is all over, you'll be busted lower than the newest rookie on the force. You know I don't make foolish statements. Bring Greg—or you won't have either me or the solution to this case."

HE DIDN'T make any promises, but he didn't argue either. I thought he'd bring Greg along. Nothing in the world could throw a scare into Westover more than a threat to bust him. I hung up, turned around very slowly and Uncle Thad backed up a couple of paces, the gun still level with a sensitive portion of my stomach.

"Sit down," Thad ordered. "And stay there. I'm sick and tired of catering to a killer."

I sat and twiddled my thumbs. It was a good drive out here, but I had an idea Westover would use the siren all the way. I heard it half an hour later. Then headlights swept the windows and tires squealed. Car doors slammed and I held my breath. Greg had to be along.

Westover came in first, important, glowering, and with handcuffs dangling from his fingers. Behind him came a detective cuffed to Greg Alden. Greg gave me a worried look and I grinned back at him. I wondered if the grin was any more reassuring than I felt right now. I decided it wasn't because the worried look stayed in Greg's eyes.

Westover said: "Well—the first thing to do is cuff this jailbird. . ."

I stuck out my hands. "Go ahead, Lieutenant. You've got me cold because from here on I intend to act like a private detective."

"Kind of you," Westover muttered. He was so unsure of himself it was funny.

"Rick—why?" Donna cried. "He hasn't anything on you. We won't testify against you. . ."

"I've got to, Donna," I said. "This time there's more than just me to think about. I know all the answers. To have found them I must have done the work of a private detective and that means the breaking of my parole. Maybe a three year stretch, but if I don't talk, it may mean that Greg goes into a lunatic asylum for the rest of his life."

Westover dangled the cuffs in front of me and then changed his mind. He said, "Go ahead and talk. I've got four men posted outside so if you are stalling to wait for a break, give up the idea, Trent. This is the finish and you know it."

"Sure," I agreed. "I've looked forward to this moment. The warden misses me. Now let me talk."

"Go ahead," Westover invited. "You always were good at it."

I gave him my Sunday leer, walked around behind a straight chair and put my hands on the back of it. I studied them all for a moment. Then I said: "Greg has been determined as a fit subject for an asylum. Doc, you were instrumental in having the commitment papers drawn up. I don't blame you or anyone else except Lieutenant Westover. He is the only person who completely flopped!"

"Why, you. . ." Westover lifted the handcuffs. I didn't even look at him.

"Greg had four narrow escapes from death. Three of these were absolute phonies. never intended to kill him. Just to break him down mentally. He'd been very ill, maybe they believed he'd go crazy some day. I don't know or care. In the first attempt an urn was dropped near him. When he hurried into the house to tell about it, somebody picked up the broken pieces. I imagine the fake urn was made of some plastic material which would make a good crash, but break clean and leave no bits of evidence.

"Then something—Greg thought it was a bullet—whizzed past his head and

hit a tree. He thought he heard a silenced rifle. But there was no rifle, or bullet mark on the tree. There never was a bullet. It was only intended that he think so. The third attempt—an attack in a dark alley by a man who used slivers of glass to stab him. was an obvious fake. Only a genuine dope would have fallen for it and I'm casting insinuations straight over to Lieutenant Westover."

"This is a lot of nonsense," Westover hollered. "A lot of guessing. Hell, man, you have no proof."

I looked around the room. Uncle Thad was gray-faced, looking forty years older if that was possible. He still held his gun. Harriette Hatfield was bland and resting easy. Ronald kept biting at his lip. Doc had put an arm around Donna and held her very tightly. She was white under the makeup.

I said: "Yes, I am guessing, but my guesses fit the facts as I see them. It had to be like that. A man with a rifle could have killed Greg. With a second bullet if he missed the first time. The attackers in the alley had Greg down, wounded and weak. Why didn't they polish him off? Because they had orders not to.

"Now we come to the fourth attempt which was real. Somebody tumbled to the fact that Greg might not be declared insane so—a real try was made to kill him. O.K.—let's check motives. Donna stands to inherit a considerable fortune. but she didn't do it. Thad also stands to profit and he's just cantankerous to cook up a scheme like this only—he's innocent. Doc, in marrying Donna, enters her position as heir, but Doc is an unlikely suspect. He fronted for me, helped me out and yet if he was guilty he would have realized I was dangerous."

I let that soak in as I slowly turned toward Greg. He stood there, transfixed with interest. I said: "Greg, I want you to answer me one question. First though, I'll say that I have eliminated any motive that has to do with profiting by your death or imprisonment in an asylum. This whole case has nothing to do with it."

That did the trick!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Me And My Nasty Tricks

RONALD HATFIELD gave a wild howl and leaped at Uncle Thad. He wound an arm around him and grabbed at the gun, missing it, but slapping the gun hand around. I had Skinny's snub-nosed gun almost in my hand.

"He's going to shoot Greg," Ronald screamed. "He's a murderer."

Ronald Hatfield kept tussling with Thad who was no match for him at all. I leveled my gun and when Ronald came around to face me. I shot him through the chest. I was glad the gun was small and didn't pack too much of a wallop. A heavier weapon would have sent a slug clean through Ronald and into Thad's hide.

Harriette let out an unearthly yell. She was trying to open her handbag. I gave a leap in her direction and slapped her back against the chair. Then I wrenched the bag from her grasp and dumped its contents on the floor. There was a pearl handled revolved lying among the other things she carried.

Ronald had staggered over to grab at a chair, but it wasn't doing him any good. He began sinking slowly toward the floor. but there was strength in his tongue. For a quiet little guy, as stiff as a deacon, he was tossing out some fancy language. Then it was all over. He pitched forward and lay there groaning weakly.

I walked up to Thad and gently took the gun out of his hand. I said: "Ronald was trying to make you pull the trigger and kill Greg."

"But why on earth. . .?" Greg shouted.

Westover suddenly recovered and added to the din. I waved my hands for silence. I looked at Harriette who seemed to have shrunk six inches. She was all huddled deep in the chair where I'd shoved her.

I said: "Greg, there was one question I wanted to ask. Ronald knew what it was. So did Harriette. When you answer it, you will cost the Hatfields a mint

of money. I began to get the idea this morning. I discarded any motive having to do with your estate and looked for another. It had to be a recent event that made you a target for murder. So—what happened to you recently? You were in a train wreck. Now—the question."

"It better be good," Westover commented savagely. "You just shot a man."

"Just doing your job again, Lieutenant," I said. "Greg—when you were trapped in that train wreck with Mr. and Mrs. Faulkner, they were alive for a short time. Am I correct?"

Greg had a haunted look in his eyes. "Yes. Yes, they lived for a little while."

"Who died first?" I asked.

"Why—why, I have to think. It was so ghastly. Yes—Mr. Faulkner was the first to die. Mrs. Faulkner lived about fifteen minutes longer. Rick—Harriette Hatfield asked me to tell her all the grisly details some time ago. She knew who died first."

"I thought so," I said. "It had to be that way. The fact that Mr. Faulkner died first had no especial meaning to anyone but the Hatfields. To them it meant a lot of money. Mr. Faulkner was their uncle by blood; Mrs. Faulkner was only related by marriage. Now when two people—man and wife—die simultaneously, the law considers that the man died last and his heirs therefore come into any estate. I suppose the law considers a man will last longer than a woman. At any rate, that's the law. If Mr. Faulkner died after his wife, or at the same moment, then the Hatfields inherited. If Faulkner died first and his wife lived, even for only a few moments, she automatically became his heir and upon her death the estate passed to her people.

"I contacted them and they didn't get a dime. Hatfield took every scrap of the estate, but—he knew that if a civil action arose from it, Greg's story would cause the estate to revert to Mrs. Faulkner's relatives and not the Hatfields. So—Greg either had to be put away in such a manner that he'd never even hear of the action, or declared insane so anything he testified to wouldn't be worth a nickel. Or—Greg had to die."

Westover was rubbing his chin and I noticed he'd put the cuffs away. I was enjoying his discomfiture.

I went on. "It worked beautifully thanks to the stupidity of the people who investigated Greg's assertions. Even Doc fell for it. But to handle these matters, the Hatfields required help and they got a man named Red Sawyer—who, in turn, told his girl friend about it. She had a fight with him, decided to double-cross him and sell her information to Greg. Sawyer found out she intended to blow town, figured the deal correctly and killed her.

"But she had also told her latest boy friend, the skinny lad whom Hatfield conked with a shovel edge. Who else could have killed him? Skinny came to see if he could do a little business, perhaps even visited the Hatfields and demanded some dough. Anyway he died. But I was becoming dangerous, especially when I began tracking down Red Sawyer, so he was told to kill me. He tried—very hard. Red is in the garage, all trussed up and ready for the spit. Ronald and Harriette saw me drive into the garage and called Red to come take care of me. Nobody in Greg's house did the phoning because I cut the wire."

WESTOVER marched across the room, grabbed Harriette and stood her up. He didn't have to ask any questions. She began to talk, begging that somebody get a doctor for her brother. She'd tell the whole story if a doctor was summoned. All the while forgetting that an M.D. was right in the room, but so darned surprised by what had happened that he hadn't made a move.

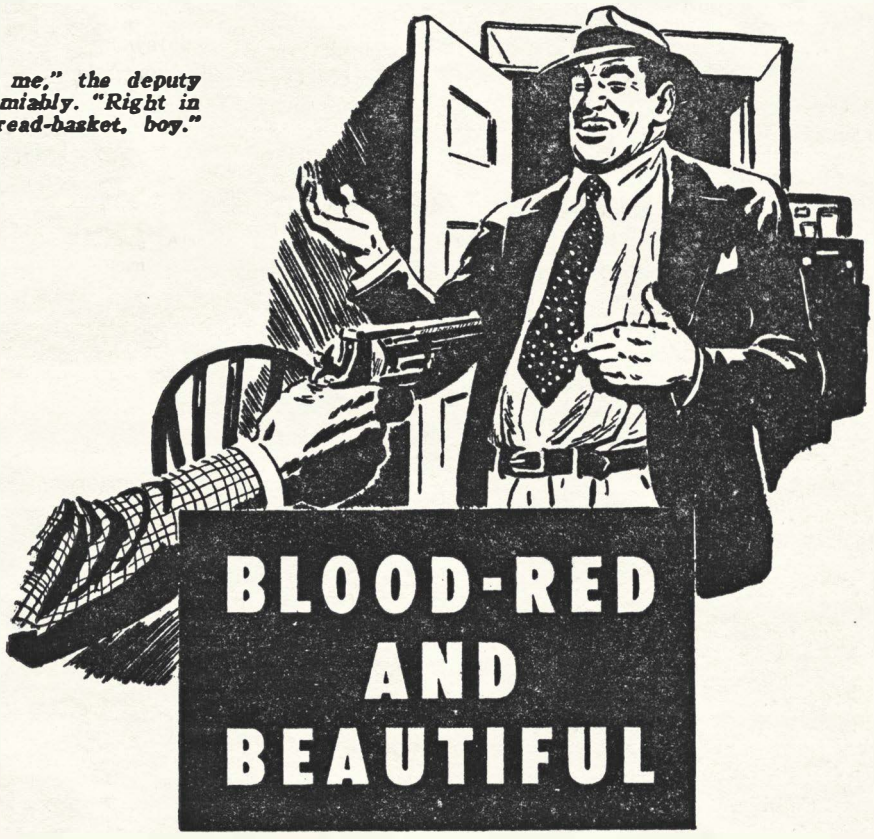
Westover sent Ronald away in an ambulance under guard. Harriette was turned over to a matron and Red Sawyer hauled out of the garage. Westover saw to it that only he and I were in his car on the way back to town.

Westover cleared his throat. "That was a pretty nice gesture, Rick. Very nice. You were willing to go back in stir so that Greg would go free."

"Yeah," I said. "Guys can be crazier

(Continued on page 129)

When Hell's Half Acre burned down, Nick the Gambler was cooked like a forty-minute steak — just a small sample of what surely awaited him in the hereafter.



"Plug me," the deputy said amiably. "Right in the bread-basket, boy."

BLOOD-RED AND BEAUTIFUL

By TOM MARVIN

IT ISN'T really a cave," Jeremy said. "It's a *shample*. Hoboes hide there, and . . ." He set his tin gun on the steps, his black-fringed eyes big with his secret. "*And Captain Francis Lolonois lives there!*"

"The word is shambles," I said. "And nobody lives there. Least of all a buccaneer dead two hundred years. If you don't quit dreaming up guff like that I'll stop telling you pirate stories."

The kid hunched closer to me. "He's got a fuzzy black beard, Mr. Herron. And a cutlass, and a fur coat clear down to his boots."

"In August? Come, now, you never really saw a man. You saw Mr. Caylor's calf roaming around there. Or Mr. Piasecki's goat."

"Well, I heard him," the kid insisted. "I saw his tracks, too. He leaves burnt cigarettes, and he digs for eight pieces with a stick."

"Pieces of eight," I corrected. "Kid,

pirates never strayed from the Spanish Main to Wisconsin. Now, go inside and admit to your mother where you've been. And promise never to go there again. And, Jeremy, don't mention pirates, eh? It would only fret her."

The kid scowled, but he stood up and went into the house. I moved over to the hammock, and the Cairn terrier pup leaped up on my chest. I almost liked the beggar. A lonesome man has weaknesses. You buy a dog for strictly business reasons, and presently you discover that sentiment has intruded on practicality. I would have to watch that.

Also, I would have to be more careful with my cigarette stubs. And replace my divots.

Alice Forbes, wearing a red plaid dress and a broad white ribbon across her jet hair, like a tennis player, came out and sat in the lawn chair. Opening her knitting bag, she said: "My son has just discovered that confession is good for a man's soul, Mr. Herron."

I swayed in the hammock, rubbing the pup's ears. "But if a man makes no errors, he has nothing to confess. And by the way, you needn't call me Mr. Herron. I have another name, you know."

"I thought perhaps you did," Alice Forbes said.

"I mean a first name. It's Rod."

Her knitting needles chattered. "Do you find your room here satisfactory? I've never had a paying lodger before. But since my husband died. . . . Well, you've been here two weeks, and I was wondering."

"You suit me fine, Alice," I said.

"Thank you, Mr. Herron. Shall I have dinner at seven? Or are you planning to go somewhere again today?"

The hammock rocked me gently. "They were just little business trips. To Keysport. And they're over, I think."

"At seven, then. I hope you like guinea hen, Mr. Herron." She shut her knitting bag and went into the house.

I leashed the Cairn and we moseyed down the plank road in the late afternoon sunshine. On the first jog in the S-curve I came face to face with Thad Piasecki, driving his milch goat up the road from the *shample*. "*Jak sie masz?*" I greeted him.

He was a thickset man of middle height and years, handsome despite a head too broad through the temples. He twirled his blackthorn stick, eyeing the Cairn sourly.

"Some day that pup is going to get wedged down there," Piasecki said. "And you'll never find him." He turned into the yard of his farmette, herding the goat with the blackthorn.

On the rise of pastureland behind the ruins, I could see old Dud Caylor, lanky and overalled, driving his calf back to the barn. Caylor kept the animal tethered to a washtub which he attempted to fill with enough field stones to allow the calf to graze without straying. He never hit the proper delicate balance, however, because the bleating thing did stray. And then Caylor would have to hike down and chase her all over Hell's Half Acre.

Exactly. Hell's Half Acre. Or what remained of it five years after the fire. Burdocks and mustard weed grew now in the once flossy swimming pool; spotted touch-me-nots ran riot on the lawns; feverfew sprouted where Nick Hell's sportive customers had parked their Cadillacs. Along the charred beams and fire-stained masonry of the casino itself, wild cucumbers and morning glories twined. And everywhere on the Half Acre, which actually was six acres, evening primroses made an unkempt mourning wreath for its former grandeur.

Lightning had started it, they said. Well, everybody said it, if you didn't count me. A storm-driven bolt in the dead of night that had caught Nick Hell alone in his sumptuous penthouse atop the casino, razing it and shriveling him in fire. In its day it had been a great spot to drop a thousand bucks, or pick up same, on a spin of a wheel. Nick Hell was as square as a judge, they said. Everybody said it, if you didn't count me.

"Scoot!" I said, unleashing the Cairn. With a flirt of his tail, the pooch was down a black beam and burrowing in

the soot-streaked concrete. Great burrowing dogs, Cairns.

I walked through the weeds, remembering Nick Hell. The pomaded black hair and eyes bright with drops; the white waistcoat he insisted was correct with dinner jacket, big stones in bosom and cuffs; the atrocious pronunciation. Wassasay-pal? Suede shoes, roulette chips in pockets, the blinding diamond stickpin for afternoon elegance.

IF NICK liked you, he would sit at your table and spin yarns of the Prohibition days; he'd show your date the miniature pearl-stocked gat which the Big Guy had given him (you were expected to know who the Big Guy was). He might even take you upstairs and display his vanity: the immense pearls and diamonds, the red and blue stones which some people wouldn't even recognize, all cold and forlorn on their black satins. Nick Hell didn't think any more of those stones than you thought of your head.

Some fancy newspaper stories had been written about Nick when he roasted to death. Especially about his will. A hundred grand to an orphanage for pickaninnies, but to his no-account jailbird brother—one bowling ball. Interesting inventories of Nick's estate in the newspaper clippings, too. But not complete enough. . . .

Down in the ruins of masonry, the Cairn snarled. I scrambled up the rubble and peered into the cluttered excavation. A man's voice complained: "This hound thinks he's a K-9 commando."

I whistled at the Cairn, and the man lowered his stick. He looked up at me and said: "Relax. I'm just a passing 'bo that couldn't resist this hole. I used to be one of Nick Hell's—well, bouncers. I heard the joint burned down while I was in the Army."

"Yeah," I said. "In 1942."

He stepped on his cigarette with a soiled combat boot. He had a new red sunburn. The knees of his jeans were damp with dirt in round patches. He extended a bottle. "No? Well, here's to pink eggs at Easter." He tucked the bottle in his hip pocket and prodded the rubble absently with his stick. It turned up a faded chip.

"Blue, red or white?" the 'bo said musingly. "We had a dealer, a guy from L. A., could look at a stack two feet high and tell you how many, within one." His probing stick turned up the heel of a woman's slipper. He had half a heat on, from the bottle and nostalgia. "Nick had a chorine one season used to break her straps on purpose. He fired her. Great character, Nick. Did you know him?"

"Knew him well," I said. "I even got to see his stones."

"Did you know his name really was Kell? Changed it to Hell. For religious reasons or something."

"Where did he pick up all those stones?"

The 'bo tossed his stick aside. "If you were crazy about stones and had the dough, would you care where you got them?"

"He willed them to the public museum in Keysport."

The 'bo brushed off his dirt-stained jeans. "Did you know he even had a bowling alley in his penthouse?"

"I bowled him a couple games on it," I said. "How long were you in the Army?"

He gazed around at the wreckage, shaking his head. "Nick had a painting of Gloucester Cathedral hanging right about there. Now look at this joint. It gives me the creeps." He climbed the embankment.

"So you were one of Nick's bouncers?" I said. "Easier to hide among ten million men than ten thousand trees."

The 'bo shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Don't suppose you were the only guy hiding out in the Army."

"Hold it," I said. "How long have you been hanging around here?"

He wrenched out of my clutch. "Don't pretend like a dick. If you're a dick I'm the Angel Gabriel without portfolio." He shuffled off unsteadily through the tangle of weeds.

When he turned the jog in the S-curve, I whistled at the Cairn and started up the rise of pastureland. Dud Caylor was

putting a heavy field stone into the calf's washtub and taking out a light one as I went past his door. He peered at me over his steel-rimmed spectacles, his false teeth clicking like a marimba, and cackled: "Got it this time, b'god!"

He went on with his balancing, and I climbed to the tip of the S and lay down in the grass along the plank road, waiting for the 'bo to slog over the hill toward Keysport. I waited five or six minutes, but he didn't show. I puzzled over that for another five minutes, and then I stood up and looked down the hill. Nobody was climbing the white ribbon of concrete. The 'bo had faded off somewhere between the Half Acre and the tip of the S.

I began to worry that he had returned to the ruins. I trotted back down the rise, past Dud Caylor's door. The old man was inside, and the washtub now was filled solidly with stones. Well, he'd hit the right combination at last. No calf was going anywhere with that load of stones haltered to its neck.

When I reached the Half Acre, Thad Piasecki was standing on the shoulder of the plank road. His oxford suit was freshly pressed and his boots and blackthorn polished, so I knew Alice Forbes was having guinea hen and Thad Piasecki for dinner.

"*Jak sie masz?*" I said.

Piasecki grunted. "Been calling on Dud Caylor?"

The Cairn had gone tunneling into the casino ruins, and I stood there listening carefully for him to make a fuss.

"Right about there," I said idly, harking for the Cairn, "Nick Hell had the handsomest painting of Gloucester Cathedral you ever saw."

"A beauty," Piasecki agreed.

"Did you know he had a bowling alley in his penthoues?"

"He had no bowling alley, Herron."

I was listening so hard for the Cairn that for a moment I let it pass. Then I looked at Piasecki. "You sure about that?"

"He had no bowling alley anywhere on the premises." He nodded distastefully at the ruins. "It's time this eyesore was filled in. I saw Jeremy Forbes risking his neck around here today. This wreckage is what the lawyers call a nuisance attractive to children."

"You're certain about that bowling alley?"

"Positive, Herron."

I whistled, and the Cairn bounded over the embankment with his tail waving eagerly. So the 'bo wasn't down there.

ALICE FORBES had the dart board ready and cocktails icing. While she busied herself in the dining room I took on Piasecki and Jeremy at darts.

Piasecki scolded the kid. "You were prowling around the Half Acre today. What for?"

The kid glanced at me guiltily. "Nothing," he said.

"It's a dangerous place," Piasecki grumbled. "So I've bought it. I'm going to have that hole filled up."

"No!" I said. "You can't do that."

"Beg pardon?" Piasecki said.

My dart bit into a corner of the board. "I mean," I said, "when are you going to fill it in?"

"Tomorrow, perhaps." He smiled without meaning it. "Sorry your Cairn won't have a place to sport in, Herron."

"You're heartbroken," I said.

We went into the dining room and sat down. Alice Forbes served the chilled consomme. I was still thinking about the 'bo; I was thinking about Piasecki's plan to fill in the hole. A little flicker of panic sprang up in the back of my head. I tried to stamp it out. I concentrated on the soup. And then Alice Forbes exclaimed: "Mr. Flowers! You startled me!"

A towering, gaunt old man wearing a tan summer suit was standing near the sideboard, watching us. He had soft, white down on the back on his neck and a Buffalo Bill mustache. He had slipped into the room so quietly that I had no idea how long he had been there. I knew him though, although I'd never seen him before. Jared Flowers, sheriff of Keysport County.

"Seems I never visit folks these days," Flowers said plaintively, "unless trouble bids me."

"What trouble?" Thad Piasecki asked.

"Man's been killed."

"Auto accident?"

"Nope," the sheriff said. "Club. And it wasn't any accident. Who saw Dud Caylor today?"

The sheriff waited patiently. Nobody said he had seen Dud Caylor. Jeremy turned his round, black-fringed eyes on the sheriff and whispered: "Are you looking for Mr. Caylor, sir?"

"I know where he is, sonny. I'd just like to meet somebody who saw him alive today."

Across the table, Thad Piasecki stirred. Our eyes met, and then he bunched hs napkin on the tablecloth and said: "Sheriff."

Flowers followed him into the living room. We sat stiffly at the table, Alice Forbes, Jeremy and I, listening to the soft slush-slush of their voices. Once Jeremy whispered: "Didn't I tell you? *Captain Francis Lolonois!*" I snapped at him, "Shut up!" and then we sat woodenly again, until the sheriff and Piasecki returned to the dining room.

"I'd be obliged if you made that phone call for me, Thad," Flowers said. His mild gray eyes rested on me. "Mr. Herron."

I pushed back my chair and went into the living room with him. "Of course Piasecki saw me up at Caylor's house today," I said. "But I left the old boy very much alive. Why should I want to harm him? Look." I showed Flowers the cards in my wallet. "I'm an operator for an indemnity company in Frisco, Sheriff. I came out here two weeks ago to look up a jewel thief. And a jewel."

"Here?" Flowers asked. "Did you find him? And it?"

"I think so. Want me to brief you on this job? Dud Caylor's death may be tied up with it."

"Shoot," the old man said. He bit off the tip of a cigar and nestled wearily into a corner of Alice Forbes' sofa.

"Here it is. In 1938 a certain San Francisco art connoisseur was robbed of forty-one precious stones valued at slightly more than four hundred thousand dollars. You can check on that inside of ten minutes. Anyway, my company had insured them. Our men traced the thief across the country and halfway back again. We recovered thirty of the stones after he had disposed of them. But we never caught up with him."

"But you traced him to this neighborhood?" Flowers said.

"We made a routine check of museums and art galleries, and we found ten of the eleven missing stones in the Keysport public museum. They were part of the gem collection which Nick Hell bequeathed to the museum when he died in 1942. We have reason to believe that the thief sold the last eleven stones to Nick early in 1941."

"Eleven stones? You said the museum got ten."

"That's why I'm here. We haven't been able to turn up the eleventh. And believe me, Sheriff, it was the prize of the lot. A star sapphire, a regular blood-red plum. We believe this stone is still somewhere in the ruins of Hell's Half Acre. And our client wants it back. He's willing to let the ten stones remain in the museum. But he's got to have that star. You see, he's as stone-crazy as Nick."

"Don't seem reasonable," Flowers protested. "We found the ten stones in a fireproof vault that fell from Nick's penthouse into the cellar. Why wouldn't the sapphire be there, if Nick had bought it?"

"It's our theory that Nick valued the star so highly that he secreted it separately. We believe that Nick had the stone when he burned to death. And it fell into the ruins and is lost among the masonry."

"Have you looked, mister?" Flowers asked.

"Certainly I looked! I bought a Cairn pup as an excuse to prowl the ruins without arousing the neighbors' curiosity. And by the way . . ." I tapped the old man's arm. "Did you know that Thad Piasecki rambles over the Half Acre every day, chasing his nanny goat?"

Flowers blinked. "You mean he bought his goat as an excuse, too?"

"Sheriff, listen. We learned a few things about that jewel thief as we shagged him around the country. He has a little knowledge of law, he affects oxford gray suits, he can speak Polish. Now, get this. I've said to Piasecki a dozen times, *'Jak sie masz?'*, which means, 'How are you?' *But I've never got an answer out of him.* He just doesn't want to speak Polish."

The old man grinned at me. "The answer is *'Dobrze.'* Good. But it don't mean a thing. Plenty of Polish folks around here never speak anything but English." He scratched his head, chuckling. "Dud Caylor was always prowling the Half Acre, chasing one or other of his danged calves. How about that? Dud used to be Nick Hell's caretaker. Figure Dud used his calf as an excuse, like your Cairn and Piasecki's goat?" He burst out laughing. "Or maybe Mis' Forbes used her Jeremy for an excuse to dig up the cellar herself. Wow!"

"O. K., laugh," I said. "But how do you explain Dud Caylor?"

"How do you explain him, mister?" he asked.

I TUCKED the identification cards back into the wallet and looked out the window at the Cairn, dozing on the lawn. I said: "Shouldn't we be finding that out, Sheriff?"

Flowers sighed. "I suppose so, Mr. Herron."

A car drove into Alice Forbes' yard, and a beefy man carrying a tan envelope climbed out and lumbered into the living room without knocking. "Hi, Jared," he said. "Man named Piasecki phoned that you wanted these pictures brung right out."

"I'm obliged, Toby," Flowers said. "You needn't wait."

The beefy man returned to his car and the sheriff opened the envelope. "Fellow down the plank road name of Charlie South, runs a filling station on County Trunk M, says he noticed a stranger hanging around here the last few days. You seen any bums loitering around, Mr. Herron?"

Flowers spread ten glossy prints on the sofa; front views and profiles of men with numbers on their chests. "Some of Keysport's unchoicest citizens," the sheriff said mildly, "that ain't been accounted for in quite some time."

I stepped over to the sofa. But I had eyes for only one picture. The 'bo looked a little neater for the photographer; he was wearing a wingbat tie and a sweater vest, and his hair was clipped shorter at the temples.

"Him?" Sheriff Flowers said, following my gaze. "Ever see him?"

"No," I said.

"That's Augie Kell. Brother to Nick Hell. Spent more time in pens than out of 'em since he was twenty-one. Steals like a crow. Even Nick didn't like him. Augie just got out of Waupun last Friday."

"You thinking he killed Dud Caylor?"

"Don't know," Flowers said. "Don't know if any of these fellers did. Just heard from Charlie South that a stranger's been flitting around, so I had Toby dig up the pictures of some old friends."

He scooped the prints together, squaring them on the arm of the sofa. "I'll have Mis' Forbes and her boy and Thad Piasecki try to identify these pictures. Meantime, if you'll get your hat we'll start our chores. We'll go into Keysport first and I'll phone out to Frisco to check your references. O. K.?"

"Fine," I said. "Do you mind lending me that picture of Augie Kell for a minute. I want to compare it with what I have in my files."

Jared Flowers handed me the print and I went up to my room. I transferred the S&W .38 from the drawer to my armpit, put on my Panama and emptied my briefcase into the fireplace. There was nothing in it on Augie Kell, anyway—just the clippings on Nick Hell's death, and the inventories of his estate that I had cut out of the newspaper files in the Keysport public library, and the notes I had made of my conversations with the curator of gems at the Keysport municipal museum. Nothing on Augie Kell. I had not expected to need anything on Nick Hell's jailbird brother.

I touched a match to the mound of paper, and then I looked again at Augie's picture. How long *had* he been rooting around that *shample?* Perhaps those tracks of Captain Francis Lolonois that Jeremy had seen, the burnt matches and scars of probing stick, had not been made by me after all. Perhaps Augie Kell had found it!

I shook the picture, trying to stifle my rage and disappointment. He *had* found it. *On Dud Caylor.* Which was the reason Dud Caylor lay dead. The twist of my thoughts turned me hot and cold. See, Nick Hell's old caretaker knew about that sapphire, and his roaming calf was only an excuse to frisk the casino ruins. But today he had filled the washtub completely with rocks, which meant he wasn't going to need a roaming calf any more. . . . And why had Augie Kell never appeared at the top of the hill? Because he had dropped into Dud Caylor's house and surprised the old man gloating over the stone.

My rage got away from me. I cursed Augie Kell for getting out of Waupun. I cursed Dud Caylor for dying. I cursed the grainfed, backwoods sherff for sticking his Buffalo Bill mustache into a project so thoughtfully planned, so nearly completed.

I ripped Augie Kell's picture across, and flung it into the fireplace. Then I saw what was on the back of it, and I dropped frantically to my knees and snapped the pieces out and smudged the little flame on the carpet. Pasted to the back of the picture was a typed sheet of paper. *August Kell, alias Augie Kell, alias Augie Hell, alias A. Helf.* His description, his police record, his F.P.C., the names and addresses of his relatives And a special note: *Haunts: Subject frequents Club Lisbon, Thirty-fourth and Argyle streets, Keysport.*

I dropped the torn picture back into the fireplace and pushed the curtains aside and stepped out on the porch roof. The Cairn was napping on the lawn. Sheriff Flowers' muddy sedan was parked under the box elder, my own car in the driveway. If I started either of them, they could hear me inside the house.

As I shinnied down a pillar of the porch, the Cairn stood up and yipped eagerly. He wanted to go burrowing. I snapped my fingers and he leaped into my arms, and I clamped a hand around his muzzle so he couldn't bark. I faded through the high lilac hedge, into the field, and began to run toward Thad Piasecki's farmette. The Cairn didn't like being held so tightly. He began to claw and struggle, and he worked his jaws loose and howled as loud as a banshee.

So I tightened my fingers around his throat. He was only a pup. He stiffened, and then softened, and I threw him into a patch of milkweed.

I eased Thad Piasecki's car down the sloping driveway, swung it into the plank road and gathered speed. Lights were burning already in Dud Caylor's house, and a beefy man, who looked like Toby the deputy sheriff, was ambling up to his parked car in the farmyard. I notched up my speed, to climb the hill on the S-curve, keeping an eye on the mirror. Five minutes later, when Toby's car plodded over the crest, I was halfway to the Keysport city limits . . .

AT 8 P. M. a place like the Club Lisbon scarcely has its eyes open. A blonde woman was sitting on a stool asleep with her head on the bar, and scattered along the mahogany were three men customers. One of them saw me instantly in the backbar mirror, spoke quickly to the bartender, and climbed off his stool. Without looking at me, Augie Kell disappeared through a hall door strung with portieres. He was still wearing his combat boots and jeans stiff at the knees with dried dirt.

I took my time going after him. I left the S&W under the arm until I stepped into the murky hall, and then I moved ahead slowly until I came to a partly open door, with light shining from it. Augie Kell was sitting at a table inside facing me, his hands stretched flat on the table. "I'm clean," he said. "And I'm not running. Come on in, Benny."

His hands stayed flat on the table as

I circled him and patted his clothes. I sat down. "The name is Herron. Rod Herron."

"Your name is Benny," Augie said. "Benny Kwasniak."

I held out my hand. "Produce," I said bluntly.

He smiled faintly. "Even if I had it, you'd have to knock me off to get it, Benny."

The guy wasn't afraid of me. "Lightning," I said, "sometimes strikes twice in the same family."

He made a fine show of snarling and half rising from his chair. But his outstretched hands didn't move. I rested the butt of the S&W on the table, and he sat down slowly.

"Stow it," I said. "Don't pretend there was any love between you and brother Nick. How much inheritance tax did you have to pay on that bowling ball he left you?"

"O. K., Nick didn't like me," Augie said slowly. "But I liked him. And I'm going to square that with you, Benny. *You had no reason to burn him, no reason at all.*"

"Didn't I?" I said. "*Didn't I!*" I could still taste the hate, bitter and black. "Know what he gave me for those stones? A measly tenth of what they were worth. *One-tenth.* I went back in '42 to pry some more money out of him. Or heist him, if I had to. He worked me over with a blackjack and heaved me out in the rain. So I hung around until the casino shut down. And then I paid him up. And don't give me that routine about you're sorry. . . ."

I tapped the .38 carelessly on the table, enjoying the terror on his face as he stared at it. "If you catch this slug under your chin," I said, "your toes will come up hard enough to break the table. I learned that in the Army. A guy can hide better among ten million men than ten thousand trees."

He kept his sullen eyes on the S&W. "Come on, Augie," I said. "Produce. I've been checking on Nick's estate for a month. And that stone has been missing until today. You don't have to try to kid me."

Augie Kell took his outstretched hands off the table. He broke into a grin and stood up, winking at somebody behind me.

I swung in my chair and saw Dud Caylor shuffling through the doorway. Behind him Toby, the beefy deputy, said amiably: "All right, Benny. Plug me." He patted his paunch jovially. "Right in the breadbasket, boy. Right in the breadbasket."

I bounded out of my chair, pressing the trigger of the S&W. The hammer fell with a dry click. I squeezed it again, wildly. And again.

"Simmer down," Toby said equably. "The sheriff snuck up in your room and emptied the slugs before he let you vamoose."

I wouldn't believe it. I squeezed the trigger over and over, and then I plunged for the door, and Toby threw a corkscrew punch at my jaw. The room erupted blindingly into sparkling slivers of glass . . .

I remember stumbling out a side door of the Club Lisbon. All around lay a heavy, winking fog in which a giant bumblebee seemed to be growling. Then I was squeezed into the back seat of a car, between Augie Kell and the beefy Toby. They talked and guffawed as if we were setting out on a fishing trip, and I shook my head hard, trying to make sense of it. Ahead of me, I could make out Dud Caylor, driving the car down Argyle street.

The old gaffer chuckled. "I liked to died when he talked to you like you was Augie Kell. Augie ain't due out of Waupun until 1959. What did you say your name was, mister?"

"Singleton," Augie Kell said. I turned my head painfully to look at him, and he smiled. "I'm an operator for the firm that insured those stones, Benny. Don't take it so hard. You did fine. I was beginning to think we would never knock you off at all."

Dud Caylor shook his head admiringly. "How do you fellows do things like this, mister?"

Augie Kell, I mean Singleton, shrugged. "We'd found out a good deal

about Benny here, without ever catching up with him. But his trail got cold late in 1942. That must have been when he went into the Army. So we switched from looking for the thief to looking for the loot. We found it in the Keysport museum and arranged with the curator to tip us if anyone toddled around to ask strange questions. He did as soon as you showed up."

Turning the car into the plank road, Dud Caylor said: "You figure out this mousetrap by yourself?"

"Give the credit to Sheriff Flowers. He coached me on Augie Kell, slipped my picture into the cold deck, arranged the set-up with you and the Club Lisbon. You see, I could have come out here and put the arm on Benny without any fuss. But Flowers heard my story and started wondering if Benny had started that fire. In which case, Flowers wanted him for murder. So now he has Benny for murder."

The car pulled into Alice Forbes' driveway, and we went into her living room. Thad Piasecki and young Jeremy were playing darts.

"*Jak sie masz?*" I said.

Piasecki looked at me as if I had a bomb in my pocket. Then he mumbled, "*Dobrze.*" I suppose he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Flowers and Dud Caylor went upstairs for my luggage, and I sat on the sofa between Toby and the dick, Singleton. Nobody talked until Alice Forbes came into the living room, and I said: "The bad penny."

She was wearing her frilled apron and a white ribbon in her hair, and she just looked at me solemnly. That's when I noticed the bauble she was wearing. I half arose from the sofa, but Toby yanked me down. Singleton, though, had seen it too. He was across the room in three strides and lifted it lightly from her throat, studying it intently and admiringly.

Nick Hell had had it mounted in an icy setting, laced on a silverish chain. A blood-red plum in a medaliion of diamonds.

Alice Forbes said: "It's—just glass. Jeremy found it in the Half Acre and wanted me to wear it, so I cleaned it up just to please him . . ."

I started to laugh. Like a fool, I suppose, half sobbing and half raging. But I couldn't stop. Sheriff Flowers, carrying my luggage down the stairs, looked at me strangely, his Buffalo Bill mustache twitching.

Young Jeremy whispered: "Mr. Herron! Mr. Herron, what are you crying for, sir?"

I made an effort. "What for?" I said. "For . . . Captain Francis Lolonois. What a bum you made out of *him*, kid."

Sheriff Flowers signaled with his eyes, and beefy Toby lifted me from the sofa. He bunted me with his knee, and I stumbled numbly out the door toward the sheriff's car.

TO EACH

Clint Morgan, the diminutive dick, was aware of the housing shortage, but a cadaver in his bed was almost too much—even with a fat fee at stake. Not that Clint was mercenary — except where money was concerned!

TURNING the corner fast in the chill air, I saw two bulky shadows flanking the entrance to the office building. If there had been only one, he could have been a Vine Street wolf two blocks off his beat, looking for a late lamb. Two could mean someone was expecting someone. I'm the only one in the building who keeps odd hours. And you could call two o'clock in the morning an odd hour.

I paused at the entrance. The single bulb burning inside the dingy lobby touched the two men with a tentative light. "Could be you're looking for me," I offered. "Clint Morgan."

The thin-faced one, without the hat, kept his hands in his overcoat pockets and glanced at his friend. The friend nodded at me. His hands must have been cold, too. He was a stocky, sad-faced man with a hard line to his jaw, and his eyes were jet-black, shiny like onyx in the dim light. He looked faintly familiar.

"Could be," he said pleasantly. His head jerked toward a gleaming coupe at the curb. "Get in the car."

I stepped past them and turned. "Office hours twelve to twelve. Day or night. Come on up."

"Nervous?"

"No," I said. "A little guy like me has to be cautious, that's all. Anyway, I've got lights in the office—thanks to a ten-day extension."

He appraised my suit, which contained about 150 pounds, very little of it muscle. His face was going around in my mind, fast, but it wouldn't fit any of the place cards. He said wryly: "That's a lot of stairs. We were just up there. Saw the light on, and figured you'd be back . . . You may as well get in the car, Morgan. I want to hire you."

"Hire, you said? For money?"

He made a mirthless smile. We got in the car. The thin-faced one leaned against the door with his head inside. The other one, the one who did all the talking, sat behind the wheel. He gave me a cigarette. "Think you can lay off the horses long enough to look for a friend of mine?"

"That's asking a lot," I said. "Who sent you around?"

"I pulled you out of a hat," he answered easily. "You're in the phone book, aren't you?"

"Am I?"

He showed his teeth again. "Don't give the customers a hard time, Morgan. If you have to know, a guy who works for me said maybe you could find your hat, if it was on your head—and you could keep your mouth shut. His name's Gregory."

By BURT SIMS

HIS Corpse

I knew Gregory, all right. There are bookmakers all over this town; some big, some small. Gregory wasn't big. But the guy he worked for was. I said: "Sure. You must be Mark Donelli."

"I must be."

I thought a moment. "You know a lot of people—they don't know where your friend is?"

"They've just started to look. I want to find him fast. The more people I have looking, the better chance I'll find him.

The gun went off again, but I kept my face in the carpet — I was afraid to look.

Figure the odds." He blew a thin shaft of cigarette smoke against the windshield, and watched a taxi take the corner.

"You're so anxious to renew that friendship—he must be a wonderful guy."

"His name's Harry Lubeck."

"Never hard of him."

Donelli shrugged. "He's not the popular type." He flipped the cigarette out the window. It was shadowy in the car, but I could see his eyes glitter. "This is a quiet deal. Understand?"

He made that thin smile. "Gregory didn't say you were the mercenary type."

"Only where it concerns money."

He opened a long wallet and handed me three bills. "Gregory said you could keep your mouth shut," he reminded me.

The bills were fifties. I said, "This kind of glue helps."

"This is Tuesday. Maybe you'll come through in a day or two. When you find him," he went on deliberately, "leave him alone. Strictly. Just call me at the Crescent Club. There'll be another hundred and fifty for you."

The thin-faced one opened the door. I got out. Donelli leaned across the seat and turned his sad face up to me. He said softly: "Just between us girls."

"Sure." His tone cooled my body temperature. "Look, chum," I said hesitantly, "I don't want to appear too amateurish—but you probably know I've been in this business only a couple of months."

"You were a police reporter on the *Gazette*."

"Yeah . . . All I want to know is—where the hell do I start?"

He squinted at me. "Maybe I made a little mistake."

I felt that crisp, beautiful currency nestling in my pocket. I recalled unhappily that ever since they'd torn down my rooming house to build a supermarket I'd been sleeping in the office. Clients weren't exactly wearing grooves in the floor.

I shook my head. "I've got it," I said. "I'll run with it awhile."

I watched the coupe mutter down the quiet street. Perhaps half a block away, another car started up in the shadows and moved out slowly. I wondered if Donelli knew that he was being followed closely.

He and his friend had been about as helpful as boxing gloves on a piano player. Standing there on the sidewalk, I felt a shiver run through me. It wasn't that cold. I thought of that other hundred and fifty—and the fact there was competition for it. It was late, or early, depending on whether you dig ditches or carry a milk route, but I had slept from the second to the seventh races. Business was that good.

I walked up to the boulevard and went another block to the all-night garage, and wheeled away in the wheezy, groaning hunk of iron that no one except the dealer would have called an automobile.

I PUSHED my head into the *Gazette* city room, waving at a couple of late men who were swearing over a game of dominoes. They grinned, and one yelled something vulgar. I went on upstairs to the third floor, and pushed the button outside the library door. A buzzer sounded, the latch clicked, and I went into a big room where green filing cabinets marched in long, orderly rows. Harvey, a middle-aged guy with glasses and a general appearance of malnutrition, looked up from a desk. He blinked. "Well—Clint. How you been?"

"What good would it do to complain? Look, Harvey, how's for seeing the clips on a guy named Lubeck? Harry Lubeck?"

"Can do." He went to one of the cabinets. I lit a cigarette. I said: "Maybe you have some stuff on a guy named Donelli, too."

"The gambler?"

"Yeah."

In a moment he brought the clips. "Nice friends you have."

"But some people don't have any friends at all."

Lubeck didn't take long. Three little stories, covering about ten months. The first one said he had been arrested mere-

ly for questioning in connection with a black market ring peddling blood plasma, nylons, soap, meat and a few other items like that. The second one, about six weeks later, covered an arrest for bookmaking. The third mentioned he had paid a fine and had been released—no doubt to win back the fine.

He had been photographed. He was third from the left in a shot of five bookies who had been plucked out of a Beverly Boulevard rooming house. I couldn't tell much from the picture, except that he was short and heavy, and might have been the nervous type who bites nails in two—fingernails. His face was puffy and he had a lot of black hair.

Donelli proved more interesting. The clips had references to events ten years earlier. At various times, he had been questioned about the loss of everything except sleep. But nothing stuck. That affirmed my first impression; he was shrewd and dangerous. Only once had he gone to trial. That was a Chicago affair in which a fellow gambler had developed an overpowering urge to join his ancestors. Donelli had been acquitted of forcibly providing the transportation.

Harvey said curiously: "How's business?"

"I'm snowed under. I got so much work I have to sleep in the office—use your phone?"

"Go ahead."

The first guy I talked to was a stranger, but he found Sergeant Devlin for me. Devlin sounded sleepy. "What the hell do you want?"

"Old Pal Devlin," I muttered. "Didn't I always spell your name rght? It isn't my fault the copyreaders automatically pencil out the last paragraph."

"It sounds like Morgan, all right. But it sounds sober. What good could I do you if you're sober?"

"You had a guy out there named Lubeck, Harry Lubeck. Twice." I glanced at the clippings, and told him the dates. "Maybe you can tell me who bailed him."

"Don't you ever sleep?" he asked querulously. "O.K.—I'll call you back."

I ate three cigarettes and glanced through the midnight edition, working my way back to Pedro's Race Selections. It was a fair news night: A plane crash in Utah . . . A flashy bank robbery in Oklahoma . . . A strike riot in Michigan . . . And an interesting little follow-up yarn about the car which had been fished out of the ocean Sunday a few yards beyond high Malibu cliff.

I remembered the Sunday story. There had been a man in the car. All that the cops had was his name—Savage—and a registration slip giving his home address as Chicago.

Savage had made no comment, the story inferred. He had inherited a bullet the hard way, and was as dead as they bury them. Whoever dumped him probably had hoped the fishes would get to him good before the car was found.

Harvey had finished sorting pictures. "Tell me, Clint—how is it, being a private detective?"

I sighed. "I wish I knew," I told him frankly. "It's strange stuff to me."

"But you were a police reporter a long time. And you passed the exam for a license, didn't you?"

"Yeah. And I've seen a lot of movies."

The phone rang. Lubeck, said Sergeant Devlin, had been bailed out by a bondsman, both times.

"Who hired the bondsman?"

"I don't know. The guy's in the phone book. Call him." I heard Devlin yawn. "Tell him I said to tell you."

The bondsman's name was Sol, and at first he wasn't cooperative. I told him about Devlin, and he checked the records. "Some guy named Carpenter. Skippy Carpenter."

"Both times?"

"Yeah."

"Address?"

A paper rattled. He gave me a number on Santa Monica boulevard. "Thanks," I said. "If I ever need . . ."

"Sure. Day or night. Reasonable."

"All they have to do," I said, "is leave you an arm."

I hung up. So far it looked as simple as falling off a bar stool. My nerves stopped trying to pass themselves off as jumping beans. But it was no time of

morning to chase around leaning on doorbells. I went back to the office, and pulled the bed out from behind the screen. It wasn't crowded.

There was a medium-sized earthquake, not strong enough to shake down anything except a block of light which struck me sharply across the eyes. I blinked past it and into the angular, well-fed face of Gregory, the bookmaker. He wore an amused expression. Then I was fully awake, and he let go of my shoulder.

"That door was locked," I groused, raising up.

"Do tell," he said, seating himself behind my desk.

"I knew you hadn't been a bookmaker all your life."

He merely grinned. "Too bad about that pig you gave me yesterday. You heard, no doubt. He was leading by two lengths—and quit in the last sixteenth."

"A little more of that, and I'm going to give up trying to improve the breed," I said glumly, and yawned. Bright sunlight was shafting through the window. "What time is it?"

"Quarter past ten." He raised his feet to the desk, and inspected the brilliant gloss on his tan shoes. "Like something today?"

"Maybe. Maybe some information." I began dressing. "Thanks for sending me a case."

"I was beginning to worry. You weren't making any dough." He shrugged. "How you going to pay me if you don't make a few bucks?"

"You're so thoughtful," I said dryly. "Why is Donelli looking for Lubeck?"

He looked at his shoes again. "Maybe Lubeck's got his laundry. Got his white shirts."

"Clever boy."

His expression was noncommittal. "Maybe you want to bet some more. Got a lot of horses. A winner in every race. Guarantee it."

My fingers hadn't been doing so well with the necktie—now they just gave up. A thought that had been trying to get to me since the start of this business finally made it. I jerked off the tie and glared at him. "If Donelli sent you around to find out how well I'm doing, I'm touched! But not deeply. When I know something, I'll call him—maybe."

Gregory's eyes were cold, unblinking. "Not maybe," he said. "You mean, for sure."

"I mean maybe," I snapped "Now take your rusty dusty off that chair and get the hell out of here!"

He got up slowly, and his face didn't say anything. "Anything for a friend," he answered coolly. "Anything at all."

The door closed behind him—but it didn't shut off that delayed thought which had suddenly exploded me. A guy like Donelli looking for a guy like Lubeck—maybe I would just be fingering Lubeck for a quick kill. It didn't taste good, particularly on an empty stomach. I felt like returning Donelli's money, less a day's fee. But I couldn't quit, yet. I had to be sure.

I went to the water cooler and tried to fit my head under the spout. I didn't have any luck with that, either. I could feel this was going to be a big day.

I went downstairs. As I stepped into the lobby a tall man in a loosely-cut brown suit was casually inspecting the wall directory. He had a long, narrow face which he had tried to shorten by wearing a fashionable, flat-crowned hat. As I passed him his eyes flicked over me. I had a feeling he recognized me, but if he did he wasn't blowing any bugles about it. If that's the way he wanted it, he could have it. I went out.

CHAPTER TWO

Trouble Drives In

THE ADDRESS on Santa Monica shaped up like a phoney; it was an elaborate drive-in sandwich stand. I cruised on down the block, checking numbers. Nothing else even remotely resembled what Sol had given me. I went back to the stand for breakfast.

A snug-hipped girl in beige slacks and a well-filled blouse came toward the car as though she were walking fast on a tight-rope. She put a placard on the windshield. "Your order, sir?"

"Ham and eggs. Coffee. . . Say—a friend of mine used to be around here a lot. Guy named Carpenter."

"How nice," she said, and went away.

I watched the tight-rope act again, there being little else of scenic value. I saw her hand the order to the counterman. She said something, and turned to another girl lounging against the service counter. The second girl was a blonde in the same kind of uniform. The counterman shrugged. The blonde looked toward my car a moment, then turned her back.

I climbed into my own little world and pretended to think. It was crowded in there, and some of the faces were familiar. What if Donelli were after Lubeck's scalp? Should I worry; should I care? I remembered the first hundred and fifty. If I quit, I'd have to hand it back. If I didn't quit, maybe it would hatch a mate. As far as I was concerned, everyone in this affair was a bum, from any angle. But then I thought about a guy getting killed, and me setting him up for the pitch—if that's actually the way it was, they'd have to hire another boy.

The girl brought my order. Only it wasn't the first girl, I noted with surprise. It was the blonde.

But that was all right. Perhaps even better, if you like them wise and wary. What her eyes didn't know, hadn't been done.

She fastened the tray to the door. She wasn't in any hurry to leave. She gave me a factory-built smile. "Anything else?"

I was as full of curiosity as a kid with a clock, but I said: "I guess not."

She hesitated, frowning. "You—you told the other girl—"

"Yeah—a guy named Carpenter."

Her eyes gauged me. I tried to look as honest as possible. There was a long pause. Then, abruptly, she shrugged. "I'm Carpenter. Skippy Carpenter."

I leaned against the worn cushions and pushed my hat back with a slow thumb. "Well—hello. We have mutual friends, Skippy. Or, maybe, just acquaintances. . . . What's Harry doing, these days?"

Her eyes grew as hard as a five-minute egg. She turned. I said softly: "Hold it, baby. I could be hard to lose."

"Following me wouldn't do you any good," she replied sullenly. "I haven't seen him for days."

"There's always a first time. Maybe he'd suddenly decide he wanted to see *you*." I looked at her good. "Who'd blame him?"

Her face was angry. And a little scared. "You a cop?"

I sighed. "I cannot tell a lie. A guy I know wants to find Lubeck. He's paying me coin of the realm to help him. That's all I know. Now, suppose you take a chorus."

Her eyes had widened. "A guy—a guy paying you—"

"I am masquerading as a private investigator," I handed her a card. "After awhile I may blow my brains out and become a copyreader. But right now. . ."

"It's trouble again. I knew—," she broke off, and stared toward the street, lost in thought. In a moment she said, frowning, "Look. You're in it just for the dough?"

"Do I need another reason? Does anybody?"

She turned my card in her fingers and faced me with sudden decision. "I have money. Enough. If you find Harry, tell me before you tell this guy who hired you—and I'll pay you twice as much."

"This is beginning to sound like a Chinese auction." I went to work on the ham and eggs. "Where would a car hop get six hundred clams?"

She pushed a hand inside the car. I looked. Maybe it was glass, but it looked like a diamond. She said: "Leave your car here. Take the ring across the street. There are two jewelry shops over there. Or take it anywhere you want. They'll tell you it's good for at least five hundred."

I hesitated, then shook my head. "Ethics," I said, trying to believe it. "I've already got a client for this case, baby."

"Nobody'll know the difference," she said urgently. "Just call me first, when you find him."

I couldn't take the deal—but I couldn't let go of this lead, either. I said: "I'll think it over. . . Tell me, Skippy. What's this Lubeck got; a key to the U. S. Treasury?"

Her smile was lopsided. "Sure," she said. "That's it."

Off to the right, a car sounded a fretful horn. A second one bleated impatiently. I said: "This isn't the place—where do you live?"

There was reluctance in her voice as she gave me the address of an apartment on Franklin. "I'll see you there tonight," I said. "What time?"

"I'm off at five."

"I'll be there at five-thirty."

I STARTED the car and glanced in the rear-view mirror. It paid off like a slot machine. There was a bus stop across the street, and the mirror gave me a neat picture of the lower half of a brown suit leaning against the sign. From belt buckle to forehead, it was covered by an open newspaper—and topped with a fashionable, flat-crowned hat.

Skippy was removing the tray from the door. "Wait," I said quickly. "I don't get all of this—but it's possible we'd have company at your place. I'll pick you up here, instead. At five. We can talk in my office."

Bewilderment filled her eyes. I said: "Got it?"

"I—I guess so."

"I hope you're a good guesser, baby. So long."

As I was backing out of the place trying to keep dented fenders at a minimum, I saw the man in the brown suit ambling toward a car parked just around the corner.

There was no reason to believe he'd reveal why he was following me, even if I asked him. But I had asked sillier questions.

If it hadn't been for the streetcar and the moving van, I might have had a chance for an answer. They halted directly behind me for the traffic signal. I couldn't back out, and the sandwich stand was in front of me. When the street cleared, the only company I had was a temper which was flirting with its boiling point.

I went back to the office to count my gold, worry about the rent—and principally because there was nowhere else to go.

Skippy, I kept telling myself, wouldn't have offered me six hundred to find Harry if she knew where Harry was. I could figure that without an abacus. Unless, I suddenly thought—unless she wanted to be able to warn him, when I reported to her, that knowledge of his whereabouts no longer was a trade secret.

That seemed to make sense—except for one thing. If she didn't know where he was—how could she warn him? I let it all go, and settled for worrying about the rent.

A little before five, I parked across the street from that sandwich assembly plant. I watched for awhile, and then my nerves began to jump. I had seen no sign of her. At five minutes after five, I walked into the place.

The counterman gave me an odd glance. "Skippy? Oh—she left about an hour ago." His manner implied he needed me about as badly as he needed a spare wagon tongue.

"Where'd she go?"

His tone flattened. "You'll have to ask her, Mac."

I flashed my private investigator's badge. I didn't put it away fast enough. He plucked it out of my hand, read it, and handed it back. "Real cute," he said.

I felt like nailing it on his nose.

"Where'd she go?"

"You're no cop," he said. He was enjoying this.

I glanced around. There were perhaps a dozen people eating at the counter. That was audience enough. I said loudly: "That's a hell of an alibi! I tell you, there was a cockroach in my salad! I'll never eat here again!"

The people nearest me raised their heads in shock. I winked at the counterman, whose jaw was trying to drop off his face in sudden despair.

By the time I reached the car, there were only two people at the counter. But, like I've always said, in Hollywood it

takes a great deal to turn some people's stomachs.

My pleasure at whittling down that counterman was short-lived. I telephoned Skippy's apartment. There was no answer. I felt as helpless as a guy trying to hammer his way out of a bank vault with sofa pillows.

Well—there's always tomorrow, I admitted. But I was mad. I was mad enough to go to a movie. It was a detective thing, sure. They killed off four or five guys.

But none of them was as dead as the guy I found in my bed when I got back to the office.

Mike Sheil, from Homicide, said patiently: "We may as well get some coffee. This is a great time to go around finding bodies, Morgan."

The big man from the coroner's office who looked like a sleepy fullback said, "We'll haul the body downtown, Mike. Some kind of poison. Slow stuff, looks like. I'll let you know."

I stood there, feeling silly, and said for about the fortieth time: "This beats the hell out of me."

Sheil moved toward the door. "Coffee," he said again. "There's a place down the street, isn't there?"

I nodded, and glanced once more toward the skinny little man dead on my bed, the saliva still wet on his receded chin. Then I followed Sheil's slow, steady tread down the hall. He was a tall, rangy, careful man with a plaintive sense of humor and a solid reputation. I had covered his cases; he didn't miss much.

We sat in the all-night beanery, the light getting gray outside. He said: "His name's Smith. It really is. Just a guy named Smith."

I felt hollow. "Mike—I'm dumb. Really. I don't know anything about him. Never saw him before, never heard of him. And I don't like the way he picked my bed to die in."

He studied me. "You'd better settle down a little, friend. You've seen them dead before."

"Not in my bed, Mike. On my pillow. . . . Think he had time to pray a little? Now I lay me down to die. . ."

"Get off it," he ordered roughly. "You getting human, Morgan?"

"I thought you guys'd never get there. I sat there and I couldn't keep my eyes off him. He'd already gone where he was going, Mike—but I kept hoping he'd move, or say something." I gulped some coffee, almost glad it was so hot the pain slid my mind off Smith for an all too brief moment. I put down the cup. "Mike, you know where I can get a room? Today? Right now? . . . And I've got a bed I'll sell cheap."

"Maybe," he said. He stirred his coffee. "You been trying to buy anything yourself?"

"A few winners at Santa Anita."

He shook his head. "This guy wouldn't have known any—although he got around a lot. Not much good—but he wasn't a full-fledged rat. More of a mouse. He sold information, and he should have known that sometime it was going to make somebody mad."

"He didn't sell me any," I said. "He'd gone out of business when I got there."

"Yeah." Mike's calm gray eyes met mine. "Just a guy named Smith. But somebody killed him. I get paid to find out who did it." His voice was weary. "I could use some help. Always could."

"I don't know who did it."

"Got any good guesses?"

I thought of Donelli and Lubeck and Skippy and Gregory. Maybe Smith fitted into their pattern, somehow. If he did, this was suddenly a very personal affair. If one of them had done it, he shouldn't have done it in my bed.

Mike prodded: "Well?"

"It might have something to do with a case I'm on. I don't know."

"What's the case?"

"Give me a little time. It doesn't add up—yet."

"No," he said quietly. "Tell me now. I'll add it."

"There's nothing to tell, Mike. I've got a fistful of loose ends. Leave me alone for awhile, and maybe I can match some of them. Push me around, and we're both liable to wind up with nothing." I sighed heavily, and stared at him. "Anyway, I've got a personal interest in this

one, as of a couple of hours and a corpse ago."

He studied me for a long moment. Maybe he liked what he saw on my face. "Two days," he said. "That's all. Maybe I'll have the guy myself, by then."

He finished his coffee. We went outside in the dawn dampness. The air was moist, but sweet. Life seemed a very precious thing. Mike said: "Drop you anywhere?"

"Right here," I told him.

He nodded and left me there. For a few minutes, I walked. The morning coolness did its best to air out my brain, but its best wasn't good enough. There was a heavy, infinite weariness inside me that wouldn't quit. I knew what I needed. I divorced myself from my heaving stomach and decided to return to the office. The bed would feel good, even if Smith hadn't kept it very warm.

CHAPTER THREE

Pipeline to Murder

UNDER the gray bedspread of early morning, a car was parked at the curb in front of the building. The guy sitting in it laid something brightly metallic on the rolled-down window. "Come on in," he invited. It was simple, and it was casual—and if I hadn't been thoroughly chilled before, I was now. I set a new record for chilling.

It wouldn't have done any good to pull my gun. "If—if this is a stick-up," I told him, half hopefully, "I'll have to give you an I.O.U." I recognized him, then. He still wore that brown suit. "I guess it isn't a stick-up."

"No," he replied easily. "We seem to know a lot of the same people. Maybe you know a few more than I do."

"Jealous?"

He tapped that metallic thing on the door. It gave me king-sized goose bumps. I took a couple of reluctant steps and got in.

He raised the metallic thing and put it in his mouth. It was one of those super-streamlined, chrome-stemmed pipes. He asked matter-of-factly: "Got a match?"

I blew out a breath. "Buddy, I'm in no mood for games. You—"

"I thought you might be jumpy at first. You've been busy. That's why I used this. . ." He shrugged. "You weigh the odds, Morgan. You wouldn't try to beat a man to the draw—when he's already drawn. I knew you wouldn't shoot when you saw I just wanted to talk."

My nerves felt like someone was using them for violin strings. "All right," I snapped. "So let's talk."

He nodded. "My name's Barney Savage."

"Mine's Smith," I told him, suddenly sore. "We're both dead, and if I don't make the choir I'm going to throw away my harp!"

"Very funny," he observed. There was a note in his voice that was as hard as a traffic judge's heart. There was something else in it, too; a whisper of tragedy that made me feel like crawling back to bury my angry flippancy.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I—I guess you had a brother."

That gray light wasn't strong enough for needlework, but near him, now, I could see a deep line furrowed around his mouth, as though he had pressed his lips together a great deal. Too, there was a thoughtfulness in his lean face that looked as though it had been there a long time. The two made sense. Anyone who thinks a great deal these days is bound to tighten his lips.

Not that he appeared to have the world on his back. I had the feeling instead, that it was a personal matter. Something or someone had given him a rough time.

It didn't take long to find out it had been someone. He gave it to me in calm, controlled phrases.

His brother, Tony, apparently had been the kind of sharpshooter mothers warn their daughters against and street-corner hoodlums try to emulate. That's my own interpretation. The way Savage told it, Tony had been merely a wild, reckless kid who grew into a wild, reckless man with not much regard for any law he hadn't made himself.

"He was h e a d s t r o n g." Savage

shrugged. "But I have to give him credit, in a way. He didn't like the way the world was put together—so he manufactured one of his own."

"It won't work," I said. "The world was here first." I started a cigarette. "How do I fit into this?"

"Well—before Tony left Chicago, he told me he was coming out here on a—business trip."

"You're from Chicago, too?"

He nodded. "I manage a furniture store."

"We might make a deal for a bed, before you leave. . ."

"Quite awhile ago," he went on, "Tony did a favor for a fellow. Testified in his defense. They turned the fellow loose."

Some of the pieces slid smoothly into place. "So Tony thought Donelli would return the favor."

"I suppose so." He paused. "He'd heard Donelli was getting big, out here. And Tony wasn't getting as far as he wanted to go. Not in Chicago." His voice wavered, around the edges. "The next thing I hear, Tony's dead. So I grabbed a plane."

"Have you talked with Donelli?"

"Not yet. I hired this car and drove out to his place, as soon as I got here. He was just pulling away. I followed him here. I decided to check around a little before I went to see him."

I appraised him. "Then—checking around—you must have seen me talking to a girl yesterday."

"Skippy? Yes. That was quite a surprise."

"Oh, old friends?"

"I'd seen her before," he admitted.

"Not in Chicago? Listen, chum—"

"Yes. Chicago. She isn't exactly a good girl, you understand. But she's ten times as good as that cheap tough she's been trying to change for the last five years. She and—"

"Harry Lubeck," I said. "Also from Chicago. Friend, you really get around."

"They all ran together." He stretched his legs. "Tony, Donelli, Lubeck, some others. Skippy was dragged into the crowd when she met Lubeck. He was fighting an occasional hundred-dollar preliminary. Probably the only actual work he ever did in his life—and he couldn't do that honestly. He was suspended. . . You've heard about love, Morgan?"

"There's been some talk," I admitted.

"By the time she discovered what a deuce-high rat her Harry was, she'd talked herself into being in love. It happens all the time. She's stubborn. She won't admit she's wrong, even if it costs her every ounce of that false pride. So sh's sticking with him until she can change him, or he . . ."

"He's already changed her," I said. "Friend, it's very refreshing to ask questions and get answers."

He gave me a level glance. "I'm talking for one reason. Maybe it'll help me find out what happened to my brother."

I THOUGHT of something. "When you were checking around behind me yesterday, did you see where Skippy went?" It was a long, slim chance. I wouldn't have been disappointed with a negative answer. But this guy was wonderful.

"I thought Lubeck might know something," Savage said. "So I followed her, thinking she'd lead me to him."

"And. . . ?" I held my breath. It couldn't be that good.

"She went to a bar, a few blocks away. She talked with the bartender, Alec."

"No Lubeck?"

"No Lubeck. I thought Alec might know where he was—but he didn't."

"Maybe he just didn't want to tell you."

"Maybe," he admitted. "He did act sort of funny. But I thought he might talk, because I'd known him before. He was Lubeck's manager while the fighting lasted."

I inhaled, and pushed back my hat. "Correct me, if I'm wrong—but this is Los Angeles, isn't it? Or are we stranded in the middle of the Loop?"

"Well," he reasoned, "what would you do in a new town where you had some friends? You'd look them up."

"That could have been Tony's first mistake."

Savage was quiet for a moment. "He was a lot of fun, when we were kids. Sometimes he was as good a brother as you'd want. I've had a few troubles. He always was the first one to give me a lift with them." His lips tightened into their familiar pattern. Tautness crept into his words. "No one has the right to take a life without trial. Perhaps Tony wasn't good. Perhaps he got off on the wrong foot and could never get in step. But no one on this whole, crazy earth had a right to kill him!"

"You—"

His head swung toward me. "I keep remembering how he was when we were kids," he said swiftly. "Before he went wild. I remember the things he did for me, the kind way he had, sometimes. Before he got so wise and bitter and hard!"

Abruptly, he stopped and leaned back against the cushions. His hand made a small, helpless gesture.

I cleared my throat, and in that poignant silence it sounded like someone moving a piano over a flagstone floor. "O.K., doc. . ." My voice tasted wry. "Maybe you haven't seen the light, but if you mean what you've said, it's going to be a hard one for you to handle. Nobody has the right to take a life—remember? So what'll you do if you find out Donelli killed your brother?" I shrugged. "You can tell the cops. That ought to be enough. Except that apparently Donelli beat one murder charge—and he might beat another one."

He shook his head slowly. "I have to find out, first, how it happened. I don't know what I'll do if I know for certain that Donelli. . ." His voice trailed off. He was staring at the windshield, but he wasn't seeing it. "I don't know. . ."

"If my luck keeps breaking like this," I told him, opening the door, "maybe you'll get a chance to find out." I stood on the sidewalk. The sun was making a feeble attempt to warm me. "One more thing. Where's that bar"

He told me. He looked like he hadn't slept in a week. I said: "You'd better go home and close your eyes before you bleed to death. I'm sagging, myself. Soon as I get a little rest, I'll start all over. Where can I reach you?"

"I have to move out of the hotel today. Somebody else had reserved the room, but they were late. I'll call you."

It was about noon when I woke up. I yawned and stretched, while my mind won a wrestling match with sleep. Then I suddenly froze as the memories of the night before washed over me in an icy flood.

The Turkish bath helped. I ate a midday breakfast and walked back toward the office. The boulevard was bright in the early afternoon sunlight. People seemed in a rush as usual, but no one appeared particularly upset. I wondered morosely how many of them had found bodies in their beds. Dead ones, that is.

No flowers had grown in the musty little reception room. It still was dusty, and the walls were faded and the two chairs looked old and tired. I yawned and went into my office.

WHEN I finally reached Mike Sheil, he said, "Just what the guy said. A slow poison. It's a type of—do you know anything about poisons?"

"They're poisonous," I offered. "Once, when I was seven, I ate some ant paste thinking it was molasses."

He sighed. "No use getting technical, then. Just call it slow poison. Some alcohol in him, too."

"A mixture?"

"Could have been. Doc figured the stuff would take two or three hours to work."

I thought it over. "Whoever gave him the stuff didn't want him dying on the doorstep. Just wanted him dead."

"I guess so. You doing any good?"

"Not much. You know this guy they found at Malibu? Savage, his name was."

"Yeah. From Chicago."

"They all are. I met his borther last night. He thinks Mark Donelli did it. I don't connect it with Smith, but. . ."

"Donelli? Why?" demanded Mike. "He's getting too big for that sort of thing."

"How do I know? When I find out

something, I'll be sure to let you. . ."

"Yeah, do that," he snapped. "Be kind enough to let me know."

"Mike, dear, you'll be the first."

"Don't try to be too smart, Morgan. You're playing with a rough team."

"I know it," I admitted. "It was my bed, wasn't it?"

After he hung up, I telephoned the sandwich stand. Skippy wasn't there. The voice sounded like it would fit that counterman. Perhaps mine aroused some familiar and unhappy thoughts in him, too. He tried to tear out my ear-drum with a sudden, piercing whistle. Then he signed off.

Listening with the other ear, I phoned Skippy's apartment. Just from the way the periodic buzzing sounded, I had the feeling the place was empty. I was getting about as far as a midget with an anvil. I crammed my head into my hat and went out.

The bar was a few yards up a side street leading off La Brea. It had a lot of glass brick across the front, and a leather-padded door pushed invitingly open. If I was going through with this dizzy scheme, I couldn't stand there like I came with the sidewalk.

With the fond hope that if Skippy had vanished, she had done it completely, I walked in. It seemed possible the bartender was some kind of a contact with Lubeck. Maybe it still was a live one.

I went to the far end. There were two women seated a few stools away, some loose change ostensibly on the shiny mahogany in front of them. That showed they had paid for their drinks; an old come-on. Over in a dimly-lit corner, a sailor was studying selections on a juke box that looked like something out of the Arabian Nights.

When the bartender came down I blinked at him a few times, so he'd notice me. I told him what I wanted. When he set the glass down, I said softly, "Alec."

That way, he could take it or leave it. If he weren't named Alec, he'd probably conclude I was talking to myself. In some bars, particularly with early afternoon drinkers, it's a habit.

He paused, inclining his head with company politeness.

"Skippy," I said in a low tone, "told me to give you a message."

It sounded corny, even to me. But I'd never done it before. I couldn't expect to sound like John Garfield. Anyway, it seemed to work. He wiped the bar and was listening.

"Some guy," I said significantly, "is to meet her at La Brea and Sunset. Southeast corner."

He showed a poker face. "Are you sure you feel all right?"

I tried to give him a Garfield squint. "Twelve-thirty," I said. "Got it?"

He looked at me pityingly and moved away. I felt like a man with a paper head. After awhile, he returned for the empty glass. "Another one?"

I shook my head, and tried to pass a meaningful look to him. That went over like a zither solo in Ciro's. His face was as expressionless as a medicine ball. I decided I should have played Bogart.

I slid off the stool. "Well—so long, Alec."

"So long." He was very polite. "Alec comes on at four. I'm the early bartender; Charles."

Skippy had given me the correct address, if nothing else. I flashed my card at the clerk. He was a small guy who apparently was irritated because he wasn't big. He tried to sound big, but merely became ludicrous. The bow tie worked up and down on his prominent Adam's apple, and his eyes began to bulge.

"That card doesn't mean anything to me," he snapped. "If you want to know anything about our guests, ask them—not me."

Maybe I outweighed him five pounds. It was a cinch I was carrying a bigger burden in my head than he was. And I had suddenly had enough of frustration.

I reached across the desk, grabbed his long nose and pulled him. He yelped. I got my other hand into the greasy hair at the back of his head and bounced his face on the desk, just once. I panted: "That girl may be shopping for a casket—and you give me answers like that.

Open up, leather-head, before I put your face in this mahogany like a footprint in Grauman's forecourt!"

He sniveled: "She—she went out with a guy. Yesterday. I haven't seen her since."

I let go. "Was he forcing her"

"He had her arm, that's all I noticed." His tongue wet his lips. "She looked a little upset."

"The guy with her—what'd he look like?"

"Big," said the clerk. Naturally, he'd notice that. "No hat. Sort of brown hair. A gray flannel suit, I think."

"You've just described about twenty percent of the city's pedestrians," I complimented him flatly. "Nuts!"

Only a guy who reads dream books, believes in black magic or plays the horses would have shown up at La Brea and Sunset after that barroom performance. It was cold, and the breeze whispering in from Santa Monica carried a penetrating dampness.

There was a good rush of traffic, but the sidewalk wasn't drawing much business. Everytime a man approached, I studied him like a contour map of Lana Turner. After half an hour of shivering in the shadows, I sat down on a bus company bench. Lubeck wasn't coming.

I thought of some of the things I had done. A lot of them had been foolish. I decided, somewhat angrily, that I might as well be consistent. I'd go ask Alec point-blank where the hell Lubeck was.

CHAPTER FOUR

Time to Get Tough

I TURNED the corner and braked to a stop. Except for a few cars parked in the tree-flung, wind-dancing shadows, the street was deserted. So apparently, was the bar. My spirits sank.

The other buildings were apartments, except for a delicatessen down the block. Bright lights were burning in one nearby, and as I stood on the sidewalk I heard a loud radio and a burst of louder laughter. I felt cold.

I put my nose against the glass brick and tried to see inside. That was as successful as an attempt to eat soup with a fork. I got a faint gleam from somewhere, but it could have been a reflection from the streetlights.

All bars have backrooms, I remembered. Else, why'd they ever think up: "See what the boys in the backroom'll have?"

I walked back to the corner, turned left and went a few yards to the alley. A yellow panel gleaming a short distance away pulled me in. The alley itself was darker than inside an elephant. "Maybe I'll only prove they left a night light burning," I told myself. About that time I fell over the garbage can.

I got up, swearing. The shade had been lowered on the window, but not quite far enough. I raised on my toes, and put my nose against the glass. At first, it looked like any storeroom; cases and bottles and cans on shelves. Then I sucked in my breath.

There was a guy on the floor. It looked like he was wearing a white jacket, bartender style.

I tried the door, fast. It was locked. I reared back, the way I'd seen it done in movies, and slammed my shoulder against it. I got up off the ground with my head spinning and my spine as out of place as confetti at a funeral.

After I had dented myself up good, it finally cracked. I fell inside. The man's eyes were open, blinking. I wheezed: "I knew it. I made enough noise to wake the dead."

His eyes closed. A sigh eased out of him. His consciousness had been only momentary.

He had a wide, fleshy face, and a nose that had once been flattened. His face had grown a few welts, and some of the hair had been pulled out of his graying head with little regard for pattern. Instead of shoes and socks, he wore nasty little blisters, like measles, all over his feet. Somebody had used him for an ashtray.

I didn't have to send out for a St. Bernard. There was enough brandy on the shelves to float anything except a loan from a temperance union. I poured it

over, around, under and into his wobbling head.

He began to make noise. They were little whimpers of pain that were worse than yells because they came from so far down inside him. It took a few moments longer before he could make conversation, and even then he needed help. It was Alec, all right. There had been three of them, he said with agony. They came in one at a time, shortly before he closed the place, and when everyone else had left they hustled him out back.

"I've had enough," he mumbled. "I want to eat, but I want to live, too. . ."

"And I want a guy named Lubeck," I said.

"Punks," he was saying bitterly. Anger was dulling some of his pain. "Just punks. Young enough they might've killed me." He grimaced and felt his head gingerly.

"You won't need a toupee," I told him. "What'd the punks want—as though I didn't know."

"Same thing you do," he grumbled. His hands were shaking. "Man, they were rough—"

"You said you'd had enough. Mean it?"

He nodded slowly. "But I don't know where Harry is. All I've got is a phone number. And he hasn't been there for two days."

"Nobody answers?"

"A guy answers," replied Alec reluctantly. "I ask for Harry Lester, and he says Harry isn't there. I don't push him none. I done my part when I call." He looked up at me. "Except day before yesterday. Tuesday."

That was the day I had found and lost Skippy in one quick act. "What happened then?"

He tightened his lips and hesitated. "What's this going to get me?"

This was no time to let him get hard. I reached over and gently squeezed one of his blistered feet. Pain gushed out of him in a swift breath. I said: "Not talking got you those feet. You like not talking?"

His face worked. "No." He got back some of his breath, and sighed miserably. "The guy I always talk to said Harry'd be there in a couple of days—"

"That makes it today. Thursday. What else, Alec? What'd you tell him?"

"I did what Skippy said. I told this guy to tell Harry that a private eye named Clint Morgan was asking about him. That's all."

"Did you give those punks the phone number?"

"I passed out. I guess not."

"You know who sent them around, don't you?"

His eyes met mine, then flicked away. He said bitterly, "Who else?"

I squinted down at him. "That's a screwy story you're trying to sell. You mean Skippy doesn't know Lubeck's number?"

"It's the truth, so help me," he maintained. "Harry didn't want her to know where he was. He's afraid she'd try to find him, and Donelli—" he stopped abruptly.

"Would have her followed, the way she was followed here," I finished. "Well—it all adds up, Alec. Except for just a few more numbers. What are they? How do I call Lubeck?"

He touched his feet with tender care. Agony twisted across his face. "I—I got to see a doctor."

"Maybe you'd better see a travel agency, too. You're going to be unpopular with a lot of nasty people."

"Including Harry," he pointed out, with a sudden, sharp glance at me. He shook his head. "So I've already got Donelli on my back. That's crowd enough."

I gripped his shoulder hard. "Listen, chum! By now even a moron, junior grade, would have figured out that Donelli isn't chasing Lubeck merely to pin a Kiwanis button on him. I'm not gunning for Lubeck—I just want to talk to him. But if I don't get to him before Donelli does—"

"I know it, I know it," he broke in, running a nervous hand across his bruised face. It was cold in that room, the floor was colder, and he was sitting on it—but he began to sweat.

He slowly felt his head. He looked at

his feet. Then he frowned laboriously, and a deep sigh escaped him. "Like I said," he muttered, as though he were convincing himself, "this is no league for me. . ." He paused for a moment—then sorrowfully gave me a Long Beach exchange.

I SAT on the edge of the bed and got my shoes off, but that was as far as I could go on my own. I woke up a few hours later with my clothes strangling me in five different places, and my mouth feeling like I had been eating raw blotters.

I called Mike Sheil. He said: "Well—stranger. Are you about to let me in the game?"

"You're probably three touchdowns ahead of me," I said. "But I'm not proud. When I need help, I'll ask for it."

"Like when?"

"Like now. I need an address to fit a phone number." I told him, and sat back and deliberated on the sins of the world until he called me back. He said it was a cheap rooming house, and gave me the numbers and the street. "Who're you looking for?" His attempt at being naive went over like a lead balloon.

"A guy who might know a guy," I said smoothly. "If I find him, I'll call you in two or three hours. Don't leave town."

"Now, see here, Morgan," he hardened abruptly, "murder isn't something you play like charades or musical chairs. If this has anything to do with Smith getting killed, the department's going to know about it! Play dumb with me and I'll have your license so fast you'll think it was made of soap bubbles!"

"Mike," I said soberly, "I don't get many cases. I know I won't get any at all, if you boys put the chill on me. But in my book, a guy takes a case—he finishes it. If I call you in too soon, we're both liable to scare away the pigeons. Right now, I haven't a thing that would justify a pinch."

"Then get something," he ordered. "I've given you a chance. A guy is found dead in your own bed—and you can't add up anything but zeroes. When're you going back to the *Gazette*?"

That struck me about as funny as arsenic in my oatmeal, but I managed a small laugh. "If you're trying to needle me into shooting off my mouth, Mike, save it. Just give me more time."

"Two days, I gave you. That makes it this afternoon. O.K.," he granted grudgingly. "But if you can't make sense by then, you're going to be as popular with me as scarlet fever."

"Listen," I said. "When I need you, I'll need you fast."

"Sure," he said dryly. "That's always the way, with cops. Never can take their time. But just hope I get there soon enough, sonny."

"I could get these fingers uncrossed," I pointed out, "if I wanted to."

I couldn't take a chance on phoning Lubeck. From what I had learned of the guy, he would be as shy as a monk in a harem. I'd have to grab him first and talk later. I got the car and moved out.

About an hour later, I strolled into the Long Beach place as though I knew exactly what I was doing. It was a rooming house, all right, but it looked more like a movie set left over from Tobacco Road. There are some nice places in Long Beach—this place just made them look nicer.

What was left of the paint on it had turned from battleship to tattle-tale gray. There were loose boards on the porch and a few rips in the screen door, as though some drunk had been playful.

Inside, there was a rickety table shouldered against the big and dirty front window, a couple of hard wooden chairs and, at the far side, a counter. A heavy character in a filthy blue shirt and a seagoing cap was lounging behind it. He was about fifty, with grayish stubble on his loose face, and a bulge in his cheek.

"Full up," he grunted, when I got to the counter. He squinted at me insolently from under bushy eyebrows.

There was an open ledger in front of him. I spun it around, and began checking names. He reached a big horny hand over and closed the ledger ungently on my fingers. But he was a shade too late. Harry Lester's room number was listed as 12.

"I'm looking for a friend," I told him.

He jerked the ledger off the counter, and put it under his arm. His eyes were hostile. "You could use one," he stated flatly. "Lots of 'em, if you don't pull out of here, mister."

I decided he might be a little slow. I had plenty of early foot. I was out of the lobby and into the long, musty-smelling corridor before he stumbled around the counter. I pounded down the uncarpeted planking, scanning numbers. My gun was solid in my fist when I flung open the door to Number 12. I was scared, plenty. But there wasn't much I could do about it: the results were the kind you had to go out and get.

THE ROOM was empty. I saw that much before my land-locked sailor friend puffed furiously up beside me. He laid a heavy hand on my shoulder, and he had a grip like a milking champion. I fixed that, quick, by rapping his knuckles with the gun barrel.

"Simmer down," I told him, breathing hard. "Nobody's hurt, yet. I just want to talk to Lester."

He rubbed his knuckles. "He ain't here," he glowered. "That gun makes you pretty big, mister. You'd better not lose it."

"There are two beds in this room. Who uses the other one?"

He didn't answer; just tried to drill my brains out with his eyes. I raised the gun, glaring, like I'd pistol whip him. He stumbled back against he wall. He had seemed like the type who'd respect only the dirtier tricks. "Who uses the other one?" I rapped.

"Just rented it," he muttered. "The other guy blew out, owing me four bucks."

"A shame," I said. "A month's rent. He roomed with Harry?"

"He was here first. I put Harry in with him."

Something like a thought stirred in my head, and my pulse beat stepped up. I put the gun two inches into his stomach. "What was the guy's name? Deliver, or so help me—"

I wouldn't have shot him. I'm not crazy. But disappointment and worry and frustration had pyramided on top of me so fast and so heavily that I was almost past caring.

"Jones," he blurted out. "Just a guy named Jones. We get dozens of 'em in here. Take it easy with that rod, take it easy!"

"Jones," I echoed. That was so close to Smith, I almost laughed. The little guy hadn't used much imagination in picking an alias. He probably had a lot of others; like Brown. . . I wasn't out of the woods, yet, but the spaces between trees were getting wider.

I jerked my head, and we started back down the hall. "Where's Harry?"

He said: "I don't know."

I was walking behind him. I tapped him very lightly with the gun. Maybe he had a tender head. He swore, and said: "He's supposed to be in today. Maybe he won't ever be back."

"I'll buy the first half of that." We stepped into the lobby. "I'm lonesome," I said. "Stick around."

He glared. "You'll come apart easy," he promised, "without that rod to hold you up."

"Friend," I said candidly, "you've got something there."

I leaned against the wall, watching the street. He stayed behind the counter awhile. I guess he got just as tired of waiting as I did. He fished up a dirty rag and wiped the top layer of grime off the counter. He came out and straightened the chairs against the wall, piled some old magazines on one, lifted a dirty vase of withered flowers onto the table and generally made the place as spic and span as a paper factory after a fire.

Maybe five minutes unwound from the clock, maybe ten. I was getting fed up, but there was no place to go. Just as surely as I knew the world was weird as well as round, I knew that this dingy hole was where my case either folded up around my ears or produced some action.

It wasn't a busy street. A few people strolled in the warm afternoon sunlight. An occasional car passed. Then one didn't pass. It was a mud-splashed Dodge coupe, about eight years old, and

it braked to a slow stop at the curb.

I came away from the wall. The old guy was moving around the counter, toward the door. I kicked out a foot and tripped him. The gun in my fist moved about six inches to cover him, and he laid sprawled on the floor blinking at it.

I shot him a quick look that told him how serious I was, and glanced out at the coupe. A stocky guy with lots of black hair was climbing out. He got a foot on the curb, and stopped. He looked at the big front window. So did I.

That vase of withered flowers suddenly loomed up as big as a giraffe to a grasshopper. I was out on the porch as Lubeck darted back into the car. In the next instant, something belted me from behind and I obligingly tried to drive a hole in the sidewalk with my face.

I stopped counting sky-rockets and began counting faces. They finally merged into one, a worried looking assortment of features collected under the cap of a gas station attendant. I saw that I was in my car, parked at a curb. "Golly," the attendant said with huge relief. "I thought you was dead."

My hand felt a pile of jelly on my face. "What's that?"

"Your nose," he said. "Where'd your friend go?"

"What friend?"

"Why, a guy drove you up here, and jumped out. I came over and saw you, and figured he'd gone to phone a doctor. . . Have an auto accident?"

"No," I said. "This clunk looks like this all the time. But it runs." I glanced at my watch. I'd been out half an hour. My jaw felt like I'd been slugged. I guessed my friend hadn't wanted any argument about who was going to drive.

"How you feel?" asked the attendant with sympathy.

"Like I'd just gone five rounds in a cement mixer," I told him. "Thanks for anything." I pulled out.

My car wouldn't do more than forty-five, downgrade, top off and with a tail wind. That didn't help my state of mind as I tried to wheel back to Hollywood like lightning late for a date. On the way, I managed to get most of the blood off with my handkerchief. My eyes were beginning to appear as though they wore skin-tight, horn-rimmed glasses.

It was no effort to dredge up a deep sigh. I toyed with the idea of turning it all over to Mike Sheil. Maybe he would let me help him work it out. I wanted to be in on the finish—but I didn't want it to be mine.

Then I thought of Smith. Or Jones. Smith-Jones. Jones-Smith. Any combination I tried, it came out murder in my bed. My face was beginning to feel like a diving helmet. And I was getting mad again. I still had a couple of hours before I'd have to call Mike. I shrugged, and decided to take it.

Lubeck could have been staying in that flophouse for one of two reasons, I thought. Either he thought it was a good hideout—or he didn't have any money. Maybe, both. And if he got desperate for money, he might ask someone who had told me she could raise six hundred clams.

I wheeled into the drive-in stand, and poked my head out the window. The girl who had taken my order the first day was serving another car. "Hey," I called. "Seen Skippy?"

She turned, and her eyes widened. I guessed I hadn't removed all the blood. "No," she faltered. "Not for a couple of days. But—another guy was just here, asking for her."

"Stocky, black hair? Puffy face? Dodge coupe?"

She nodded dumbly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Now I Lay Me Down to Die

THE apartment house clerk tried to vanish into his shirt when I came in. I patted his head. "Tell me, little man, is Miss Carpenter here?"

He backed away. "Not yet. She hasn't been back."

"Anybody else ask for her? Recently?"

He nodded. "A guy was here a little while ago. Seemed in a hurry."

"A big guy," I said. "Black hair."

He nodded again. "A big guy."

I sat in the car for a moment, outside

Skippy's apartment. I had swung twice, and missed. There was another pitch coming up. Lubeck was seeking Skippy, obviously. From here he might have gone to Alec's bar—or he might have been frantic enough to head for Donelli's Crescent Club. If he were bound for Donelli's I thought, Lubeck was either crazy, suicidally desperate—or counting on something I didn't know about to keep him alive and unholed.

Time was out at the elbows. I voted for Donelli's. On the way, I stopped and called Mike Sheil.

"I'm headed for the Crescent Club," I told him. "Maybe some other people have the same idea, maybe they haven't. How long would it take you to get there?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe, with the siren."

"If I don't call you in half an hour," I said, "use two sirens. And bring your friends."

The Crescent Club was a large, gray and chrome structure on Sunset, strictly for the carriage trade. It had a good restaurant, two fashionably gloomy cocktail bars and a large and flourishing back room. The cars of the late afternoon cocktail crowd were sprinkled across the asphalt parking lot.

The attendant gave me a quick survey. "Frankly," he drawled, "I don't think they'll let you in."

"This isn't my face," I told him. "I'm just breaking it in for a friend. A guy who doesn't like Mark Donelli had something to do with it. How do I get to him?"

"You might try the stairs next to the check room," he said finally. "His office is at the top."

I went in fast, sidestepped the hat check girl's gaping mouth, and moved up the heavily-carpeted stairs. There was a short hall at the top, and a wide, door in front of me. I knocked.

In a moment, it cracked open. A man with brown hair in a gray flannel suit blocked it. "Yeah?"

I pushed suddenly, the door banged his leg, and I was in. Donelli was behind a wide desk that squatted powerfully beneath a low, indirectly-lit ceiling. The carpet was thick here, too—and the walls were probably thicker.

On the floor a husky character in a torn blue coat and rumpled hair was sitting on Barney Savage's chest. Savage was out cold. A lamp had been overturned in a corner, and a small chair needed a new leg.

Donelli called sharply: "Don't!" I

whirled. The guy at the door lowered his arm reluctantly. His blackjack swayed to and fro. I turned back to Donelli. "Thanks."

His dark eyes inspected me. His sad face was calm. "Did you find Lubeck?"

"Yes—and no," I told him. "What's with my friend there on the floor? You run out of furniture?"

"He's got a crazy idea I killed his brother." Donelli shrugged. "It's hard to convince him I didn't."

"It's hard to convince me, too," I said recklessly. "Also, convince me you don't have Skippy Carpenter. Your playmate with the blackjack rousted her out of her apartment."

"You can have her," he replied indifferently. "She doesn't know where Lubeck is. That's the guy I want. What happened?"

"I almost had him. He got away. Where's Skippy?"

His head jerked toward another door. His eyes were now hard and bitter. "What do you mean, got away? I told you not to tip him. I told you to call—"

"I just wanted to talk to him," I said easily, crossing the room. "He forgot and left a body in my bed." I turned the key in the lock, and opened the door. Skippy was seated in a large, overstuffed chair. Her shoulders were slack and her face drawn. She said dully, without looking up: "What now?"

"Come out and play, baby."

Her head lifted swiftly. "Morgan! What? Did you see. . ."

"I went, saw, and was conquered. He ducked out."

It was hard to tell whether she felt relief or merely was past caring. She rose slowly, and followed me back into the other room. The guy in the flannel suit had left. Donelli was on his feet.

Savage groaned. I said to the character: "Why don't you get off his chest?"

"Shut up," the character said lazily.

"Let him up," I said, walking toward him. Donelli came around the desk. Behind me, the hall door opened and closed quickly. Someone said: "Hold it. Everybody!"

My heels dug into the carpet up to my ankles. I said, "Donelli, could be you owe me that other hundred and fifty. C. O. D."

"You'll never get out of here, Harry," Donelli said flatly.

Skippy crossed the room. I heard Harry say: "Who's this guy?"

"Morgan," she replied. "The detective I—"

"Turn around, Morgan," he rasped.

I obeyed. It was Lubeck, all right. His puffy face was flushed, and his lips were working nervously. The gun in his hand had a muzzle that looked as big as a water glass. I said: "Why'd you kill a guy named Smith?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know anybody named Smith."

Skippy said quickly: "Let's go, Harry. Let's go."

"I need that ring," he said harshly. "And you might lift the roll off our fat pal over there. We'll need dough."

"You'll never make it," Donelli grated. I guessed he hadn't liked being called fat. "You'll never get far enough."

Lubeck's eyes gleamed. "Sure I will. You won't be around to stop me, fat pal." He reached in a sagging coat pocket and withdrew a package. It was heavy. He tossed it to me. "Have a gun, Morgan. It's Donelli's." He made a thin, nervous smile. "I was going to let him buy it back—but it's too late, now. The slug in Tony Savage came out of it."

Donelli took a step forward, his face livid. "Why, you—"

LUBECK'S hand lashed out and the gun barrel cracked Donelli alongside his jaw. He stumbled back. The guy on Savage's chest, waiting for an opening, moved his arm. Lubeck kicked him in the face. There was a wet, crunching sound, and the guy went flat on his back. It was interesting—but I thought there was a frightened pleasure in it for Lubeck, as though he were tasting forbidden fruit.

Skippy cried: "Harry, please—"

I felt a little sick. I said: "Why don't you guys stop acting like mugs in a Class B movie?"

Lubeck said: "Where do you think the movies get all their ideas, Morgan?"

"O.K.... Why'd you kill a guy named Smith who was named Jones?"

"You've got a one-track mind," he said, watching Donelli. "I told you I don't know anybody—"

"This gun," I said, hefting the package. "How do you know it killed Tony Savage?"

"I was here when it happened. You can tell the cops. The three of us were talking old times. We had a few drinks. Tony wanted Mark to cut him in on the bookmaking. Give him one of the studios. Mark turned him down. They had a fight. Mark shot—"

"You dirty, lying—" Donelli broke in. His voice was lethal. "I'll—"

It looked good for Lubeck. Somehow, that annoyed me. From the first, I had thought he was lying. Now, I didn't know. I said, "You pulled it once in Chicago, Donelli. Is it a habit?"

He appeared a little shaken. "They can't make that stick," he said. "I was here—for awhile. I went downstairs to check on the crowd. I left Lubeck and Tony alone. When I came back, they were gone. So was my gun. There was blood on the carpet. I—I went for a drive, thinking it out."

"To Malibu?" I asked.

"Don't get too smart, Morgan," he said roughly. "Lubeck knew I was going to give Tony a good spot. I owed him something good. He thought Tony was cutting him out. I didn't have a fight with Tony. But Lubeck. . ."

"It sings real good," said Lubeck, his smile thinner. "So you went for a ride. . . You'll never make that one stack up." He reached out with his left arm and drew Skippy to him. "But I've got my alibi. And I'll be carrying it around with me. . . I beat it out of here right after you shot Tony. That was about seven." He was triumphant. "How could I have driven to Malibu—when I was with Skippy from seven-thirty 'til midnight?"

Skippy's eyes were wide. Her nerves must have been leaping like a jitterbug on a hot stove. Her lips opened to corroborate Lubeck—and a sudden, harsh sob came out. She had backed him up for five years. Maybe it was getting too old. She put her hands over her face. "No, Harry, no! . . . Not for murder. . ." She broke into muffled weeping.

I had been tenderly patting my nose. My hand shot on up, grabbed my hat and flung it in Lubeck's face. The gun went off. Then I was reaching for him—but I was late. Barney Savage, on the

floor, had a death-grip on Lubeck's knees.

I kicked Lubeck's arm as he tried to get the gun on Savage. In the next instant all three of us were rolling around on the floor. An elbow caught my battered nose, and water gushed out of my eyes like beer out of a busted barrel. Lubeck and Savage struggled up, furiously locked, then crashed on top of me. The gun went off again. Somebody was breathing terribly hard in my ear. I was afraid to look.

"Get up, Morgan," said a weary voice from the doorway.

I kept my face in the carpet. "Who's dead, Mike?"

"Not you. Get up."

Barney Savage was sitting beside me, a glaze in his eyes, muttering brokenly. "It—it went off. . . I—it went—"

"Yeah," I agreed, looking at the hole in Lubeck's chest. I had hated the guy's guts, but I didn't hate him now. I looked away. "Well—you found out, didn't you? You wondered what you'd want to do to the guy who killed your brother." I shrugged. "You wanted him dead. That's the way you've got him."

"People always call the cops too late," said Mike. "Always."

Skippy was sobbing hysterically. One of the cops took her into the other room. Donelli said heavily: "I wanted to handle this one myself. I wanted that guy personally."

"It's just as well," I said. "So did I. But I don't feel cheated."

I stood in the hall, weariness in my very soul, waiting for Sheil. I could fit Lubeck in with Smith, now, although they'd never prove it—and never have to. Lubeck had said he had planned to let Donelli buy back that gun. That meant only one thing to me—a shake-down.

I could see Lubeck after Tony's murder, scared—and then wondering if he could turn Donelli's gun into a fat bankroll. He needed help on the shake-down. So he chose his roommate, Smith.

No matter how little he had told Smith, it was too much. He was all right for petty work—but he was too small for such a highpowered league. He probably hadn't wanted any part of it. But he must have figured there was information worth a price in this somewhere.

The picture wasn't too difficult to put together, up to there. Alec had helped some, when he revealed he had mentioned Skippy's warning to someone at the Long Beach number. That would have been Smith, taking Lubeck's calls. So he knew, then, of a market for his information—me.

I lit a cigarette, and watched the customers being herded out of the Crescent Club. A woman's laughter drifted up the stairs, oddly chilling me. . .

Anyway, I decided, Lubeck grew suspicious of Smith and quickly regretted having approached him. Perhaps Smith had betrayed himself. That scared Lubeck. So he fed Smith the slow poison in a shot of whisky. Lubeck wasn't a scientist, a chemist or even a soda jerk. But in his line of business he picked up a great deal of information.

Mike came into the hall. He said, "I've got most of it from Donelli. Let's go see if they have any coffee in this joint."

We sat in a kitchen that gleamed like an aluminum factory and talked it over. I felt a little better when we agreed on most of the answers. Mike eyed me. "You say that from the time you first talked to Lubeck you thought he was trying to pull a fast one. How come?"

"Well, it wasn't much, really. But—I always thought if a guy lies a first time he's a cinch for a repeat performance."

"He lied a first time?"

"Sure. So I didn't buy his story. . . He said he never knew anybody named Smith." I had to grin; it was such a silly, little tip-off. "Mike, *everybody* knows somebody named Smith."

He chuckled, getting up. "You know, this reminds me of a case I had when I first got into police work, back home."

"Back home? I thought you were a native."

He shook his head. "No, I'm from—"

"Oh, my shattered back! I might have known it. Chicago."

His brow wrinkled. "Why, no. I'm from Kansas City."

MANHATTAN HORSE OPERA

Hugo neither heard nor felt the blow that dropped him gently into unconsciousness.

Hugo the fat boy would bet on anything, with just one condition: that he couldn't possibly lose. Then came the night he wouldn't have wagered a Hungarian pengo on his own life at a million to one!

IF A GOOD tailor could have gotten hold of Hugo Stanwicz, known familiarly as Hugo Stanwicz, he would have covered the great slabs of fat with a neat, loose-fitting gray suit in a quiet pattern. Then, when Hugo rolled through the lobby of the Edwinet Hotel on his way to make a soft buck, only the uninformed would stare. They might say to the man at the cigar counter: "Are they making a movie in here?"

And the man would answer: "Friend, that is Hugo Stanwicz and he will be glad to make you a small wager on anything you care to name—after he's checked the odds and bought insurance."

But Hugo didn't wear the quiet gray suit. He wore spectacular creations, padded on the shoulders, nipped in at the waist, flaring over the massive haunches. A surprisingly thin and exceedingly long nose, appearing to swing when he walked,

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

bisected his vast and muddy face, giving Hugo the look of a happy and stunted elephant which had been taught during its formative years to walk on its back legs. His little gray eyes, imbedded in pads of doughy flesh, looked out at the world with vacant amiability. He carried, hidden away in his clothes, a silver coin the size of a small saucer. On one side was written, in tiny, rose-cut diamonds, the word, *Heads*. Under it was engraved *I win*. On the other side was an appropriate *Tails* and the mystic *You lose*.

It was the center and focus of Hugo's code. And it had made innumerable trips to Benjamin's Emporium—loans freely granted, unsecured if necessary, provided applicant can furnish the co-signatures of three other persons, permanently and suitably employed. The silver saucer was always good for eight dollars and fifty cents with Benjamin.

Hugo had learned, at an early age, that he was of a type unsuited to manual labor. Being an heir to nothing more than a lease on a railroad flat and a shovel caked with cement, living off his income appeared unfeasible. His way became clear at the time of the long-count Dempsey-Tunney fracas. A month before the bout, Hugo found a citizen who was willing to wager five dollars even money on the outcome. In a fit of recklessness, Hugo bet on Dempsey. It troubled him, as it was most probable that he would not have the five to pay off should he lose—and the other party was a man with big hard fists. In the middle of a sleepless night, Hugo grunted his way out of bed and made many figures on a piece of paper. At last he was able to sleep, and the next day he found an ardent Dempsey supporter and wagered two dollars at three to one on Tunney.

After the fight, Hugo collected his six dollars from the Dempsey supporter and paid five of it to the Tunney supporter. He spent long hours with his fat white hand deep in his pocket, fingering the dollar profit. If the fight had gone the other way, he would have made three dollars profit. A great light dawned for Hugo. It was possible for a man to bet without any possibility of loss. He never returned to the Brooklyn grocery store. He had the secret of permanent income without labor. True, it came much harder for Hugo to live with the profits of insured betting than it did for those persons, nimbler mentally and physically, who had been making a nice living for years at the same occupation. The tip of Hugo's tongue was permanently stained from sucking on the stub of a pencil, puffy brow knotted, while he strained at the simple mathematics of the racket.

Years lent a certain dexterity, and in time, Hugo should have become an expert. He would have, but for one thing. Deep in the massive frame was hidden a small spark of gambling fever—an insidious little spark. Hugo, with cool and careful restraint, would accumulate a reasonable chunk of money, and then, feeling that he had inside information, wager it without insurance on the outcome of anything from a dog race to the Kentucky Derby to a couple of Golden Gloves kids hacking at each other.

He lost oftener than he won. And then his heart hung in his breast like a soggy turnip fried in deep fat. He visited Benjamin . . . the saucer changed hands . . . and Hugo began again with very small stakes—insured.

He recognized this failing within himself. He indulged in fits of morose self-reproach. And did it again.

But, as he walked through the lobby of the Edwinet Hotel, there was a tilt to his pearl gray hat that would have been jaunty on another head. He had pyramided his insured winnings to an imposing level—and he was full of resolve never to make another uninsured bet.

HUGO turned sideways to squeeze through the narrow doors of the elevator, and the twisted melody of a popular song rumbled in his throat as he rode upwards to the third floor where Barnie O'Gay made book in a converted suite.

He walked in, nodded to his myriad acquaintances. He had no friends. No

man who plays the angles for a soft buck ever has friends. The world is full of faces and in the faces are sharp eyes—and behind the eyes are many plots—each of them calculated to impoverish all other men. Hugo didn't find this strange. He didn't know that any other attitude was possible.

He walked heavily to the board and looked it over. Fights at the Garden. Basternick against Codey at even money. Hmmm. Codey's a colored boy. Odds ought to be different in Harlem. He made a mental note. And Chavat versus Antonelli. Six to five in favor of Chavat. There ought to be good Antonelli money in Brooklyn.

He located Barnie and counted out eight hundred dollars in the O'Gay paw. "Hole onta this, Barnie. I'll phone in a hour."

Barnie said: "Eight hunnert. Check. What's today's spread?"

Hugo smiled sadly and said: "Now, Barnie, you know I can't tell ya until I get my dough down."

Hugo left and Barnie sauntered over to his assistant, a small, frightened-looking man with the sad eyes of a kicked spaniel. Barnie said: "That fat clown, that Hugo, he gives me eight hundred today. It's guys like him give honest bookies a black eye."

"What you going to do, Barnie?"

He shrugged. "What can you do? When guys as dumb as him can bet it so they can't lose . . ." He left the sentence unfinished, and walked away.

Hugo had to hurry. This was the part of the business he didn't like. In fact, he had to run three steps to make the closing door of an uptown express. He sat on the wicker upholstery, patting his face dry with a big pale green handkerchief. He walked from his stop to a cigar store in Harlem, nodding to the habitues as he went. There was no board in the back room, but one quick question gave the answer that Codey was being quoted as a seven to five favorite.

Hugo did some scribbling on the back of an envelope. It was a nice spread. He said: "May want some of that. Wait'll I phone." He squeezed into a booth and called Barnie. "Codey and Basternick quoted even? They are? Put six hunnert of what I give you on Codey. I'll pick up the slip. Yeah. Thanks." He hung up, eased out of the booth and bet five hundred to seven hundred on Basternick.

He walked out, feeling very satisfied. If Codey should win, he'd lose five hundred in Harlem and win six hundred at Barnie's. If Basternick should win, he'd win seven hundred in Harlem and lose six hundred at Barnie's. One hundred bucks in his pocket for sure.

He took a long subway ride out to Brooklyn and went to three places he knew before he found Chavat versus Antonelli at even money. He figured again, phoned Barnie and told him to bet the two hundred left on Antonelli at the short end of the six to five price. Then he bet two hundred and twenty on Chavat at even money. If Chavat should win, he'd win two hundred and twenty in Brooklyn and lose two hundred at Barnie's. If Antonelli should win, he'd lose two hundred and twenty in Brooklyn and win two hundred and forty at Barnie's. A sure twenty bucks either way.

His activities had taken a large slice out of the morning, but it meant a net of a hundred and twenty dollars so far for the day. He picked up his slips from Barnie, ate a heavy lunch at a joint just off Times Square and found a movie where a double bill, two horse operas, were showing. He sat in deep contentment, his stomach rumbling over the big meal, solemnly eating popcorn and watching with wide, bland eyes as the hero fired sixty-nine shots from a six-shooter without reloading. Westerns were Hugo's vice.

While he sat, monolithic and content munching his popcorn, a trio of extroverted citizens sat in their shirtsleeves in a plush apartment in the Sixties, drinking Scotch, smoking dollar cigars and planning a big push. There was Joe Banto, numbers king of a large eastern city, a flamboyant little swarthy man who talked with very little lip movement; Judson Gale, whose gambling ships anchored off shore had made many head-

lines, a plump litttle man with rosy cheeks, white hair and scarred knuckles; Hillary Meyer, wan and ineffectual heir to a fortune once thought inexhaustible, but crippled by the large nibbles of six divorced wives.

Joe Banto said: "Now I'll run over it again lightly. The championship fight between Mole Anderson and Junior Gee is scheduled for three weeks from today. Time's getting short and we got to move fast. Meyer, you're putting up five hundred thousand, same as Gale and me. That makes the syndicate capital a million and a half. Now, through the local contacts, I got a list of the soft dollar boys that'll farm out the bets for us. Mole Anderson is a five to one favorite. Our problem, boys, is to get five hundred thousand bet on Junior Gee so fast that we catch it all at the present rate. We got to have timing. Now, let's—"

Hillary Meyer said: "Why do we have to deal with these middlemen? Why can't the bet all be placed at once?"

"Shut up, dope," Banto said. "No one place could handle it, and by the time they farmed it out, the price would be wrong. I got ten dependable guys to place fifty apiece, and place it so fast in so many different places that we'll catch the low price. We can't do it ourselves. We'd be tipping the deal off. Besides, we don't want to attract the attention of the tax boys."

Judson Gale asked: "Where will that drive the price to?"

"My guess is five to three. Maybe five to four, but I don't think so. Then comes the gimmick. I bought me a guy with a sports column, and the week before the fight he's going to stick in some talk about Mole Anderson being way off his timing, getting a bad cut in training and having a torn tendon in his wrist. That'll drive it to an even money bet. Then is when we jump in with the million. We can't figure on placing it all at even money, but with the same technique, we can maybe place half of it at even and the rest at five to four. Then, if Junior wins, we net a million and a half, deducting the million we bet on Mole from the two and a half million we clean if Junior wins. If Mole wins, we net about four hundred grand. We can't lose either way. It's done all the time, but never this big before. In the meantime, I'll see if I can get Mole to dive for fifty thousand. It'll help, but we still win even if he crosses us."

"I'm afraid, gentlemen, that I don't follow all this," Hillary Meyer said.

"Shut up!" said Banto.

The three men unlocked the cases they had brought with them and the cash was counted. Judson Gale said: "It's only fair to tell you, Joe, I'll have a tail on you all the time. I trust you, you know, but it's just good business."

"Sure. Hell, it won't bother me," Banto said lightly.

Hillary Meyer looked wistful as his cash disappeared into Banto's suitcase. He hoped that the unpleasant little man knew what he was talking about.

THUS it was that three hours later, Joe Banto sat in the office of a powerful New York citizen, interviewing the leg men who were to place the bets.

Hugo Stanwicz, having been intercepted in the lobby of the cheap hotel where he lived just as he was having pleasant thoughts of dinner, had been hustled into a waiting cab, pouting all the way down to the office of the powerful citizen.

He lost his pout when he saw who it was who had sent for him. The powerful citizen said: "Joe, this is Hugo Stanwicz. He makes his living in the odds business and gets around very quickly indeed for all his size."

Hugo nodded rapidly: "Yah."

Banto said: "O. K., Hugo. Here is one hundred and fifty thousand bucks. It is a lot of money and to help you watch it, I got a friend here named Hoag. Hoag, you go around with Hugo and you watch he doesn't get any reckless ideas. Hugo, you take the section East Fourteenth to East Fortieth, and starting tomorrow at ten in the morning, you grab off fifty thousand worth on Junior Gee to beat Mole Anderson. Don't take no less than five to one. Then you wait about a week

and I'll get word to you through Hoag here and tell you when to go to the same places and place one hundred thousand in small pieces on Mole Anderson. Get even money for all you can and no worse than five to four."

Hugo said: "From five to one down to even money!"

"That's right. And no funny business. You cross us up and I got another friend in town. A Chicago boy from the old days. You play it crosswise, and my friend, he puts a slug, which he rubs in garlic first, right in that fat middle of yours."

Hugo quivered as he had a very vivid mental picture of said slug breaking and entering. He opened his mouth to protest his innocence of any such move, but all he could utter was a faint chirping noise.

Banto smiled grimly and said: "Goodbye, Hugo, and don't lose the dough in the subway."

Hugo left, followed closely by a muscular citizen named Hoag. Hoag was a redfaced man in his early forties, with a look on his face as though he smelled dead mice in the woodwork. They went back to Hugo's room. Hoag hauled the couch over in front of the door and went to sleep. He slept with his arms folded, his right hand resting on a Colt-shaped bulge near his left armpit.

Hugo slept poorly. In one dream he was running backwards down the street pursued by a large, leering bullet which followed him around corners and licked its chops in an alarming manner. He awoke and his disposition wasn't improved by the sight of the muscular shadow using the bathtub. A short, fat revolver gleamed blackly on the tile floor. Hugo stepped gingerly around it and brushed his teeth.

They ate a silent breakfast together. Hugo was acutely conscious of the sickening bulge of currency in his inside pocket. It weighed on his soul. He ate a meager breakfast of orange juice, fried eggs, sausage, waffles, toast, jam and coffee.

At ten sharp he stepped into Tiny Marlow's place on Fourteenth, sweat beading his gray expanse of brow. The board was up and the odds were Mole Anderson over Junior Gee—five to one. Tiny was behind the wicket, sucking up coffee with large uncouth noises. Hugo sidled up and waited until a horse man had wandered away. He said to Tiny: "How much Gee money can you soak up?"

Tiny looked at him with mild distaste as he set the cup down. "What you think this is, Hugo? Woolworth's, maybe? I can soak up any kind of dough you ever had in your pants. You name it."

"No, Tiny. You tell me, huh?"

"Hugo, name your bet."

"How about fifteen grand, Tiny?"

Tiny picked up the cup of coffee and got it almost to his lips. He paused and set it down. "Did you say fifteen grand?"

"Yah."

"Gimme a couple minutes on the phone, Hugo and I'll handle all of it."

"No soap. I don't want you farming it. How much could you handle?"

"Let's say eight."

Hugo faced a wall and fumbled with the packet of money. He came back and slipped eight thousand dollar bills across the high counter. Tiny inspected each one carefully before he made out the slip. He said: "Kinda outa your class, ain't you, Hugo?"

Hugo gave him a large, damp, uncertain smile before he turned away and hurried out. The shadow detached itself from a wall and fell in step beside him.

Bellafleur took six; Rockanzo took eleven; Halloway took three; Empero took nine; Jackson took another eight; Muriel took the last five. And it was noon. Hugo assembled the slips with trembling fingers and pinned them together. Fifty thousand at five to one! A quarter of a million bucks if Junior Gee happened to win!

But it wasn't likely that the Fancy Dan, Mr. Gee, with lots of dance steps and a twenty-two caliber punch could last the limit against the heavy artillery of Mole Anderson.

The shadow accompanied Hugo to a double feature, two westerns—but his presence and the bulge of the remaining

hundred thousand turned the popcorn to ashes in Hugo's mouth and made it hard for him to follow the action on the screen.

In Hugo's simple philosophy, it was only necessary for him to find the courage to finish the unsavory mission and be rid of his shadow. He felt no resentment about having been chosen. The world was full of people a little bit rougher than Hugo. In his own way, he sought self-effacement. He bore his affliction with the same stoicism with which he would have faced a common cold. He prayed that it would end soon.

BUT the ways of the acute little men who make their living on the fringes of society are devious indeed. The Very Powerful Citizen, having provided Joe Banto with a moderate amount of assistance, added some refinements of his own—added them with cunning and a deep appreciation of the value of a dollar. Even as Hoag followed Hugo, another citizen followed both of them. He blended into the gray and neon of Manhattan the way a lizard finds invisibility on a rough wall. And he looked a bit like a lizard.

After two days of careful observation, he made his report to the VPC. "All they got on the fat guy is this Hoag, who is not very bright. Every day he follows the fat guy to a few horse rooms and then they both go to the movies. Cowboy movies. Fat boy spends a lot of time eating and a lot of time sleeping."

The VPC was following the odds closely and had noted that Mole Anderson had become but a five to four favorite. He knew that in a day or two, Joe Banto would pass the word to Hugo to get the other hundred thousand down. And nine other men in the big town would also be slamming a hundred thousand apiece on Mole Anderson. But the VPC wasn't greedy. He had designs on only two of the ten—Hugo and another sharpie who seemed to be equally defenseless.

So the lizard listened attentively while the VPC gave detailed instructions.

Hugo sat in the balcony of the fourth-rate movie house, his great jaws champing in a circular motion, grinding up the greasy bits of popcorn. He was beginning to enjoy the movies once more, having made an adjustment to the ever-present Mr. Hoag and the uncomfortable bulge of currency in his inside coat pocket.

In the picture the blockhouse was on fire, and the desperadoes were worming their way up through the brush for a final charge at the brave defenders. The blonde was reloading six-guns for the hero. The desperadoes charged, and the picture house rattled with the crashing shots. Hugo didn't notice that someone behind them made a quick motion and Mr. Hoag slumped down in his seat. The small crunching noise was unnoticed. Fragments of the mastoid bone slid into Mr. Hoag's brain and perpetually stilled his rather vegetable-like reactions to his environment.

Nor did Hugo see, hear or feel the blow which dropped him gently into unconsciousness. He didn't feel the hand that slid down inside his coat and removed the bulge that had bothered him for days. The lizard paused and looked back before walking casually down the stairway. The two heads were silhouetted against the flickering screen.

When Hugo awakened in the hospital he politely answered all the questions of the police. Yes, he knew Mr. Hoag. Slightly. He had gone to the movies with Mr. Hoag. Yes, he had been robbed. A little money had been taken. And a few betting slips. No, he didn't know who had done it. Very sorry.

Hugo struggled back into his clothes, gently fingered the lump behind his ear, and walked out of the hospital. A slender and ominous person urged him to get into a taxi which took him to a dingy and soundproof basement apartment near Sheridan Square. There he was quickly and expertly tied into a sturdy chair by two young men with the determined sadness of funeral directors. Hugo's mouth was as dry as West Texas and his fat palms had the texture of wet sponges. He felt unhappy.

He was left alone for an hour. At last a delegation arrived. It consisted of Joe Banto, Judson Gale, the Very Powerful

Citizen, the lizard and a new person called Charlie. Hugo formed an immediate dislike for Charlie, who had a wet, loose mouth, little hot eyes and long thick fingers. He looked at Hugo with the same professional attention that a butcher gives to a side of beef.

Joe Banto stood in front of Hugo, his hands on his hips. "It won't work, fat boy."

Hugo said: "Hah?"

"Don't play stupid, you lump of suet. It was real neat. Hoag gets his head smashed and you get a little tap on the head that maybe puts you to sleep and maybe doesn't. Who's holding the dough for you?"

Neither Hugo nor Joe Banto had any way of knowing that the lizard had not meant to kill. He had merely been hurrying to time the first blow with a blast of gunfire from the screen. With a sap, any undue haste geometrically increases the force of the blow.

So Hugo said: "Hah?"

Banto shrugged in disgust and the assembled group glared at Hugo. Banto turned and said: "Charlie, we'll all be back in the kitchen. You play with him for a little while and let us know when he decides to get talkative."

The kitchen door slammed shut. Charlie knelt and gently took the shoe and sock from Hugo's massive pink foot. Hugo's ankle was lashed to the leg of the chair. Charlie began to work with small tools and infinite delicacy on the fat foot.

Hugo bellowed once. From then on he screamed frankly. Charlie stopped and waited until the screaming ceased. Hugo's face was the color of unbaked pastry. Sweat rolled down it, soaking into his collar.

Charlie said: "How about it?"

Hugo gasped: "Don't . . . know . . . nothing."

Charlie bent over his work again. All the world, for Hugo, dissolved into a bright hot spark of pain that grew and grew and suddenly ceased. He came to when Charlie threw water in his face.

Charlie said: "You O.K.?" When Hugo nodded, he sighed and said, "Well, let's go back to it," and bent over the foot again. The foot was beginning to lose resemblance to the other foot.

There was unbelievable pain and then the darkness. And again. Again. Nature came slowly to Hugo's aid, deadening the ability of the nerves to transmit pain, turning the entire situation into a fantastic nightmare which lost all relationship to reality.

Hugo was vaguely conscious of Joe Banto standing in front of him once more. He heard Charlie saying, from a great distance: "Either the guy knows nothing, or he's got a lot of guts."

They all left him alone, and in the silent hours, reality came back to him. And with it came a sort of dignity. The first dignity that Hugo Stanwicz had known in his vague life. He had been hurt, and with the hurt there had grown a slow anger. It was as massive and ponderous as Hugo himself. It filled his mind, and he forgot the throbbing pain of the nerves in his foot.

They all came back during the night. Banto looked tired. He said: "This is the payoff, Stanwicz. Tell me now or tomorrow they find you on your back in a Jersey swamp, with your eyes open."

With his new dignity, Hugo said: "I don't know nothing, and if I did, I'd never tell you guys."

The Very Powerful Citizen said to the lizard: "Untie him." The Very Powerful Citizen was happy. He was unsuspected, and he had personally added a very fine stack of bills to one of his safety deposit boxes. A very profitable situation.

Hugo sat heavily in the chair, his numb hands freed. He heard Banto say: "You two boys take him in the sedan. And get him away from the car. I don't want no blood on the upholstery."

Hugo thought: *It can't end this way. Always, in the movies, something happens. A hundred times I see it. Somebody comes in and sticks up the villains. Or the hero grabs a gun and blasts his way out. It doesn't end this way.* But while he thought, he could somehow see himself staring up at the dawn with sightless eyes, feel the rip of bullets through his big body.

Joe Banto disappeared into the bed-

room and came out with a cheap .32 revolver. He handed it to Charlie, saying: "This'll do it. Toss it off the bridge on the way back." Charlie swung the cylinder open and inspected the brass ends of the cartridges. He snapped it back into place.

A GUN is a strange gadget. Women have fired six shots at their husbands from a range of ten feet and missed with every shot. They tried to aim. Police courses in many cities emphasize the fact that in close work, a gun should be aimed as naturally as one points a finger, with no conscious effort at aiming.

A gun in the hands of a child is very dangerous, because they point it in the proper direction instinctively.

Hugo had never fired a gun.

Hugo had seen hundreds of westerns, had seen hundreds of heroes grab a weapon and go bam, bam, bam—a villain dropping onto his face with each shot. Hugo thus believed a gun to be infallible.

Charlie made a mistake. He held the gun out toward Hugo and said: "Here it is, Fat Boy. Meet Mr. Bang."

Suddenly all the circumstances fitted. Hugo flashed his big paw out with blinding speed and grabbed the little gun. Joe Banto, Charlie, the lizard, Judson Gale and the Very Powerful Citizen were in the room. Hugo turned the gun in his hand and the cheap little gun went whack, whack, whack, whack, whack—as he swiveled it around the room.

If Hugo had ever fired a gun before, he would very probably have inflicted one bad chest wound, one arm wound and three clean misses.

But to Hugo a gun was infallible, and he fired with all the negligent confidence of a later-day Tom Mix. He aimed it with the same ease with which he would have pointed his finger. Hugo didn't even know that a gun had sights.

The Very Powerful Citizen caught the little slug flush in the mouth, and fell face down. Charlie backed to the wall and slid down, pawing at the hole in his chest. He slumped over and lay still. Judson Gale sighed and turned completely around before he fell. The round hole in his forehead bled hardly at all. The lizard tried to scream, but the rush of air that should have activated his vocal cords sped through the hole in his throat in a mist of blood. He went down heavily. Joe Banto smiled at Hugo, a smile that drew his lips back tightly against his teeth. His hand went slowly up toward a shoulder holster as the blood spread on his shirt. His fingertips were touching his own gun as he fell.

Hugo Stanwicz sat in the small silent room, breathing heavily. He thrust himself up to his feet, limped painfully over and stepped with his shod foot on the cigarette butt which smoldered on the rug, having dropped from Banto's fingers. Hugo limped back to the chair and forced his gashed foot into his sock and shoe.

He found the phone, dialed the number and said: "This is Hugo Stanwicz. I've just killed five guys. You better come over." He gave the address and hung up.

With his new dignity, with his fat shoulders squared, he went back and sat down on the chair to await the arrival of the police. His anger was fading away and he looked at the bodies with mingled pride and horror, not realizing the strange effectiveness of his shooting, not knowing that dozens of men from Headquarters would stand by his chair and calculate angles and percentages, would scratch their heads wearily and try hard to believe that this man, who had never fired a gun, could do such a thing.

Hugo knew, in his vast simplicity, that it would be madness to try to run away from such a mass shooting. He had faith in the ways of westerns, where the court cleared the hero in a brief ceremony.

As he waited for the police, the bodies gradually ceased to be of very much importance. They faded out of his mind even as the dead movie villains had done for years. When he heard the sirens in the distance, he realized that he had been thinking about the current athletic contests in the big city, wondering where he could find a spread in odds big enough to make up for the few days' loss of income.

LIFTING THE NOVEMBER BLACK MASK

MORTIMER Jones never expected his circulating-library knowledge of Freud would lead to murder. But a gumshoe can use applied psychology where policemen fear to tread, so when he discovered that the fiery Patricia had a strange set of motivations and owned half the mint to boot, the Duesenberg-driving dick decided to jump into the psychiatric puddle with a vengeance. Most of the soul doctors, he'd discovered, were blind leading the blind anyway, so why shouldn't his all-seeing eye be a healthy orb to focus on the mess—and if there was a fat fee at the end of the labyrinth so much the better for Jones! . . . It's WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT at his best solving the amazing riddle of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

* * * * * *

"Relax, big boy," Marie Correll said out of the corner of her mouth like a mediocre actress in a gangster picture, C-grade.

What could Duane do? She carried a gun. She had killed a man. She was a dangerous woman.

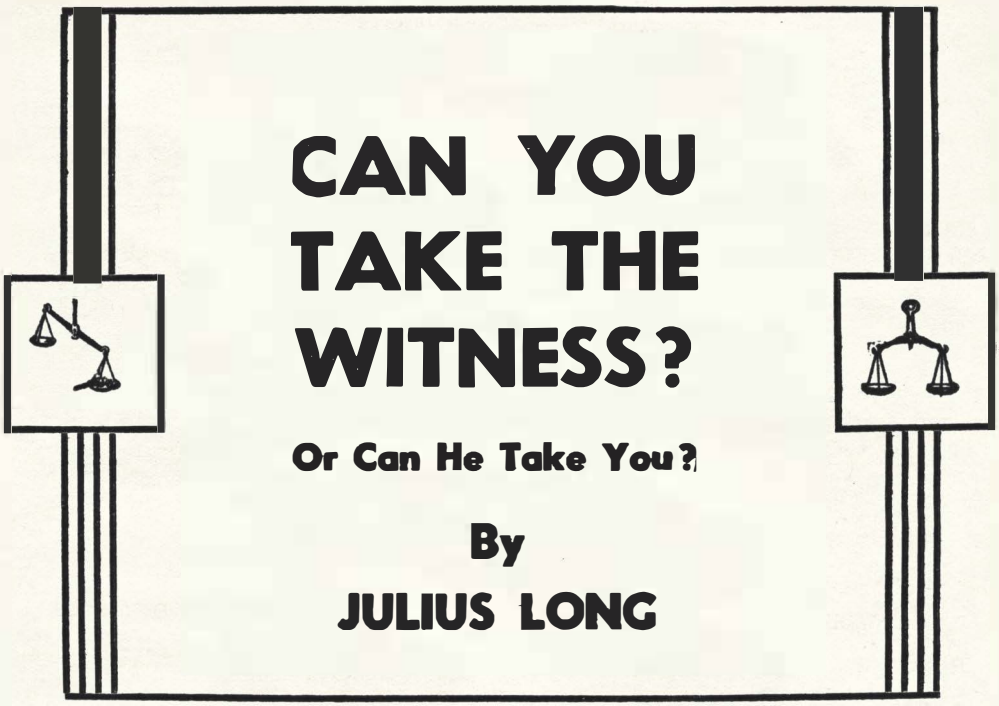
He relaxed.

But that, of course, was only at the very end of R. M. F. JOSES' smashing new novelette—*Red Pearls*. A brace of murders, abduction, the most-thorough sapping any hardboiled private eye ever absorbed, plus the neatest crooked jewel-gimmick any wrong gee ever cooked up to finagle the insurance companies, all take place before Duane can call it a night. It's the nonesuch peep of *And Death Did Them Part* back again to play both ends against the middle in as exciting a crime-sequence as you'll read in many a murder-moon.

* * * * * *

Plus another great Sackler novelette by D. L. CHAMPION . . . H. H. STINSON'S latest long mystery-thriller. . . . An exciting Ben Corbett novelette by JULIUS LONG. . . . And shorts by BRUNO FISCHER and others.

This smashing big NOVEMBER issue will be out on September 19.



CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS?

Or Can He Take You?

By JULIUS LONG

1

You represent Farmer Jones, who owns a herd of thoroughbred Jersey cows and who supplies his milk customers with milk whose butterfat content is in excess of 5%.

Farmer Jones has been charging 15c per quart for his milk, which infuriates the state milk trust which charges 15c for near-skim milk. So the big company bribes enough state legislators to pass a law making it illegal to sell milk containing butterfat content in excess of 4% at a price of less than 20c per quart. Farmer Jones, stubborn as a mule, persists in selling his choice milk for 15c per quart, and is promptly arrested and indicted as a felon. But before his case comes to trial sufficient public indignation has been aroused to force a repeal of the law making it a crime to sell high-quality milk cheap. So on the day of his trial you move the court to dismiss the case against him, arguing that the criminal law under which he is charged has been repealed. The D.A. argues that the repealing law is not retroactive and that Farmer Jones must be tried under the law as it was when he allegedly committed its violation.

What will be the judge's decision? Will he dismiss the case against Farmer Jones or will he rule that he must stand trial?

2

You are the district attorney and you are trying Dick Roe for selling fireworks on the 4th of July, contrary to the law of the state. The defense counsel moves that the case against Dick Roe be dismissed for the reason that on July 1st, four days before the alleged violation by Roe, the anti-fireworks law was repealed. But you, the D.A., counter with the argument that on the 1st day of August following, the repealing law was itself repealed. Therefore, the anti-

fireworks law was revived, and Dick Roe is not saved by any temporary repeal of it.

What will the judge's decision be—will he dismiss the case against Dick Roe or rule that he must be tried under the anti-fireworks law?

3

You are the D.A. trying Sam Samuels for armed robbery. You have produced ten eye-witnesses to testify to Sam's guilt, and poor Sam has been able to produce no witnesses to the contrary. Moreover, he makes an extremely poor witness, squirming in the stand, stuttering confusedly and failing to make any defense for himself whatever. So, under the circumstances, you ask the judge to point this out to the jury and tell it that the only way it can do its duty is to convict Sam Samuels for his crime.

Will the judge grant your request?

4

You are the district attorney trying Danny Dare for armed robbery. The defense counsel relies upon the defense that as he was perpetrating his act Danny lost his nerve and ran away, therefore committing no crime. You, the D.A., request the judge to read the law of armed robbery to the jury, so they will know that whether or not the defendant ran away after commencing his criminal act is a matter of no consequence. The defense counsel objects, arguing that an accused man is tried by a jury, not by a judge, and that for the judge to influence the jury would be a violation of the defendant's constitutional rights.

Who will prevail, you, the D.A., or the defense counsel?

5

You are the defense counsel, and your client, John Drinker, is on trial for driving while intoxicated. You base your defense on the fact that all John had had to drink the day of his alleged criminal act was beer and that beer is not intoxicating. The judge, in his charges to the jury, comments as follows: "It is true that the state has introduced no expert witnesses to give evidence tending to show that beer may be intoxicating. However, such evidence is not necessary to establish the guilt of the accused, for it is common knowledge that beer is intoxicating."

John Drinker is convicted, and you appeal his case, arguing in the court of appeals that the judge erred in influencing the jury as to the evidence when he told it that beer may be intoxicating. Will the court of appeals reverse the conviction on this ground and grant your client a new trial?

6

You are the district attorney, and Jack Jackson is on trial for larceny. His defense is an alibi, and his alibi witnesses are four guys named Joe. One after another they all tell a story which has obviously been rehearsed. So you ask the judge to call the jury's attention to the fact that the similarity of the stories indicates their collective lack of veracity. Will the judge give the jury such advice?

7

You are the district attorney handling the prosecution of Jerry James for pocketpicking. You know that Jerry is a congenital pickpocket, having had his hands in more pockets than an old-time Prohibition agent, and you call as witness a city detective who knows Jerry's rep as well as anyone. The defense counsel has offered no witnesses to testify as to Jerry's good character, and for that reason he thinks you can't introduce testimony as to his bad character.

Will the judge let your witness, the detective, testify as to Jerry's rep?

8

You are the defense counsel for Joe Mugg, on trial for first degree murder. He is charged with having with malice aforethought pushed his mother-in-law

into a flooded quarry. The D.A. has produced ten witnesses who saw Joe push the old gal into the quarry, and the same witnesses have testified that though they stuck around all day after the commission of the crime, they did not see the body come up. However, when the D.A. rests his case, you ask for a dismissal of it on the ground that he has failed to prove a *corpus delicti.* Nobody ever saw Joe's mother-in-law after he pushed her into the quarry; nobody has ever seen her dead body. As everybody knows, you can't convict a man for murder unless you've got a *corpus delicti.*

Will the judge dismiss the case against Joe because the D.A. has failed to produce a body?

Answers to Preceding Questions

1

The judge will dismiss the case against Farmer Jones, for generally a repealing law acts as a pardon for all violations of the repealed law that have not been brought to final judgment. Of course this is subject to three exceptions. The repealing law may contain a saving clause; a saving clause for all repealing statutes may be incorporated in statutory law; it may also be contained in the state constitution. Generally, however, all persons under indictment for the violation of a criminal law are pardoned by the repeal of the law, *if the case against them is still pending.*

2

The judge will dismiss the case against Dick Roe, for though the repeal of a law which has repealed a criminal law revives the criminal law, the criminal law was a nullity during the interim between its repeal and its revival.

3

No, the judge will not grant your request and tell the jury that its duty is to convict poor Sam. The weighing of the evidence is the province of the jury, not of the judge who presides over the trial.

4

You, the D.A., will win the argument. It is the province of the court to instruct the jury upon matters of law. The rules of criminal procedure are sufficiently practical to recognize the fact that the jury would be helpless to decide what the law is from the arguments of counsel, and the judge is accordingly required to state the law and explain it.

5

No, the court of appeals will not give your client a new trial because the judge stated a fact which is common knowledge. Judges may comment on matters of common knowledge, and it is certainly common knowledge that beer may be intoxicating.

6

No, the judge will not advise the jury as to the credibility of witnesses, for weighing their credibility is the province of the jury. It is obvious to anyone with any trial experience that several alibi witnesses could not be telling the truth if their stories jibe exactly. There is enough margin for error in the recollection of events to make slight variations perfectly natural. However, juries are frequently naive with respect to the natural conduct of witnesses, and a wise defense counsel will see that his alibi witnesses parrot each other's testimony, the intelligence of juries being the strongest evidence yet adduced that Man is descended from monkeys.

7

No, the judge will not permit your witness as to Jerry's bad character to testify. It is a universal rule that no evidence of bad character may be introduced against an accused man unless he has offered evidence of his good

character. Once he calls a single character witness on his behalf, the door is opened against him.

8

No, no, a thousand times no! It is true that no man may be convicted of murder until a *corpus delicti* is proven, but that does not mean that the body of the murdered person must be produced. The *corpus delicti* is the *body of the crime,* not the body of the murdered person. The *corpus delicti* consists of two components: the act and the criminal agency of the act. In a homicide case the act is the homicide and the criminal agency is the criminal aspect of the homicide. A homicide itself may not be criminal—it may be justifiable, excusable or accidental. The criminal nature is the second phase that must be proven before the *corpus delicti* of murder is established. Both the act and the criminal agency may be established by circumstantial evidence. The fact that Joe Mugg's mother-in-law's body cannot be produced does not prevent the *corpus delicti* from being proven by the circumstances of her disappearance. The belief that the *corpus delicti* is the body itself of the murdered person is so widespread that many murderers have taken considerable pains to dispose of the body of their victim under the delusion that if it cannot be produced against them they may go free. Perhaps this widespread fallacy is owing to its perpetuation by mystery writers, but more probably it is owing to the fact that *corpus* sounds like corpse and leads to the natural assumption that *corpus delicti* must therefore be the body of the murdered person. However, every crime has its *corpus delicti.* If you jay-walk across the street contrary to law, your crime has a *corpus delicti* the same as murder. The *corpus delicti* in a jay-walking case consists of the fact that you (1) walked and the fact that you (2) walked contrary to law. So remember next time you are tempted to jay-walk that you might stumble over a *corpus delicti!*

THE END

BEHIND THE BLACK MASK

IF you have already read the lead story in this issue—Fergus Truslow's *Murder Makes the Cock Crow*—you were probably intrigued, as we were, by its unusual theme and setting—a bit off the beaten track of crime-fiction, with its bloody backdrop of feathered killers along with the more-to-be-expected specimens of homicidal *homo sapiens*. To satisfy our curiosity—and yours—we asked Mr. Truslow, how come? In reply to our query, he writes—

The springboard for *Murder Makes the Cock Crow* was thoughtfully provided by the District Attorney of Las Vegas, Nevada. He made a visit of state to L. A. recently. For the newspaper boys, he beat his breast loud enough to be heard back home, clear across the state line and beyond the L. A. city limits. He decried the way Angelenos were flocking to the fair metropolis of Las Vegas and bouncing rubber checks on honest gambling tables. The practice, he warned, must stop. If not, steps would be taken.

Alas. I fear that some of the sporting gentry around L. A. will lend him a deaf ear. The same deaf ear, incidentally, that they lend to the law's squawks about matching gamecocks.

About once a week, some beefy bailiff struggles into a courtroom here with feathered prisoners—*prima facie* evidence in cases where the law has raided a cockfight.

A gamecock who's been "in keep" for a couple of weeks craves fight. Lacking another gamecock, he'll settle for a bailiff. Or even a judge.

"In keep" isn't legal doubletalk for placing a rooster in protective custody. It means what it meant as far back as 1614, when cocking was written up in *The Pleasures of Princes*. It means to put a bird in training.

A gamecock has to train for a fight, just like a leatherpusher. He even dons the gloves for brisk workouts with stumblebum sparring partners. He does roadwork to limber up the old legs. He gets sunbaths, and rubdowns. He does his pushups (in the form of "bounces" in his trainer's hands) and he watches his diet like a hawk. What am I saying?—like a dietician, I mean.

This training routine had long gray whiskers when the Roman Legions marched into Spain, carrying their gamecock mascots with them.

Los Angeles in 1947, or Roman Spain *circa* 50 B.C., it's still the same sport.

(Continued from page 84)

than some who are halfway to an asylum."

"Too bad," Westover sighed. "I almost hate to tuck you away this time, Rick. But, you certainly worked for Greg as a private detective. Harriette Hatfield told me that yesterday."

"And I thought Uncle Thad had sung his song," I muttered. "Live and learn. How's the Sing Sing baseball team doing this season? I'll be catching for them next year."

"Ah—look, Rick." Westover was thawing like an icicle in June. "I been thinking. Now I got the Hatfields and the answer to the whole business. I got Red Sawyer who did some of their dirty work. That ought to be enough."

I looked at him sidewise. "Are you hinting I should breeze?"

"No, dammit," he cried. "I think you are a subject for just punishment. It isn't only because you violated your parole by going back to the private detective business, but other things. Mostly you've been laughing at me."

"There'll be a lot of laughing—at you," I said complacently. I didn't feel complacent, but from somewhere I summoned enough nerve to make it sound real.

He gave me another of those sharp glances. "Meaning exactly what?"

"Well, you'll have to appear before a court or parole board and tell what I did. In doing so, you'll simply explain the things you did not do, but left for me. Like fully investigating the four attempts on Greg's life. Honestly, now, you

just figured the boy was crazy and let it go at that. Didn't you, Lieutenant?"

"I made all the investigation the circumstances warranted. I still think the boy is . . . oh, what's the use? You've got me over a barrel and you know it. I might have suspected—when you asked me to come to the Alden estate and agreed to wait there for me. I might have known there was a trick up your sleeve. One of those nasty little tricks you're so good at."

"Who is being nasty?" I protested without heat. "I'm telling you—the boys over your head will wonder why I discovered those things and you didn't. That's all there is to it. And me? I'm satisfied. I was back in the private eye business for a couple of days. I didn't do so badly either. Did I, Lieutenant?"

His foot came down on the car brake with a thump. The sedan shuddered and swung off the highway. Westover reached past me and opened the car door.

"Get out," he said softly. He was boiling, nearing the point of an explosion. "Out, you stir-bug. If I send you back, I'm in a mess. But you can't talk about me because that will mean action by the Parole Board and you'll be in prison again. We're even, Trent. We'll let it stay that way for now. But I'm warning you. . ."

I started to slide out of the seat while I regarded him expressionlessly. "That's the way you want to play it?"

"How else? Not on your account, but for the good of the department."

"O.K.," I told him. "So long as it is played precisely that way."

He gave me a push and I practically fell out of the car. He slammed the door and rolled off. I sighed, picked up my dogs and wondered how far it was to the next bus stop. I also did a little figuring. I'd spent three days on the case. At twenty-five bucks a day, I'd made seventy-five dollars which wasn't bad. In the morning I'd see that Greg got the difference out of that two grand. I had an expense account to figure, too. That was what saved me. I went into the nearest house and phoned for a cab.

THE END

Missing Page

Inside back cover

GROUP LIFE POLICY THAT INSURES THE ENTIRE FAMILY

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GRANDPARENTS, PARENTS, CHILDREN, AGES 1 TO 75 ALL INSURED IN ONE SINGLE LIFE INSURANCE POLICY

Genuine Life Insurance— No Medical Examination

The extremely low cost of this marvelous Family Group Life Insurance Policy is made possible because the Bankers Life and Casualty Co. has reduced selling costs to a minimum . . . this policy is sold by mail—no high-priced, high-pressure selling agents will call on you. Bookkeeping costs have been reduced because an entire family can be insured in a single policy – requiring only one policy, one premium notice, etc., etc., for as many as ten persons in a family.

FREE Inspection for 10 Days

Now everyone in your family may enjoy sound life insurance protection. Regardless of which member of your family dies . . . or how they die, after this policy is in full benefit, it pays cash promptly. You don't have to risk a penny to inspect this policy . . . we want you to examine it carefully, ask your friends about it. Don't delay . . . you never know when misfortune strikes. Be prepared with safe, sound life insurance for every member of your family.

Send No Money—No Agent Will Call

Don't send money! Just fill out the coupon and get the details now, without a single penny of expense to you. Learn all about the free 10-day inspection offer.

ACT NOW • SEND COUPON!

$1,000.00
Maximum Indemnity for Natural or Ordinary Death

$2,000.00
Maximum Indemnity for Auto Accidental Death

$3,000.00
Maximum Triple Indemnity for Travel Death

LIBERAL BENEFITS SHOWN IN TABLE BELOW

The amount of insurance payable upon the death of any of the persons insured hereunder shall be the amount set out in the following table for the attained age nearest birthday at death of such person divided by the number of persons insured hereunder immediately preceding such death.

Table of amount of insurance purchased by a monthly payment of one dollar.

Attained Age at Death	Natural or Ordinary Accidental Death Amount	Auto Accidental Death Amount	Travel Accidental Death Amount
1-40	$1000.00	$2000.00	$3000.00
41-50	750.00	1500.00	2250.00
51-56	500.00	1000.00	1500.00
57-62	300.00	600.00	900.00
63-68	200.00	400.00	600.00
69-75	100.00	200.00	300.00

ACT NOW—AND RETURN COUPON AT ONCE

BANKERS LIFE AND CASUALTY CO.
Bankers Insurance Bldg., Jefferson Sta., Desk 143, Chicago, Ill.

Please send details and tell me how to get the Family Group Policy for free inspection.

Name ----------

Street or R. F. D. ----------

City ---------- *State* ----------