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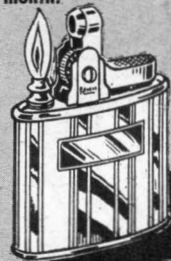
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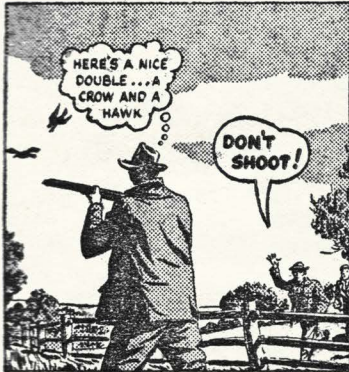
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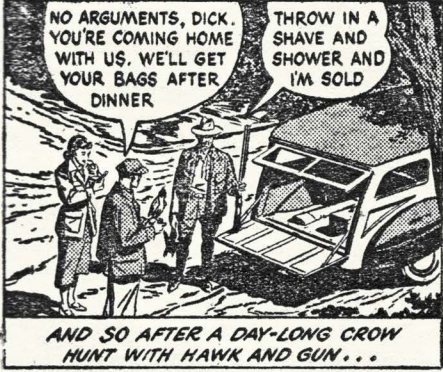
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STORIES

Volume 1

April, 1949

Number 2

One Thrilling G-man Novel

- HOT SPOT MURDER-GO-ROUND** **Bruce Cassiday 8**
 There were always two dames for Jim Crane—murdering each other behind his back.

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 "Lifting" fingerprints—the FBI way.

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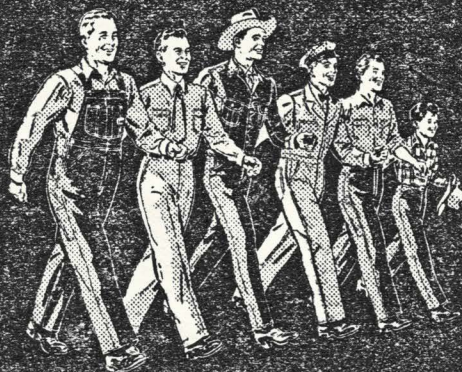
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By LON CLARK

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(Please continue on page 122)

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Cathy
Sullivan

By BRUCE
CASSIDAY



*There was never one dame for
Big Jim Crane . . . never one
with nice legs and a smile—
there were always two, mur-
dering each other behind his
back.*



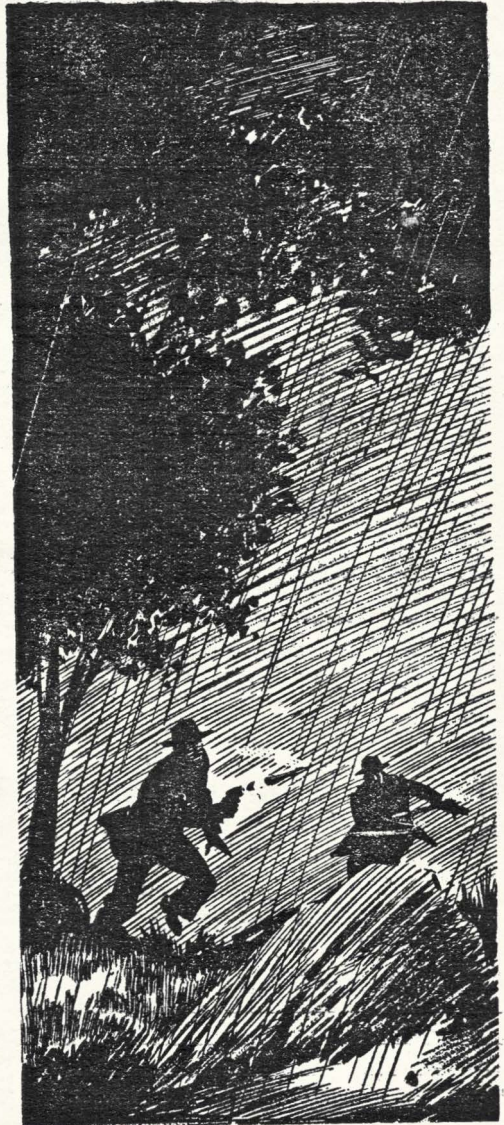
CHAPTER ONE

Coming of the Bird Dogs

THE twisted, silent man did not be-
long with the barren savagery of
the desert sand and rock. His
clothes were trim and neat and his new hat
lay beside his still head. His fingernails

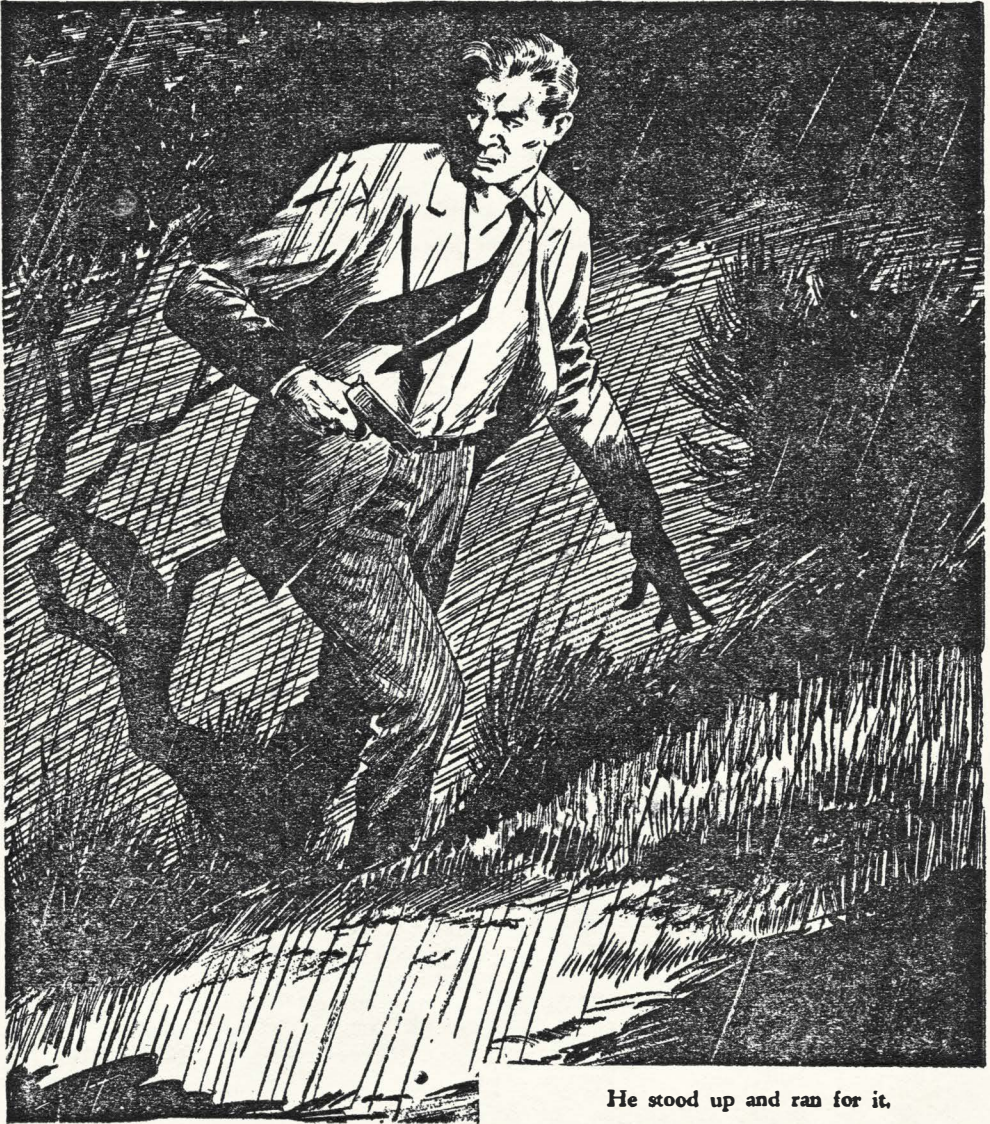


HOT SPOT



Spine-Chilling G-Man Novel

MURDER-GO-ROUND



He stood up and ran for it.

were polished and his black shoes shined. His face had been an alert, clean-cut face, pallid, thin, but immaculately shaved so the blue of the tough beard showed through.

The man's bright yellow necktie was clotted and discolored with rusty blood stains. In his skull a neat opening—.38 caliber in diameter—bored clean through to the other side.

Now he lay there on the hot desert, half-way up a rock shelf, stuffed down into the sand between two reddish boulders, and the blood was black and thick around him.

By the time the murderous sun was 9 o'clock over the Nevada desert, the shimmering expanse of sun-burnt sky was full of the big clumsy birds with their blood-red eyes and scaly talons. Curving in lazily and confidently, they swirled down in on the red-rock mesa. Three settled watchfully on the scorched rocks. Then one hopped onto the dead man's head.

One by one the buzzards came, unhurried, silent, waiting. The day was long. . . .

* * *

For several hours Big Jim Crane hadn't been able to shake the two well-dressed bird dogs shadowing him. He didn't recognize them either—they were out-of-towners from Chicago or New York. An unpleasant suspicion began gnawing at him.

He stopped and stood on Sunset Boulevard, watching the night traffic boil along the Strip. Crane was thirty-five years old, and he wore a forty-five year old face for protection. He was a big man, an attractive one—it was trouble he attracted.

On the outside he was tough as they come. He had a strong, lean face with black eyes and heavy eyebrows. His features were hard and big. His long upper lip was stiff as cement. All the signs said tough gee. Women read the signs and looked in his eyes and laughed.

Crane mashed the cigarette between his lips and slammed the burnt match down into the gutter. The night was going to be cold, but the December air was still soft and lazy. The racket of The Big Chance was beginning to swell up like an over-heated inner tube. Crane had to roll up his sleeves and pitch in to save what pieces he could.

He scowled across the boulevard at his own joint—the Club Crane. His hot spot bonanza. There it stood, looking overfed and plush with neon.

And now, when everything looked ripe, the bright boys had to pull this smart caper. Just when he was ready to haul his freight and live the life of honest John Riley, the chiselers had to box him in so he couldn't get out.

He sighed briefly and threaded his way to the back entrance of the Club. Inside he could hear the fevered riffs of the hot bebop band that cost forty iron men per musician per night.

Behind him the two pointers fanned out and stood at ease, watching the club so it wouldn't fly away.

Ed Salt, manager of the Club Crane, sat behind the desk that was too big for him, and sweat gleamed on his forehead. He was a loose, stretched guy, and his sandy hair was streaked with silver. His old, thin face hung from his skull like a flour sack. He was tough in the brains, but brittle in the backbone.

When he was ten years old his father had thrown him off the top of a hay loft while he was howling drunk. Ed Salt's legs had snapped in seven places. Nothing had ever wiped out that memory. The thought of physical violence shattered him like glass.

And that made the present setup damned tough.

"It's contagious," grinned Crane. "I picked up a couple of fleas on the way down here—just like the ones that called on you."

Ed Salt grated, his voice electric with tension. "I thought you would never get here, Jim."

"Change in plans, Ed. I'm not pulling out just yet. I'm sticking—until this dirty wash gets ironed out."

Relief flooded warmly through Ed Salt. His mouth twisted into a grateful grin. "Yeah?" That's good, Jim. What about Cathy? Are you still going to marry her?"

"Sure. Got to wait, that's all. You buzz the boys up and down the coast and tell them I'm hanging around."

"Okay, Jim. Anything else?"

"We're fighting. If we don't, we're licked. Those mobmen from the east know all the angles. One man softens up, the whole pitch is busted."

Ed Salt tried to smile. "Nobody can crack me up, Jim. Don't worry, pal. Don't worry about me."

Crane gripped his shoulder. "They can't shake us down if we all stand up to them. It's not like the old days. You watch and see."

Crane left the room, looking back at Ed Salt, standing there behind the big shiny desk, smiling at Crane, his eyes two black holes of fear.

THE girl standing in the hallway under the bright electric bulb gave a sudden start. "Jim," she said. The spicy scent of her perfume came to him—sultry and freighted with sudden memories.

"Hello, Bobby."

In the hot gleam of the naked light, her curly blonde hair glinted gold, and the amber of her eyes shone black in the shadows. She wore her hair clipped short and curled, almost like a boy's. Her ears lay neat and flat against her finely shaped head. Her neck was tanned and gold, and she wore her blouse open at the throat.

"The Rover Boy," she said, her voice sulky and turned down at the edges. Her long slender fingers reached out and ca-

ressed the smooth door sill restlessly. "I hear you and Miss Money-Bags went to Santa Barbara for the week-end. Celebrating your last few days as a nightclub tycoon, weren't you? Was she nice?"

Crane's hands clenched. She still did things to him. She always would. "I had a nice time. N.I.C.E. Nobody clawed me across the face with her sharp fingernails. Nobody threw beer bottles at me. Nobody cussed me out in a crowded restaurant. Nobody mashed my eye shut."

A helpless fury tore at her eyes. "It'll never last! You'll never make out with her, Jim. She's not your kind. You'll be back here, crawling, pal. Hot lips and hot dough—that's your racket. Not hot tea and hot bridge games."

"Yeah. I miss the backaches and the hangovers. And the dirty stink of an empty whiskey bottle to keep me company after one more brush-off. Yeah. I'll be back. I liked it all so much."

Her mouth curved down tightly. "Nice to see you, Jim. You're such a gentleman."

"Dames," Crane said, his hands unclenching. "Dames. There's never one dame—never one kid with nice legs and a smile. There's always two—two murdering each other behind your back. Two or six or eight. Never one."

"Big guy like you needs two to make him happy." She was moving past the office and out the door marked *Television Room*. "Guy out front wants to see you, Jim. He's got brass buttons on his underwear, and his arches are busted. Name of Gannon. Don't say I didn't warn you."

He watched her walk down the corridor. Sure as hell he was going to miss watching her walk. He was going to miss a lot of things about Bobby Winters.

Red Bill Gannon was standing by the hat check concession, looking beat-down and uncomfortable. His face was forty-years-old, but even tired and dragged out, it looked freckled and jolly as a twelve-year-old kid's when he grinned. Gannon

was plain clothes now. He'd been transferred to the F.B.I. after the war. But he still had flat feet, and he still thought like Sergeant Bill Gannon—with his heart and his guts.

"Where the hell can we go?" he shouted over the frantic beat of the gilt-edged bebop combo. "That Television Room quiet?"

Crane shook his head. He guided Gannon into the street. "Best place I know is a quiet little spot down the street."

It was quiet in the bar, and somehow friendly—after the garish savagery of the Club Crane. It seemed to understand why a federal agent and a gambler should sit across from each other, talking man to man.

Gannon smiled one of his freckled smiles and said, "The heat's on, Crane. The finger points again."

Big Jim Crane took a shot of rye and downed half a glass of clear water. "Oh? I figured you for a friendly visit. The F.B.I. and I are far apart."

"Ever hear of a guy named La Farge?" Gannon asked.

Crane shook his head. "Not one of my boys."

"Apparently not. He was murdered, Crane."

"Lots of people get murdered, Gannon. If you're coming to some point, come to it. Otherwise, I'll slug down this shot and take off."

"La Farge was killed in Las Vegas, Nevada. His body was found on the desert, dumped in a pile of rocks."

Crane's eyes were black and icy. He stared into the mirror behind the bar. His mouth felt dry. "Las Vegas?" Something had gone wrong. The whole damned game was busted if there was trouble on the desert. That put the feds in on it already. His heart skidded to a stop, and then pounded ahead pell-mell. "Get wise, Gannon. What should I have to do with a murder in Las Vegas?"

"The F.B.I. is curious, too. Guy had your name written on a slip of paper hidden in his hat band. Your name—big as hell, twice as legible. Had an X marked next to it. Can you beat that?"

That explained the bird dogs. And the threats to Ed Salt. The boys were closing in. Chicago boys. Loop lizards. Big ones.

"Oh?"

"Keep out of it, Jim," Gannon was saying. "It's brewing up a cyclone. We've been tipped. It's going to be the biggest blood bath this town has seen. You get out."

"I'm sticking, Gannon."

"Those Chi boys are no small potatoes. Why the hell don't you give me some kind of tip on your racket, Jim. I've got to know, or I can't bust them at all. What's the pitch, pal?"

"Keep your eyes open, Gannon," said Crane slowly. He downed the second shot, chased it, and stood up. "Two's enough for me. No use stacking too much velvet for the opposition." He flipped a dollar onto the round table. "So long, Gannon."

Gannon's voice was low. "Marry that chick Cathy Sullivan, Jim—and beat it. She'll make you a good wife. Keep out of this war. I'll have to kill you if you don't, Crane. That's what my orders read—and I'm working for Uncle Sam now, pal."

Crane swore softly at him, set his face stiffly, and walked out of the bar into the night.

CATHY SULLIVAN was not lovely in the same way Bobby Winters was. Bobby was born for liquor and laughter and tears. Cathy was born for beauty, and she was lovely in the strange, easy way any woman is lovely who has been taught it all her life.

Her eyes were deep blue and her hair rich black. Her smile was sincere and

worth a million bucks in pure gold. She had money, she had looks, she had the world by the tail.

She had Big Jim Crane by the tail, too. Crane knew it, and he wanted it that way.

She was waiting for him in the usual place—parked in her tan convertible a few doors down from the Club Crane. Crane smiled and climbed in beside. “Hi. Wait long?”

“I just got here.”

“I have to talk to you, kid.”

She said, “Oh, oh,” and turned to him. “Now it comes.” Her crimson mouth curved up. “I knew it couldn’t last.” She leaned back against the red leather cushion and closed her eyes.

“A delay, Cathy. Two weeks—maybe less. I don’t think we can go through with it this week-end. Something big’s come up.”

She moved lazily without opening her eyes. “You’ll never get out, will you, Jim? No matter how hard you try, you’ll never get away.”

“Two weeks is all. Then—”

She was watching his face intently. “It’s that girl, isn’t it?”

“Bobby?” He put his hand on her arm. “It’s not her at all.”

Her blue eyes sparkled with flame. Black fire blazed inside her. “She’ll never let you go, will she? What kind of hold does she have on you, Jim?”

“None!” He let go of her arm, suddenly realizing he had hurt her. “I swear it.”

Her slim hands slid around the smooth edges of the steering wheel and she stared down at them a moment.

“I should have known. She’s your kind. I’m not, Jim. We just don’t go together. That’s all there is to it.” She reached down and moved the gear shift into neutral. Her foot stepped on the starter and the engine roared up. “Good-bye, Jim.”

Blind, hot anger boiled up in him like

molten lava. He reached down and snapped the key out of the dash board. The engine died.

She turned on him furiously and her eyes were blazing pools of light. “Give me back those keys!”

“No!” His voice was flat and metallic. She stared at him, wild-eyed. Then her face went down in her hands, and her shoulders shook pitifully, her body racked with agonized sobs.

He pulled the tension slowly out of his body. He bent open his hand and the keys dropped out on the seat. His eyes stared at them a moment, then traveled to the girl’s face. A hard, cold, nauseous knot twisted the pit of his stomach, and he knew he had to reach out and take her in his arms, hold her hard against him, say something soft to her.

He could not move a muscle. His hands lay limp on his lap, and the sweat poured out on his face. The back of his neck was damp and perspiration beaded his lip. Cathy, Cathy. Maybe Bobby was right.

Slowly he got up and opened the door of the car. It was better this way. He stood outside and closed the door.

Then she was halfway across the seat, weeping, reaching out to him, calling his name. “Jim! Jim. I’m sorry.”

He leaned in quickly, took her in his arms. Her tears stopped after a few moments. He got back in the car.

CHAPTER TWO

Wheel of Death

A COLD, drizzly mist crawled over his skin as he walked back to the Club. The two bird dogs had gone home. Crane glanced at his wrist watch. Ten minutes to twelve. Could be shadows weren’t getting overtime these days.

Three paces from the back door, Crane kicked something metallic along the cement walk. He stooped over and picked

it up. In the dripping glow of the distant city lights he could make out what it was—a gold pencil. It belonged to Ed Salt.

Funny Ed Salt should have dropped his pencil like that. He must have stooped over suddenly to pick up something off the ground. Or else. . . .

A sour trickle of fear wormed its way through Crane. The hair on the nape of his neck bristled for an instant and his scalp crawled. Ed Salt usually went across the street for a cup of coffee about 11 o'clock—to get a breath of fresh air. He always came back in thirty minutes.

The hot naked bulb in the hallway glared at him like a one-eyed man with his eye-lashes burnt off. Crane turned the knob on the door marked *Manager*. The room was dark.

He snapped on the light and closed the door. Fumbling for his cigarette, he stared out the window at the long thread of lights webbing the Los Angeles valley.

The door swung open and Crane turned with a sigh of relief. "Ed."

Bobby Winters' face paled anxiously. "Jim. I thought it was Ed. Where is he? Do you know?" Her last words were hollow with fear.

"He's out getting his coffee," snapped Crane nervously. "What the hell's eating you?"

"He left at ten o'clock, Jim. It's not like him—"

"Ten o'clock!"

"He got a phone call and went out. I thought it was funny, but—"

Crane's hands were gripping her soft arms through the sheer gown. She was close and tight to him. He was shaking her hard. "He went out at ten o'clock! Why didn't you call me?"

"I didn't know where you were, Jim, and anyway—"

"Anyway, hell!" He stared at her helplessly. Her eyes were round and wide and hot, her mouth crimson and

moist. Her tawny golden hair was brushed back over her ear, and the pulse in her neck was beating slow and heavy. Her hands were on his sleeve, holding herself rigidly to him. They stared at each other, their stark terror a physical thing between them.

"Come on!" snapped Crane and hustled her through the door ahead of him. "What a couple of damned fools we are!"

She reached out and grabbed his arm. He could feel her sobbing silently to herself. For no damned reason at all he put his arm around her and drew her in close. Her voice was low and animal-like, and it came hoarsely from her fear-twisted throat. "Jim, if anything's happened to him!"

"Shut up!" he growled. She came in close to him, softly and freely. And they ran for the car together through the gray curtain of dead, dreary mist.

A silver sheen shimmered on the hedge and grass in the brilliance of Crane's headlights. Up past the terraced lawn they could see the stucco house. There were no cars parked along the steep, winding driveway. Crane turned in and drove up. The garage door was ajar. Relief flooded through him, and in the quick release from tension he laughed.

"Baby! He's home. He drove in and left the garage door open."

With a whisper almost, she jumped out of the car and ran to the garage. She pulled the door open, and it flipped slowly up and crawled into the garage ceiling. The glistening yellow rays of Crane's coupe picked out the big oil stain in the center of the garage, and at the same instant, the body.

A jarring scream tore out of Bobby's constricted throat. She grabbed at her mouth with her hands, and then twisted her face away. She ran in the rain and laid her head against the edge of the coupe and leaned there, sobbing exhaustedly.

Crane turned the body over, and the

muscles of his face jumped and twitched as he did so. His body knotted tightly and he let the corpse roll back in the puddle of blood and oil. Feral sounds were crawling up out of his throat, and a physical revulsion swept him, leaving him shaken and nauseous.

Ed Salt, who had turned to sawdust at the thought of physical brutality, had died inch by inch—the slow way. His face was ghastly now. In those last minutes he had aged forty years. The muscles had twisted and writhed and contorted, leaving his face a spasm of agony and pain. He had died in every muscle of his body twenty times.

Crane pulled Bobby gently away from the side of the coupe. He made her sit in the front seat. Then he went in the house and phoned the police. He sat by her in the car, silently waiting for Gannon to arrive.

He thought of the man who had died hard for him, to keep him the brass monkey on the black-and-red carousel. He thought of the man who had tasted green slimy fear with every word of confidence he had spoken. He thought of the man who was his friend and who had died because he was too scared to be yellow.

RED BILL GANNON looked at the body, at Crane, and then at Bobby. "You and your damned tough guts," he muttered, staring at Crane.

Crane pulled out a cigarette and lit it, to keep from saying anything. His eyes never left Gannon's tired face. The cigarette sputtered in the mist. Crane dragged off it and took it out.

"Get out of here," Gannon said flatly. "Take Bobby with you, Crane. If I see your hand in any more beatings, I'll run you out of Southern California." He spat on the driveway. "Call off your damned war dogs, Crane. I've had enough murder for one day!"

Crane's hands knotted and he moved

forward. "Ed Salt was a friend of mine, Gannon! If you're saying I got him killed—"

The girl's strong slim fingers closed tightly over his arm. He whirled on her, angrily. "Let go."

"Come on." She pulled him to her.

Crane wrenched himself away and moved for Gannon with stalking, cat-like strides. She grabbed his wrist, gave a downward snap, and before he could spin around, her open palm smacked across his cheek. There was a loud flaming slap, and he stood there stupidly with his mouth open.

The rain misted down between him and Gannon in a kind of protective curtain. Their eyes met for a long instant, and all the things that can ever be said between two men in conflict who respect and honor each other was there in their eyes. Then they both looked away.

Crane pushed Bobby into the coupe. They drove off into the night. . . .

Four a.m. Through the window of the Television Room Big Jim Crane could see only a few thin threads of street lights cross-hatching the sleeping L.A. valley. The drizzle mantled the city now like a veil of glistening spun glass.

Bobby Winters lay quietly on the big overstuffed couch alongside the wall, her coat thrown over her. She was breathing deeply, dead to the world. Crane grinned to himself, got a cigarette going, and blew out the match. The goose-neck lamp poured glaring white illumination down onto the paper sheets in front of him.

He reached for the phone and dialed the twenty-seventh number. The bell rang and finally a weary voice snapped, "What the hell do you want?"

"J.G.?"

"Yeah." The voice froze over. "J.C.?"

"Right. Aunt Jennie is due in from Chicago. She's hot for a game of rummy. But we don't play rummy any more. Got it?"

The voice chewed that over and then said; "Okay. What's the pitch?"

"Poker's the game. Keep your face stiff and play it close."

"Bullets wild? No holds barred?"

"No. Nothing wild. Lay low. Check the bet and sit tight."

A long pause. A shrug. "Okay, J. C."

Crane hung up and lit a fresh cigarette off the old butt. He ground the burnt one in the ash tray. Then he picked up the pencil and crossed through the initials J.G.

J.G. That was Jack Granger down in La Jolla. Hell of a nice guy, with a pretty blue-eyed wife and two blond kids. Granger's take was paying off nicely. Lots of cushy characters had fallen for the gimmick over the summer vacation. People liked to buck the wheel, even if they thought it was loaded. They'd cash in hot gold just to get the feel of The Big Chance. The gimmick was a good one, and a tough one to crack open. No reason at all it shouldn't clean up.

Crane stood up and stretched. He glanced down at the list again. Twenty-five more names. Plenty of time to get them out of the way.

He strolled over to the television set at the end of the bar. It was a big new shiny job, complete with an enlarger screen. The picture came through clean and neat. No one had any trouble at all making out the numbers.

Crane sat down at one of the long drinking tables opposite the bar. He snapped on a lamp arranged in a shade on the wall. The table glowed with a subdued orange light. Then he got up and crossed over in back of the bar, reached down with his toe in under a case of coke bottles. His foot touched the button. The orange glow over the table changed to a greenish iridescence, and a startling, sharp pattern leaped out on the table. Numbers. Squares. Marked in deep purple.

Each table had the same pattern. By the flip of a switch under the bar, the magic eye picked out the plainly marked numbers and squares. At each table a group of customers could sit and place bets for any number on a regulation roulette wheel.

"Jim." Bobby Winters had stirred and was sitting up on the couch. She was stretching her cramped back and smoothing down her hair.

"Hi, kitten," he said.

"Finished?" Her voice was husky and low.

"No. I'll finish later. You go on home. You don't need to wait for me."

She got up and walked over to him. "Want some coffee, first?"

He grinned and touched her head with his hand. Her hair was soft and curly and it stirred gently under his palm.

He ran his hand over her throat and then pulled up her chin and cupped it in the palm of his hand. She stood staring at him for a long time and he watched her without moving.

She didn't say a thing. She was just standing there holding her breath, and he put his arms around her shoulders and held her close while he kissed her on the mouth, on the cheek, and on the eyebrows.

* * *

Crane slugged down a second and last cup. "Angel, you make the best coffee in the world," he said, lighting a cigarette.

Bobby smiled. "I know I do. It's my one and only accomplishment."

Crane laughed through his cigarette. "The hell."

She poured herself another cup. "Jim, why don't you get out of this mess? Hole up somewhere until it blows over."

"Yesterday you told me I'd always come back. You were right."

She moved over to him and ran her

hand through his hair. "I sound like Gannon, I guess. But I meant it."

"A guy died for me. I've got a debt to pay."

"And then—when you're all through. Back to Cathy?"

He looked at the smoking end of the cigarette. "Yeah. Then back to Cathy."

Bobby Winters sat down, a half smile on her face. "Men are such damned fools."

Crane looked her straight in the eye. "I love her, Bobby. She's the only one I ever loved. You can't see it, but that's the way it is."

"Yeah," said Bobby Winters. "I see it."

Crane dumped the cigarette into the bottom of the coffee cup angrily. "Damn it! You know what I mean. Why the hell do you keep staring at me like a damned judge! I'm going out. So long. I've got business."

"So long," said Bobby. She watched him silently as he got into his coat. He looked at her once and then walked out the door.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Insurance

HALFWAY down the dark street, Crane found himself walking along beside a silent man in a raincoat. He turned and glanced at the man. It was Gannon. They walked silently, for a while.

"Foggy," said Gannon amiably.

"Yeah," said Crane.

"Hard for a guy to see which way he's going in the fog, ain't it, Jim?"

Crane studied a minute. "Some guys can get along by themselves. They don't need seeing-eye cops."

"Like Ed Salt."

"Get away from me, Gannon. I'd hate to have to hit a cop."

"That wouldn't be smart, Jim. Might land you in the pokey—and then how'd you be able to find the guy that killed Ed and gun him down?"

Crane stared at Gannon's placid face. "Who says anybody's planning to gun anybody down?"

Gannon's eyes were flat and hard. "Yeah. Who?"

Crane stopped walking. "It turns out I'm not going the same direction as you, copper."

"That's funny. I'd hoped we were headed the same place."

"Pick a better street, pal. So long."

Gannon stood on the sidewalk and stared after him. But he did not follow.

Crane went into his office, sat down in the big chair. Slowly his head sagged forward on his chest. At five minutes after nine he started as a knock came on the door. Crane said, "Who is it?"

"The insurance salesman you wanted to see."

Crane patted his coat, felt the gun. He slid the upper drawer open and spotted the .38 inside. Then he kneeed the drawer closed. "Come in."

Two men stepped in. They might have been brothers, the way they dressed—neat, clean, precise. One was big—bigger than Jim Crane; the other was thin and dark and tense.

Crane smiled. "I was expecting you. Sit down, gentlemen."

The big man looked at the thin man. The big man smiled expansively and winked. He flowed into the chair opposite Crane's desk. The thin dark man moved to the door and stood by it, his hand in his coat, hidden.

Happy Boy drew out a cigar, sniffed it, and bit the end off. His florid face melted into a slimy, easy smile. Then he spoke and every word sounded as if he wanted to sell it for five hundred bucks. "Cigar, Mr. Crane?"

Crane shook his head.

Happy Boy got his cigar going, his glinty china-blue eyes smirking snakily through the smoke at Crane.

"My colleague and I represent the Everlasting Light Association, Mr. Crane. We heard through the grape-vine that you might be interested in taking out one of our policies in the near future."

Crane laced his hands behind his neck. "Could be. What sort of a reputation does your concern have, Mr.—?"

"Smith, of course, Mr. Crane. Reputation? An enviable reputation. We haven't lost a client yet." He let out a dried-up chuckle that someone had forgotten to bury.

"And your terms?"

Happy Boy wallowed in his stogie a minute. "Unfortunately, in these precarious times, Mr. Crane, our rates might necessarily seem high compared to normal years. But, with the atomic bomb, the new jet-propelled bomb, and a hundred and one destructive weapons being added to our impressive list every day—we just can't see our way clear to giving away money."

The thin man's eyes didn't move. Nor did his hand. It was anchored, solidly. Crane could see the bulge in the coat pocket. Big Jim swung sideways to get the drawer clear. "Oh? Well, of course—"

"Then, too, Mr. Crane. A man with affiliations like yours—with your chain of excellent night clubs throughout the Southwest, extending as far, I understand, as Las Vegas, Nevada—a man of your caliber, Crane, shouldn't spread himself too thin. We'd figured on a policy of about five thousand clams a month."

Crane glanced from the smooth florid face of the smiling man to the thin pinched face of the wiry trigger man. He thought about the body lying in the pool of blood and oil, and he thought about the black disastrous fear that had smoldered in the live eyes of Ed Salt.

Crane smiled affably. "Inasmuch as the matter calls for a large sum of money, gentlemen, I feel that I should like to discuss this affair personally with the president of the company, himself. You must realize my position."

"Of course, Mr. Crane. Such a meeting could be arranged—say this evening at nine. If you'll appear alone at the northwest corner of La Cienega and Wilshire, our representatives will conduct you to the office of the company's district manager."

Happy Boy's bright eyes traveled about the room. They came back to rest on Crane's face. "Seems to be something missing from this room, Mr. Crane. We understand you had a somewhat obstinate assistant who used to manage your night club. He on vacation?"

The cold deadly knot twisted at Crane's stomach. His jaws clamped together. "An accident."

"Precisely, Mr. Crane. So when you call on our manager tonight—no gimmicks. Get me?"

"No gimmicks."

The thin man opened the door, the big man nodded, and they both went out. The door closed. Crane stood staring after them and his eyes were hooded and dirty with hate. . . .

CATHY SULLIVAN'S face was white and drawn when she let Big Jim Crane in. She was wearing a deep blue wrap-around, and her hair was tied up in a dark blue ribbon. Her face, scared the way it was, looked pale and transparent and more lovely than ever. She smelled subtly of Oriental perfume.

Crane closed the door behind him. Under his own skin creepy little bugs of fear scuttled along. "What's the matter, baby?" His voice came out sounding hoarse and scaly.

She handed him the letter then, silently, her eyes sick and big. "Read it."

Dear Miss Sullivan:

At a meeting of our organization last night, we voted overwhelmingly to rid the town of Los Angeles of the presence of Mr. James Crane. It is understood that you wield influence with that gentleman. Get him out of town.

It was also moved, seconded, and passed, that you yourself had better accompany Mr. Crane to his unknown destination. As you are so closely concerned with the aforementioned, it is reasonably assumed that you can convince him more easily if you mention the possibility that your own well-being may be placed in jeopardy by any fool-hardy refusal.

Crane sat heavily on the couch. Cathy! He should have known. He could have beaten them alone. But no man is ever alone. There are always ties, and when he thinks he can act as a free agent, the ties reach out and drag him back like octopus tentacles.

Cathy came first. All his life now centered about her. The man's body lying in the pool of oil belonged to the past. Cathy belonged to the future. Crane belonged to life, not to death.

But even as he thought it, believed it, gritted it out between his clenched teeth, he knew that he couldn't live with himself if he walked out on the memory of Ed Salt—Cathy or no Cathy.

He looked up at her tear-streaked face, at the tense, tired lines around her lovely eyes. "What are we going to do, Jim?" Her words were as small and frightened as she was.

He ground his fingernails into his palms. When he spoke it sounded as if he never wanted to use his voice again. "We're leaving town."

"Oh, Jim!" Her eyes filled with instant tears and then she was in his arms, laughing and sobbing. "I've been after you and after you to come away with me—but it took this!" She pulled back from him suddenly and looked at him, caught halfway between relief and fear. "You do mean it, don't you?"

"Yeah. I mean it." He stared at the floor. He fumbled for a fresh cigarette

while he thought it all over. He knew then what he had to do. There was only one way out.

Turning to her slowly, he noticed how fresh and young she looked suddenly with her tear-stained eyes and her warm soft lips. The ache got deep inside him. "Mexico, kid. We're going to Mexico."

"But Jim! Mexico!" She frowned. Then she brightened. "We can go back East after awhile. To Massachusetts. Where I was born."

"Yeah," he said. "We're leaving tonight at midnight. Meet me in your car, packed—at Sunset and Vermont. On the southeast corner. Don't let anyone tail you. If I'm not there by twelve-thirty, beat it out of town fast. Don't come back—ever. Get that?"

"Jim!" Her eyes were black with fear again. "Is something wrong? Why all the mystery?"

Crane leaned back and studied her—the slightly tense attitude, the warm brilliance of her eyes, the luxuriant sweep of her rich black hair. Anything was worth saving that kid from the bitter taste of blood and bullets.

She pulled his face around to her quietly. "Jim," she said. She kissed him on the mouth. He drew her in closer, and then suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her away. Plenty of time for that. There was work to be done. Hard work.

He walked toward the door. She was on her feet behind him. "Midnight," he said. "Vermont and Sunset."

Her eyes held a strange stubborn fire. She drew his face down to hers. She kissed him again. Then his arms were around her, drawing her up to him.

Why the hell did she have to pick a time like this? he cursed to himself. He'd handled her gently like a cotton bunny all the time he'd known her, figuring she wasn't used to rough stuff, and here she was ready to bust apart.

"Jim," she said, staring at him. And into her eyes came a brief flame of fear. It was almost as if she had seen into his soul, and knew what he meant to do. She held on tight, trying desperately to smile.

"So long, kid," he growled at her. "Plenty of time for that later." He shook her off and was gone.

WEARILY he picked up the phone, glancing at the clock on the wall of the Television Room. 7 p.m. The Club would be opening soon. Outside the mist had changed to a wet, cold drizzle.

"Hello."

"H.M.?"

Cautious, low, scared. "Yeah. You, J.C.?"

"Aunt Jennie's taking me on a ride. On the corner of Wilshire and La Cienega at 9 p.m. I want you to tail us with three men. One for Aunt Jennie's benefit. Two spares for my benefit."

"Auto, taxi, and maybe a motorcycle, too?"

"Could be. Have number three faded. Have him phone some square cabbie to wait for me somewhere near Aunt Jennie's. Repeat all that." He listened closely. "Okay. Thanks, H.M."

Crane stood, stretched, yawned. He moved across to the bar and snapped on the television set. The screen swirled and criss-crossed until finally the lines planed down. He focused it and watched a few minutes.

Later that night the Television Room would be filled with gold-mad men and women, eyes glued to the television screen, watching the videoed roulette wheel piped in from Las Vegas. The spins would all be recorded in Crane's Club, and in hundreds of other dives throughout the L.A. area.

It was a hell of a good racket—too big to last long. Crane knew he'd been lucky to run it as long as he had without the muscle men moving in. He was finished,

as of tonight. He made a fortune in two months. All that money was salted in a Mexico City bank, waiting for him to walk in and pick it up.

If they hadn't messed up Ed Salt, he'd be on his way now. But Big Jim Crane couldn't let any unpaid debts hang over his head.

Cathy. A whole new life waited for him across the Border—a life without guns, cops, hot lead, or blood; a life without the clink of silver and the buzz of the black-and-red merry-go-round and the flip of aces and eights. All his life he'd waited for Cathy.

Bobby Winters was wrong for him—too much like him. She'd come up the hard way, beating her way past every street bum in Boyle Heights. Now she was a dancer in a night club, and that was all the further she wanted to go. She wanted kids. She wanted to wear out her special section of backyard fence chinning with the neighbors.

She was a small-time kid weaned off a big-time setup. She wasn't the kind Crane wanted. He wanted the tops. He'd made every break he'd ever gotten, and he wasn't going to throw it all away now on somebody who was a bum like him. He wanted his kids to start life big; with Cathy, they'd be able to do it.

The television screen flashed on an ancient newsreel that flickered and blurred. He watched it idly. All the receiving sets contained rectifier attachments that unscrambled the out-of-the-way lane broadcast from Las Vegas. The big show wasn't ready to begin in Las Vegas until 9 o'clock. Nine o'clock, Crane would be somewhere else—ready to take the last dark step on a long lonely trail.

Suddenly the buzzing came in low and steady. *Dit, dit, dit, dit.* Crane's eyes narrowed. He snapped off the dial. Silence. He switched the set back on, and the scrambled lines crisscrossed and planed into focus.

Dit, dit, dit, dit.

Crane stepped behind the bar. Sweat clung damp and clammy to his hands and face. He leaned over and checked the wiring underneath. No defects. It was the danger signal—no doubt about it.

Dit, dit, dit, dit.

He snapped off the set and slid open the rear panel. Removing the lead-foil box, he unscrewed the rectifier from the resistors, and dropped the gadget in his pocket. Then he replaced the lead-foil box and closed the panel.

A moment later he was on the phone again, dialing, holding his breath, grinding his teeth. There was a short wait, then a ring, and then a click. No voice answered. Instead he heard the same monotonous metallic beat—*dit, dit, dit, dit*. Like an atomic rattlesnake.

He slammed the receiver down and stood there a moment, trying to ease the tension out of him. He fingered the small

gadget, dropping it back in his pocket. All over L.A. men who knew each other by initials only were fingering gadgets similar to the one Crane held. Sweating. Shaking. Pacing like trapped animals.

The signal had been rigged for an overall emergency. The tone meant, dismantle the set. The tone meant, the deal is busted. The tone meant, get out fast. Their transmitter a hundred miles out of Las Vegas had been found. The booster stations cased. The feds were moving in.

Crane grabbed up his coat abruptly and stepped across the hallway to Ed Salt's old office. Crossing swiftly to the safe, he twisted at the dial, pausing suddenly to swipe the sweat from his forehead. Then the phone rang raspily—almost in answer to dial click.

He stared at the phone, stunned. Was it Cathy—calling him? He got to his feet and started to cross the room. Damn! It was no time to talk to Cathy! He spun



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on his toe and came back to the safe. He crouched before it and twirled the dial. The phone rang again.

If it was Cathy, and if she needed to talk to him . . .

"Damn it!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Beware Aunt Jennie

HE SNAPPED on the lamp next to the phone and lifted the receiver. The voice was not Cathy's. It was a tired, business-man's voice that had callouses on it and spoke as if it were troubled with fallen arches and insomnia. Gannon. Crane let out his breath slowly, realizing he'd been expecting it all along.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Crane? Me, Gannon. Listen, pal, we're closing in. Come on out, and come out big, or it's bullets for you, buddy. This is a big roundup, Crane. We found the guy that killed La Farge—a gee from San Pedro—and he sang like a big yellow canary. The tune he whistled was you, Crane. You hired him."

Crane stared at the phone with a blank stare.

"No wise-guy stuff, pal. Or I'll shoot on sight. Come on out under a white rag, Crane. . . . Crane? You hear me? Crane!"

Crane let the receiver slide out of his hand back on its cradle. He moved over to the safe, yanked open the door swiftly. He reached inside for the little red book and the loose-leaf folder. Behind him, the phone set up an irritating jangle.

But Big Jim Crane did not hear it. He was staring in sudden horror at the little red book in his hand, at the loose-leaf folder. For a long time he did not move. Then he leaned slowly over the safe, reached in, moving his hand around in the black squat interior.

He straightened up, then, numb in every inch of his body. He lifted the note book

and folder to his face and sniffed them. The unmistakable scent of Bobby Winters' perfume curled up into his nose. A lot of things came clear to him in that blinding instant, and he felt suddenly sick. He crushed the note book in his hands and stood there.

Spy. Dirty little snivelling spy! Bought off for a set of pretty gold doubloons. Why not? She hated his guts. She'd wanted him, and she couldn't have him; she'd wanted him for keeps, the way she wanted everything. Why shouldn't she hate him—the rotten deal he'd given her?

Cursing, he ripped out the pages of the loose-leaf and crumpled them up in the big ash tray. He dropped a lighted cardboard match onto the center, and began tearing pages out of the little red book. The flame flared obediently and ate into the scraps with black licks. The last of the burning black ash snapped as it cooled. Crane ground it all to powder and dumped it on the floor.

He was across the room the same instant the hallway outside exploded into a mass movement of flat-footed men. Crane snapped the door latch shut. Immediately a heavy night stick slammed on the door, splintering the narrow panel. Brushing his coat to feel the .38 inside, he suddenly remembered one more thing.

Fumbling through the upper left hand drawer, he pulled out another Colt and snapped the clip out. Full. He dropped it into his pants pocket and grabbed up a box of adhesive tape.

"Crane!" Gannon was outside, growling and cursing. The splinters flew off the door panel and the lock shook. "Wait a minute!" Gannon muttered, and the futile pounding stopped.

Crane ran his fingers over the smooth surface of the desk just inside the right middle drawer. He pressed in on the panel and moved away. The desk pivoted on the floor. A trap door appeared underneath. Crane lifted it and dropped down.

An ear-shattering gun-shot from a .45 service revolver jarred the door, and the lock jerked sideways. The trap door closed over Crane's head and the desk swung back over it. An instant later Gannon's gun came snooping through the door, bright flashlight beams brushing the office walls with long, probing fingers of light.

Cursing to himself, Crane crossed the dank cellar and moved aside a crate of wine bottles. He pulled on a side door in the wall and stepped into a cement corridor. He shut the door behind him. In the distant gloom he could hear the steady, loose trickle of water running.

Feeling his way along the rough, sweaty wall, he made it down the stone steps to the escape hatch of the big six foot storm drain that carried flood waters and muck out of the hills above the Strip.

He dragged himself through the deep mud swirling along, through branches and shattered glass, until he came to an iron ladder a block below the Strip. He climbed through the escape hatch and peered out into the gloom of a badly paved dead-end street.

The rain was beginning to spatter down heavily. He wrapped his left leg around the top rung of the ladder, removed the box of adhesive tape from his pocket, and proceeded to twine the spare Colt around the inside calf of his right leg.

Then he pulled himself up through the opening, glanced around, straightened his tie, brushed off his pants, and hurried down the street. A change in plans, he thought to himself grimly. Another item to take care of. . . .

He stopped dead in the rain. The water poured off the brim of his hat. He eased his body around back of the wide date palm. Pressing himself in close, and pushing his hat back on his head, he watched the door of Bobby's house.

But the patrol car parked near the driveway didn't move. They had her all

right. She was under the big lights inside. A sick feeling sloshed around inside his stomach, like soapy dish water. She was a double-crosser and a two-time loser. She'd sold him out to a bunch of lead-dollar wise guys.

But he couldn't forget how Bobby Winters really was. He'd never forget that.

He pulled his hat down, tipped the brim down, turned the dripping collar of his coat up, and moved cautiously down the slippery sidewalk. Away from Bobby Winters forever. Good-bye doll. So long. . . .

The limousine picked him up at La Cienega and Wilshire at nine o'clock. Happy Boy was driving. The thin man sat in the back seat with the muzzle of a Colt shoved in Crane's neck. He frisked Crane and removed Colt number one from his coat, and the long-bladed knife from his pocket. Everything but the automatic taped to his calf.

With a snide and sadistic ease, the big man shook the first car that followed them. He grinned in the rear-view mirror, and spoke to the man in back. "Easy as hell, Bucky."

Bucky, the thin man, smiled. "Now we can be alone."

They turned up through Laurel Canyon and wound over into the Valley. Just before they reached Ventura Boulevard, Happy Boy stopped the car. "Now," he said to Bucky.

Bright light flashed and bitter, numb hell spread through Jim Crane. He slumped into the seat.

WHEN he came out of it, he was choking and coughing on ammonia fumes. He pulled himself erect, trying to see. The room was almost pitch black. Gradually the smell of ammonia seeped out of him, and the blackness swirled away.

Happy Boy Smith and Bucky flanked him where he sat on an old moth-eaten couch. Both toyed with their guns. Oppo-

site him sat a baby-faced guy. He was smiling happily, like a kid with a new torture rack.

"Tried to put the dogs on your tail, huh?" he grinned. "Had to shake two of them, huh?"

"Three," giggled Happy Boy. "Some damned fool on a motorcycle, too. In all that rain! We picked him up after we got to Chatsworth. Left him in a ditch."

Baby-Face grinned. "These small-town guys are hot stuff. Got every angle covered. Well, Crane, now that you're functioning again—I think that's the word—how about it?"

"How about what?" Crane grated out.

"Handing over the pitch—for a nominal cut. Either that—or we'll have to get rid of you."

Crane smiled flatly. "Too late, boys. We were raided this p.m. You've drawn a bob-tailed flush."

Baby-Face's eyes smoked over for an instant. He watched Crane craftily, then grinned gently. "Haw. No jabberwocky, Crane. Like it or not, we're taking over. Either put up and shut up—or R. I. P."

"You head man, Baby-Face?" Crane said suddenly. "I don't want things messed up by dealing with some second-rate stooge." Crane's eyes were hooded. Baby-Face tried not to notice.

"What I say goes, Crane," he said stiffly, his black eyes glittering.

"Sure," said Crane. Then he got it, and cursed himself silently and helplessly. Baby-Face was a phony. He wasn't head man. There wasn't any head man, or certainly he'd talk turkey to Crane. The head man was somebody who didn't want to be seen by Crane. Somebody on the inside! Somebody hiring Chicago stooges to make it look like a Chicago muscle-in. And that left one person.

Yes, Crane thought wearily. The smell of ammonia was gone in the room. He could smell something else now, through the cigarette smoke. Through the smell of

stale beer left in cans. Through the smell of greasewood in the rain outside.

Sure. That spicy, penetrating scent was perfume, the kind Bobby Winters used. She was somewhere near—maybe in the next room. The smell of her in the safe. The way she'd played him for sucker. It all fitted in—if you were sharp enough to read the signs right.

Before Crane could move, an abrupt smothered cry wrenched up from the thin man next to him. Bucky bounded out of the couch, banged up against the front wall of the shack, and whipped the curtain aside with the barrel of his Colt.

"Cars outside!" He turned to Baby-Face, his eyes sick.

Baby-Face grew old. He turned and snapped off the lamp. "Who?"

"Cops! I know it's cops!" whined Bucky. "Crane, you dirty double-crossing rat! You tipped them off!"

"Shut up!" hissed Happy Boy smoothly. "We'll all burn if they catch us. Don't be a damned fool and think you're going to get out of this any better than we are, Crane."

Crane's stiff mouth was bent now, and somewhere inside him the half-mad laughter began to well up. Cops! Saved by the bulls! "They followed me!" he laughed. "Hell yes, they followed me! I told you they raided me this afternoon. Gannon, I could kiss you!"

In the pitch dark Crane was peeling the adhesive tape and ripping the Colt off. A rap sounded on the door, rattling the loose siding against the studs. "Hey, you in there. Open up!"

The thin guy sidled to the window and tapped a hole through the glass. Immediately gun-flame spat through the hole. A man outside howled, and there was a confused silence. Then feet began moving, scattering. Three more rapid shots came, and lead bit into the thin slatty wood.

Crane gripped the Colt and crawled

across the floor to the other adjoining room. Let these tough guys battle it out with Gannon. He was going to get out now. Cathy was waiting for him.

Baby-Face's high-pitched voice whined out, "Crane! Where the hell are you, Crane? Damn it! Stay here! We need every one we can get."

Tough shucks, gritted Crane. Outside another shot blazed out. Big burning blue lights began feeling along the walls, prying in through cracks in the siding. The thin man thumbed another shot.

Crane pulled himself taut. That spicy smell! He could feel her in the same room with him. Sweat squeezed out on his face. So she'd been waiting to see him crawl—and now she was cowering in the corner, herself, too scared to move.

His hand touched her and she let out a little gasp. The gasp let everything out of her that she had been holding in, and she began whimpering excitedly, like a puppy waiting to be beaten. She reached out and felt for his hands and grabbed them.

"Jim!" she sobbed. "Jim, Jim!"

"Well, Bobby. Try to tell me you're not in on this!" he snarled. "Talk your way out of this one, sugar-tongue! So you had to grab off everything."

"Jim! I came here to help you! I—" "Sure," Crane grated out. He jammed the gun in her ribs hard. "Go ahead. Help me." He laughed harshly.

She drew in her breath with an agonized sob and tensed up against the muzzle of the gun. "Gannon, Jim. I came here to tip you off. Gannon's outside waiting for you."

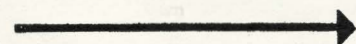
"You killed Ed Salt, baby. You're not going to get away with anything else. What a sucker I was!"

"Jim," she said, and moved toward him. She touched his cheek with her hand. It was cold and trembling, and he brushed it off impatiently. He grabbed her wrist. She pulled herself in close to him, trying to touch his face with her cheek. "Out the back way," she whispered. "Over the hill out back. You can make it! You've got to! Please!"

IN THE other room the shots were crashing out faster. Someone cursed blindly, and then four fast shots rocked through the shack. The raw pungency of cordite filled the air.

She was against him now. Her eye lashes were wet and her lips vibrant. "Jim! Gannon is going to get you. I came to warn you." Her voice was ris-

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ing now, racked with sobs. "That's his orders, Jim! Kill you! They think you killed a man. You're wanted now, Jim!"

He clawed at her shoulder, then lifted the pistol to slash at her with the barrel. Deep inside him he knew she had killed Ed Salt, but somehow he couldn't move the gun. He wanted to get away from her. Far away. He stood up, dragging her with him. She pressed herself tightly to him, and then he felt her hand reaching for his gun.

He ripped the gun from her, shoving it in her stomach. She twisted in close, her hair wet and soft against his mouth. "Oh, Jim," she cried.

His fingers were numb. "Why can't I kill you—"

Then her fingers were clawing for his eyes, and her nails gouged into his ear. The blood seeped out warm. Her other hand darted to the gun barrel, turning it away from her. Then her sharp heel dug into his leg and he jackknifed forward. He cursed with a muffled sob.

He threw himself across the room, toward the back door. He spun once and fired. The orange gun-flame slashed across the darkness, and he saw for an instant the startled flame in her eyes, and the crimson slash of her soft lips. She screamed and there was silence. He blasted again and again. Then he reeled out into the open, plunging headfirst into the thick, heavy storm.

Staggering and weaving, he ran for the knoll ahead, covered with manzanita and scrub oak and greasewood. The mud sucked at his feet. The rain beat down on him and ran off his fingers, off the gun barrel.

Lead blazed by him. He turned and saw a figure moving toward him. Another shot felt for him. Crane ducked down behind a clump of brush. Two more shots, and then a huge giant hand slapped him on the shoulder. He could feel the surprised blood worm out onto his shoulder.

He fired at the man, and stumbled to the next clump of greasewood. Two more shadows joined the first. More shots came. He crawled through the wet oak leaves. Ten more yards and he could make the top of the knoll. Lead spat through the bushes. One slug ate into the mud by his hand.

He stood up and ran for it. Eight more yards. He slipped and fell into the mud. The rain beat on him, pressing his soggy clothes close in on him. He pulled himself to his feet. Groggily he moved on. Once again lead ate into him. The shock of the impact spun him half around, and he almost fell. But he slogged forward, each step a project in will power. He zig-zagged like a crazy thing, staggering from shadow to shadow.

The three figures were pounding after him, fanning out to cut him off and shoot him down.

He made the crest of the knoll, and instead of turning down the ravine and making for the right, he edged along the same level, moving up-canyon. He dragged himself along the rough, weed-grown ground, his shoulder throbbing like fury, his side numb and bloody.

Twenty yards up the hill he stumbled over and fell onto a barbed wire fence. The barbs tore at his flesh and ripped his clothes. He cursed and shouted at the rain and the mud and twisted himself away from the stinging, hungry metallic thorns.

Startled, he stared through the wire at the railway tracks. He listened but could hear no sounds. He laughed then, a loud, exultant laugh. Parting the strands of wire, he ducked across the tracks. Half falling, half running, he plunged down into a thicket-studded canyon across the tracks and fell, drenched with sweat and blood and rain. . . .

Like a mournful coyote's call, the lonesome whistle of the freight came up-canyon, cutting through the heavy sheets of

rain, bouncing about the crag-lined canyon to die in the stones and sand.

Panting, Big Jim Crane lifted his head, and shook the mud and blood out of his hair. With a last effort of his body, he dragged himself together, wondering idly how long he had lain there. One second. One day. One year.

Before he could count ten the monster was on him, the blinding beam of white light stabbing through the drenched night. The hot cinders shot out from the tinder and the engine rolled by, shaking the ground he lay on. The long train roared past Crane.

He staggered toward the barbed wire. Clutching it with his open palm, he steadied himself. He counted the cars. Twenty-five. Thirty. Thirty-one. He parted the strands, the blood on his palms now, too. He ducked his head. The grade had slowed the engine. The cars were sliding along the track at a slow, crawling, snail-like pace.

Crane shook his head, closing his hands tightly around the barbed wire. The shock of the pain on his torn palms sent the blood tingling through his fogged brain. He opened his eyes, took his hands off the wire, and stumbled toward the thirty-first car.

His fingers tore at the slippery steel bars of the ladder, and slid off. His palms wiped along the smooth outer car surface. His knees buckled and he felt himself going down, headfirst—toward the spinning magnet of the grinding, death-dealing wheels.

Throwing himself desperately at the moving car, he clawed for the next ladder. His fingers caught. His feet bumped along the sandy roadbed, dragging. He gritted his teeth, and pulled up. Slowly, laboriously, he hauled himself up, up, up. Clinging to the ladder, he worked his way around to the coupling. Half dead, he slouched there, his hands holding on in a death grip.

CHAPTER FIVE

Escape

HE NEVER knew how he fell off the slowly moving freight outside the Glendale station, how he staggered, half-dead, down the highway until a truck driver picked him up and drove him into Hollywood, how he flagged a cab and got to Sunset and Vermont.

But he was standing there in the heavy rain, under a lamp post, when everything spun into focus. In a bright instant he came to himself, and glanced about him, moving for the protection of a wide doorway. It was then he glanced across the street at a drive-inn stand, and saw the clock.

It was 1:30!

He shook his head and tried to think. Cathy was gone. It was too late. Gannon was combing the city for him. Drag-nets were out all over the state. They'd have his house covered. They'd have the Club Crane covered. They'd have Ed Salt's place covered. They'd have Bobby Winters' place covered.

He winced at the thought of Bobby Winters. What a stinking ride she'd taken him on! Dirty double-crossing little dame!

He had to get out of town. Taxi? Train? Airplane? He needed fresh clothes. He needed money. There was no way out.

"Jim! Jim!"

He twisted around with a startled gasp. "Cathy!" He saw her then, leaning out of the convertible, calling to him. She looked like a brunette angel from heaven with a tan passport to paradise. He stumbled across the slippery sidewalk and fell into the back seat of the convertible.

"You waited for me. You waited for me!"

She started up the car, turned the corner and leaned back. "Yes, Jim."

Already he was out cold. Cathy glanced around, and a soft smile crept across her face. She drove on into the heavy black rain. . . .

He came awake with a jolt. He opened his eyes and sat up, drowsy and stiff. Someone had bandaged his shoulder and side with torn cloth and adhesive tape. He looked out of the window of the car, and closed his eyes again.

The car swerved, and he hit against his bad shoulder. He dragged in a deep breath and bit his lip. His side was throbbing now with a dull ache. His shoulder was stiff and clotted. He leaned against the cushion heavily.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright. "Cathy! Where the hell are we?" He reached forward and grabbed her by the shoulder. "Cathy! We're off the highway!" He stared out at the black canyons rising on either side of him, like towering dungeon walls.

"Oh?" said Cathy. She shook her shoulder free and drove on, pulling the wheel and spinning around a hairpin turn. Gravel shot out, and sheets of rain slammed down onto the windshield. The lights slashed through the slanting lines of glistening silver.

Crane gasped. Over the edge of the highway the canyon dropped off abruptly. A hundred yards straight down he could see a large white cement dam. "Cathy! Where the hell—"

Cathy turned her profile to him. The yellow light from the dashboard played fantastic tricks with her eyes and her mouth. For an instant she looked sinister and macabre. She smiled.

"Don't reach for your gun, Jim. I have it here with me."

"Reach for my gun? What do you mean? Cathy—"

The car lurched up over a hunk of granite that had rolled down into the roadway. Cathy twisted toward the embankment and swerved back expertly.

Crane's shoulder hit the metal window handle. His body stiffened with the shock. He closed his eyes and cursed and lay back.

Nothing made sense. He felt for his gun. It was gone. Why should Cathy—?

The car screeched to a stop. Cathy snapped the headlights off and turned around in triumph. "Well, Jim, here we are. The gates to paradise."

Crane looked at the pitch-black hell stretching out into eternity about him. He could see scrub oaks, a sharp drop-off into a canyon, and dense foliage across the narrows. The whole place screamed of desolation, even in the smothering blanket of the dank stinging rain.

The Colt peeked over Cathy's shoulder. Crane's own gun. "Thanks," he said. "But I don't get it."

She wiggled the gun to show him she wasn't handing it to him. She was talking with it. "Get out, Crane. Get out and do what I tell you to do."

"Cathy." Crane pulled open the door, and his body rocked back with the stabbing pain in his side. He gritted his teeth, and pitched out head first into the rain. Suddenly the hard muzzle of his Colt was in his back, and his body felt numb and cold. He moved ahead into the beating rain.

He stopped dead on the lip of the drop-off. He looked down. Two hundred feet below he could see dreary gray rocks, and a lapping body of water. A small and narrow dam lake lay there, drinking in the rain water. And then a cold and deadly chill of understanding crept into him.

He turned slowly and stared at Cathy. He tried to see her soft blue eyes and her lustrous black hair and her lovely oval face. He tried to see the woman he had waited for all his life.

All he could see was his own gun pointed at his stomach. Even the clean rain dropping out of the sky could not wash off the dirty veil of evil on her.

Crane stared at the woman he loved, and saw nothing—nothing but the damning image of his own cold-blooded ambition. Cathy, Cathy. Get it over with as soon as possible.

He tried to speak. He opened his mouth but his vocal chords were paralyzed. He licked his lips, and his tongue was numb. She saw his struggle and smiled. The smile was the same smile she always wore—the one she had trained. It was still lovely, and her eyes were still clear blue. And her mouth was still soft crimson. She was the loveliest thing in hell.

"Why?" asked Big Jim Crane. "Why?"

Cathy's eyes were amused. "Why what, Big Jim?"

"Why everything. It was you, all along. You were the one who tried to smash me."

"Tried to! Big Jim, I did!"

"You hired the boys from Chi. You busted my setup in Las Vegas and had La Farge murdered."

She shrugged her graceful, lovely shoulders. "Sure. Why not? Good way to frame you."

"You killed Ed Salt, too. You had those two damned bird dogs follow me to the Club, and then kill Ed. You got rid of Ed Salt because you knew that would make me stay—and then I'd finished off the Chi boys so you wouldn't have to bother!"

Cathy smiled. "You've cleared me of

all my debts. I've got a free hand now. I knew you'd fall into the last trap, too—and come running to me."

CRANE stared around into the glistening flooded desolation of scrub oak, chaparral, and brush. "So the body goes down into the dam, huh?"

"By the time it's found, I'll be in charge of the whole works again, Big Jim, and I'll be running it, like I always wanted to." Her eyes glittered in the night.

"Why?" Crane asked again, quietly. "You've always had everything. I had to do a job in order to eat. But a dame like you . . . I don't get it."

"You wouldn't!" she snapped. "You don't know what it's like, always having everything you want. Sure, it's good. It's fine. But after awhile there's no zest to life at all." Her face was animated now, her eyes brighter than Crane had ever seen them.

"There's no thrill to having everything! There's only a thrill in getting something! You don't live when you've got things—only when you're taking them away from somebody else!"

"Like taking the life away from Ed Salt."

"That snivelling yellow coward! People like him don't count, Jim. Take it from me—"

"He had too much life, Cathy. He felt fear, and love, and hate. You can't feel

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anything, Cathy. You're all on the outside. You're a hollow puppet—no heart, no soul, no feelings at all."

Her tone was flat and bored. "Get ready to die, Big Jim. It's been pleasant knowing you. I hope you enjoyed it as much as you told me you did."

Crane smiled. The smile shattered into a laugh, and he held his head back and howled up into the rain. "I've been wrong on everything Cathy. I thought I loved you. I loved the dream you carried around with you. The only one person I ever really loved was Bobby. I thought I hated her. She tried to help me tonight—not frame me. And I shot her! Will I ever get anything straight? Will I ever do anything right while I live?"

He swung down on her then, swiftly, with all the force of his body. He chopped at the gun and it sailed away from them into the mud. Cathy let out a vicious cry and plunged into the mud, clawing for it in the muck.

"Get up!" shouted Crane, reaching down and tearing her off the ground. "Get up!" Then he gasped, twisting over in a sudden spasm of pain. His knee caved in and he slid to the ground, his face writhing in agony.

She found the gun and wiped it off frantically on her dress. It was wet and muddy, and when she tried to fire a test shot, all she got was a metallic click. Whimpering in her desperation, she rubbed it again and again on her dress, cupping it in her hands lovingly, trying to warm the moisture out of it.

Crane's hand closed over hers with a grip of iron, and he dragged it from her. Her fingernails came alive and slashed down his arm. She screamed at him, loathsome words, strident cries. She pulled around and clawed at his face.

He backed off as fast as he could, holding the gun pointed at her head. She ducked under and went for his stomach, kicking and kneeling him.

"Damn it!" a harsh voice yelled at them from the darkness. "Drop that gun and stand there—both of you!"

Crane twisted around in the sudden bright glare of light. It was Gannon's voice—how had he followed them there?

"Drop it, Crane! Your goose is cooked. You'll burn for what you've already done. Don't make it any worse."

Crane stared into the blinding light. Cathy lay on the ground, looking up at it, too, her blue eyes cold and calculating. Slowly Crane inched back, holding the gun at Gannon.

"Come and get me, Gannon. I can get over this cliff—and maybe beat the rap. Who knows?"

"I've never shot a man yet, Crane! But, if you move one more step for that cliff, I'll blast you through the guts!"

Then Cathy came to life, snarling like a trapped lynx, screaming out at Crane. She stumbled on him and tore at his hands. Crane whirled at her and cursed. He fired once, then twice, and a third time. The bullets slammed at Cathy, and hot powder burns hung suddenly in the rain-drenched air. Cathy slumped back in the mud, and lay still.

"You've got four more shots, Crane! Don't make me come after you! You can't get away with murder!"

Crane was snarling now, moving back slowly. "Listen, Gannon. I was framed. Cathy Sullivan had La Farge killed, and Ed Salt too!"

"We know it, Crane. If you'd played ball with us, you'd have known this afternoon."

"Play ball with you guys! No, Gannon. No more deals. It never works out. I'm through!" He leaped to his feet and ran.

"Stop, Crane! In the name of the law!"

Crane laughed. Gannon's gun barked twice. The shock of both blows gripped Crane in the side like a huge iron claw, and he felt himself hurtled into space.

He tried to squeeze the trigger of the gun, drawing it around and back at Gannon, that damned light all around Gannon—that shimmering, maddening rainbow around Gannon's damned light—but the gun got heavy and big like a cannon and the whole picture fell apart into a dissolving mass of broken, jagged patches of black and red and orange. Gannon, my friend Gannon. Good-bye, Gannon, pal.

Crane never hit the earth at all. . . .

THE sun was bright outside and it was quiet in the bare, official office. Gannon looked across his desk at Bobby Winters.

"I wish there was something I could say, kid," Gannon said.

Bobby smiled gently. Her blonde hair was soft and curly, and her amber eyes seemed rested again. She put her hands flat on the desk and looked at them. "Don't try, Bill. There's nothing at all you can say. A pretty pitiful thing, falling in love with your own quarry, isn't it?"

Gannon reached for a cigarette. His mouth turned down at one corner. "It's happened before, kitten."

She shook her head silently. "I couldn't tell him out there in the shack that night. I tried to tell him I was an F. B. I. agent—just to keep the records straight—but I couldn't. He'd been through so much. He was on his way out and he knew it. It's best the way it was."

"Yeah," said Gannon. "I can't understand why you're quitting though, kid. You did a fine job. We rounded up a good half of the gang, just on the facts you found. You'll get good jobs now, too. Good spy cases. Good reefer shakedown. Maybe even another inter-state gambling set-up like Crane's. But never anything so neat, so fabulous, as his."

Her smile was bright for an instant. "No double-crossing babes like that Cathy

Sullivan, either. I've had enough of her kind to last me more than a lifetime."

Gannon's eyes twinkled. "Wasn't she a clock-stopper?"

"She stopped Crane's clock, all right." Bobby's eyes were far away and thoughtful.

Gannon leaned back. "Crane was a good man. Nothing wrong with him at all—square, straight, human. Trouble was, he couldn't see the difference between good business and bad business."

Bobby smiled. "A symptom of the times."

"Any other place, he'd have been fine. But here in L.A., brought up the way he was on the wrong side, what could you expect?"

Bobby shrugged her shoulders. "Look at me. Boyle Heights."

Gannon laughed. "You're gold, Bobby. You could fall down a cesspool and come up with gold doubloons. I'm really sorry you're pulling out of the Bureau."

"I think the love affair is all over between the U. S. and me, Gannon. I've given enough of my time and—yes, my heart. From now on, I'm going to live a little for me."

Gannon's eyes were gazing off at the sunny L.A. skyline. "Funny they never were able to find Crane's dead body in that dam, wasn't it?"

Bobby stood up. "Yeah," she said. "Well, so long, Gannon."

Gannon leaned forward. "Where you headed, Bobby?"

"Mexico City," she said steadily.

Gannon's eyes and hers met a long time. "If you see anybody I might know down there, kid—say hello for me."

Bobby shook hands with Gannon. "I'll do that little thing, Bill." She turned at the door, looked back at Gannon's freckled, suddenly young face. She smiled and all the light in the world flooded her face. Then she was gone.

SATAN'S REEFER

Gripping
Federal-Op
Novelette



By
ROE

RICHMOND

Masquerading as an art-and-beauty writer in Halberton Square, tough FBI-man Dave Renick met too many old friends for comfort—at man-about-town Ceffren's reefer party.

RENDEZVOUS



Pivoting smoothly, Renick threw his fist. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Renegade Genius

IT WAS a strange assignment, Renick thought. He had played a great many widely diverse parts but never one like this. Lounging back in the worn leather arm-chair he surveyed the long narrow high-ceilinged main room of his studio-apartment, as the landlord had called it, and wondered how many

thwarted geniuses had sweated and despaired here.

The place was light and airy from the tall windows, bare and bleak, extending from front to rear of the dingy brick building. One end, fitted with table, desk, bookshelves, and straight-backed wooden chairs, was the workroom; the other, equipped with a battered davenport, fraying easy chairs, and a low coffee table littered with magazines and newspapers,

served as the living-room. Opening off this on one side were the bedroom, a small kitchenette, and a large clothes closet.

Not bad, Renick thought. A writer or painter could get a lot of work done here. He smiled wryly at the old portable typewriter on its stand, and the desk and table piled with manuscripts, yellow notepads, pencils, sheafs of clean white paper, stacks of carbon. He would get a lot of writing done here himself, but it would all be wasted.

It was ironical to consider the people who might have used this room to such an advantage, while all Renick could do was create a two-fingered clatter and string out meaningless words, conveying the illusion that he was a hard-working young author.

They had given him a typescript of seven chapters of "his" novel, entitled, *Look to This Day*, and Renick had read it carefully so that he could develop on the theme. It wasn't bad either, he had read much worse in published form, and he was grateful that it interested him for he had no wish to go crazy on this job. It was good enough to be a challenge, and Renick found that he enjoyed trying to maintain the mood and style, manipulate the well-drawn characters, and keep the plot moving. It made the hours pass much faster and easier.

In addition to the seven chapters they had furnished reams of notes and references, thinking of everything as they always did at headquarters. And Dave Renick had become Dale Renner, an obscure but earnest writer, supplied with all kinds of identification in that new name; social security card, driver's license, club and fraternal memberships, old letters and telegrams.

Renick was playing the role straight and conservatively. His dark hair was close-cropped, his clothes casual and commonplace, his appearance that of a mature undergraduate or youthful business man.

There were so many long-haired weirdly-dressed people in the neighborhood that one more would have gone unnoticed, when a normal clean-cut young man of serious demeanour was likely to stand out and command attention.

"It's a Greenwich Village kind of place," McLain had explained in his grave thoughtful manner. "While there are undoubtedly earnest and productive artists living in the section they are strictly in the minority. Most of them are one hundred per cent phonies. Young men and women with too much money behind them, pretending to aspire to the arts because they either can't or won't settle down and go to work. Instead of painting or sculpting or writing they sit around drinking, and talking loftily about Art—with a capital A.

"It seems now that they have tired of alcohol and the normal dissipations and are going for the weed. If they'd stay within their own group, destroy themselves, that would be fine and nobody would care. But apparently they are constantly seeking converts, involving boys and girls of high-school age in their reefer parties.

"And recently there has been an epidemic of killings around Halberton Square. The police have cracked a few heads, made a few arrests, but actually little or no progress. So finally they are calling on us."

Renick had been selected because of his university background, a natural interest in literature that led to wide reading, and his deceptively mild and pleasant appearance. He was nearly six feet tall but so well-proportioned that he seemed shorter.

He had been a football player but in street clothes he did not look like one. His features were regular, plain and undistinguished, and his half-shy smile was boyish and charming. He had deep brown eyes that looked level, calm, and almost soft, until they lighted up with the amber

fire that came when he was aroused. Renick was quiet, well-mannered, soft-spoken, and in McLain's mind the ideal operative for the assignment.

Renick had been spending his evenings in the bars around Halberton Square, drinking soberly and sparingly, keeping to himself. He was familiar with the looks of the leading faction in the artists' colony, but it was not his intention to intrude until they practically demanded it. He had already rebuffed several tentative half-drunken advances by members of the central group, and was gaining the reputation of being a lone wolf and sour puss.

Discreetly he let out here and there that he was writing a novel. The bartenders were inclined to favor him more than their patrons did. "There's a young fellow really workin' at his trade," they said. "Not like them other refugees from the loony bin. He might amount to somethin' some day."

CHARLEY CEFFREN was the kingpin of the crew. He was big and rangy, lithe and graceful, with tawny curls tousled on his forehead, eyes so blue as to be almost violet, clear carved features and a bright winning smile. Men and women alike gazed at him with open admiration, hung on his words, laughed at his jests, and adjusted themselves to his moods. Studying him in the smoky noisy dimness, Renick knew that Charley Ceffren was far

more dangerous than he seemed on the surface.

Learning the names of others Renick regarded them with more or less contempt. Of little account in themselves they constituted a menace only in that they would follow wherever Ceffren led and obey his every order. Bud Strakey, short, squat, powerfully built, might be troublesome. And Paul Lepper, gaunt and wasted as he was, had burning black eyes and an evil mouth that made him rather formidable. But the others were mostly nondescript: dapper Harmie Permane, little Ballou, fat Lambourne, Fenbert and the apishly ugly Dunkel.

Those eight formed the nucleus of the crowd. Except for Charley Ceffren who dressed like a raffish undergraduate, their clothes were outlandish, their hair long uncut, and their pallid faces frequently sprouted unsightly beards and mustaches. They wore gaudy sport shirts, paint-daubed sweatshirts, striped jerseys, and dirty T-shirts with stained and shapeless slacks of every hue. Their headgear, if any, ranged from berets to yachting caps. Their feet were shod in anything from open sandals to ski boots.

Renick was not much interested in the women although occasionally one of them had an interesting face or a striking sunken sort of beauty. Once in awhile when he encountered them late at night Renick knew from their glazed eyes and unre-

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strained hilarity that they had been indulging in marihuana. A couple of times he saw teen-age youngsters in these parties, and his hatred blazed.

Walking homeward then Renick thought: I can't wait much longer for Ceffren to come to me. If they don't make the approach soon I'll have to move in myself. I must have frozen them out too effectually in the beginning, but Mac warned against haste. . . . The best bet'll be to pretend I'm drunk. Tomorrow's Saturday, a good night for that, too.

* * *

The Crimson Cavern was roaring with Saturday night revelry when Renick walked in with drunken dignity and writhed his way to the bar. His dark hair was mussed untidily, his necktie hung askew, and the bartenders observed him with surprise and some reproach as he ordered a double rye. This place was well-named.

With the lights flaring through a dense haze of smoke it resembled a torchlit cave, and right now the cave seemed to be packed solid-full of wild animals. Charley Ceffren and his boys were at the bar and Renick edged in beside them, but they were too busy talking and laughing among themselves to notice any outsider.

Bud Strakey, short and solid, was next to him and Renick bumped him roughly. "Sorry," he said. "Beg your pardon."

Strakey twisted his thick neck around to scowl at his neighbor. "How much room you need, genius?" he sneered.

"Said I was sorry," muttered Renick. "Guess I'm drunk. Finished another chapter today. Felt like celebrating."

"Hey, the genius finished another chapter!" Strakey announced.

"Buy him a beer," Charley Ceffren said.

"He ain't drinking beer," said Strakey. "Drinking double-headers."

"That's rough," Ceffren said. "Forget about buying him anything, Bud."

"I can buy my own," Renick said.

Bud Strakey blinked curiously at him. "What the hell brought you out of your shell, genius?"

"Told you. Finished a chapter."

"Tell him to run along home and write another," advised Ceffren.

Renick straightened up. "You don't own this bar, mister," he said over Strakey's shoulder.

Charley Ceffren pushed through past Strakey and confronted Renick. "You looking for trouble?"

"Never look for it," Renick said. "Never run from it either."

"Lemme take him, Charley," pleaded Strakey. "I'll break his back."

"Shut up," commanded Ceffren, still eyeing Renick. "You'd better blow, brother, before you get hurt."

Renick looked from him to the others. "Too many of you," he said, picking up his drink and walking toward a small unoccupied table against the wall with loud derisive laughter trailing after him. Sitting down Renick sipped the whiskey and wondered if he should have hit Ceffren. He had at least established contact with them, even if it were unfriendly. Sometime, he thought with grim relish, I'll take that guy apart . . . Meanwhile it was best to sit back and wait for something to break.

IT BROKE sooner than he expected.

Seated at a large nearby table were the women of the art colony watching their heroes disport themselves at the bar. Suddenly one of them rose and walked straight to Renick, and looking up in the murky dimness he saw a face that he had always remembered fondly but never had expected to see again. Elaine Adair, his high-school sweetheart, still a slim golden girl with a high proud head, clear gray eyes, and a gentle gracious smile.

"Elaine!" Renick said incredulously, standing up and taking her hand.

"Yes, Dave." She reached up and kissed him quickly. "And it's really you! I couldn't believe my eyes. I never expected to see you in Halberton Square. What are you doing here, Dave?"

He placed her in his chair and hauled another over for himself. He recalled that even in high school she had written poetry and probably that's what she was doing here. He was reluctant to confess literary pretensions to her but it had to be done. "Writing a book," he said, smiling shyly.

"You are?" she cried. "Why, Dave, I didn't know—. But how can you? . . ." Elaine was remembering how poor his family had been, while her folks had money. She had been permitted to go with him only because Renick was the star athlete of the school and her father was sports-minded.

"An uncle left me a little legacy," he lied, and ordered a couple of drinks from a harried waiter. "And you're still writing poetry, Elaine?"

She was. She'd had one volume published and was preparing another for publication in the fall. But she wanted to hear about his novel. In fact, she wanted to see what he had done on it . . . Renick protested that he couldn't let anyone see it, not even her.

"What are you doing with that bunch anyway?" he demanded.

Elaine Adair laughed a bit nervously. "Why, they're all right, Dave, they're fine. Very intelligent and talented. I'll admit they don't work much, but they're a lot of fun. A girl can't work and live alone all the time . . . You don't know them, Dave. You'll have to meet them tonight and come along to the party."

"The boys don't like me."

"They will after you get acquainted," promised Elaine. "Here comes Charley now."

"My pen name is Dale Renner," he said quickly. "I go under that here."

She nodded absently, her eyes on Char-

ley Ceffron as he came toward them, tall and handsome, smiling and debonair, his hair rumped picturesquely on his brow. "Well, well, Elaine," he said. "So you know this renegade genius here?" He set down the whiskey bottle he was carrying to shake hands with Renick as the girl introduced them. "Sorry about that deal at the bar," Ceffron said. "I was just craving excitement, I guess."

"That's all right," said Renick. "It was my fault."

"You'll join our party tonight, won't you, Renner?" Ceffron filled their glasses from his bottle. "A man gets tired of drinking after awhile and seeks something new and different. We have that, Renner, in abundance."

"Thanks," Renick said. "I've been alone too much lately."

"Any friend of Elaine's is in," smiled Ceffron. "We're mighty proud of this little girl, Renner. She works, she produces, she's tops with us all."

CHAPTER TWO

Rendezvous

THE party was held in a spacious studio, apparently occupied by Charley Ceffron and several of his friends, which took up the entire top third floor of an ancient brownstone building. As the ground floor was a store and the second story contained offices, the place was deserted at night and no limits were imposed upon the merry-makers in the studio. A perfect set-up, Ceffron pointed out. Anything short of murder goes, and even that would no doubt pass undetected.

Renick met scores of people, most of whom he had scant interest in. It was enlightening to learn, however, that Bud Strakey, the wrestler, was supposed to be a sculptor. The cadaverous Paul Lepper was a musical composer. De Bal-lou and fat gross La

laborating on a play. Harmie Permane painted surrealist pictures. Fenbert was a writer and had actually sold a few bloody murder mysteries. The gorilla-like Dunkel did exquisitely delicate etchings.

What Charley Ceffren did, besides throw parties and be irresistibly charming or coldly domineering according to his mood, was not immediately forthcoming. Someone reported that Charley dabbled in all the creative fields. Renick noted that Elaine's gray gaze followed Charley about with marked interest. He saw now that Elaine had changed, taken on hardness and polish, an ultra-sophisticated manner in harmony with the others.

There was more drinking, an endless milling of people with glasses in hand, a great deal of inane chatter and wise-cracking. Renick was bored until Elaine mentioned seeing Pete Caten, who had been with them in the grades but ended up in a reformatory instead of in high school. If Pete had stayed on in school he probably would have outshone Renick in athletics, for in boyhood Pete Caten had surpassed Renick and all the rest. But there had always been a wild lawless strain in Caten.

Thinking of him, Renick recalled Pete's lean tough blondness, the narrow insolent green eyes and mocking grin. After all these years Renick squirmed slightly at the memory of those fist fights with Pete Caten and the beatings he invariably took. Pete had been thin and wiry with a cat-like quickness and an explosive power. He could outfight, outrun, outjump, outswim every kid intown.

"What's Pete doing now?" he asked.

"He's some kind of racketeer, I'm afraid," said Elaine. "Of course that was his ultimate and inevitable destiny."

They were passing out the reefers now, and Renick saw the light of anticipation in Elaine's eyes. "Did you ever smoke them?" she asked. "Really a marvel-

ous sensation. You own all the earth."

Renick had sampled marihuana in preparation for this task.

"Oh, I don't do this very often," Elaine said carelessly. "Once a month perhaps. It's not habit-forming or harmful if you use discretion."

"What are those high-school kids doing here, Elaine?"

"They might as well learn young," she replied nonchalantly. "Don't be provincial, Dave."

He glanced sharply at her, but she was smiling across the room at Charley Ceffren. Renick wished he were a free individual tonight so he could break loose and bust this outfit wide open. But his mission came first. He had to lie back and bide his time, get to the source of the drug supply and make a thorough clean-up.

The rank smoke of marihuana filled the studio as the cigarettes were lighted. Elaine's mouth had a greedy look as she drew on her reefer, the sensitive nostrils dilated. Charley Ceffren and his degenerate companions deserved to die. . . . The party began to simmer, seethe and boil madly as normal restraints and inhibitions were dropped under the spell of the weed.

Sometime later Renick found himself in another room. Renick's eyes swept searchingly about in the semi-darkness. There was a long flat wooden box on the table with a sliding cover. Opening it he saw the reefers neatly aligned in the case. Carrying it swiftly to the open window Renick pitched it out and as far down the alley as he could angle his throw.

Returning to the main room, he drifted unnoticed into the smoke-wreathed swirl of humanity. If they should have to go after more marihuana he might manage to get himself included in the detail. But for the present there seemed to be an adequate supply. On all sides men and women were laughing like maniacs and telling one another how high they were. The

impact of the drug on top of liquor was terrific.

Wandering aimlessly around Renick saw Elaine and Charley Ceffren spinning and gyrating in a mad Apache dance within a ring of cheering mad spectators. He turned away from that scene in time to witness something he had been waiting for. The elegant Fenbert and the ugly Dunkel had a helpless giggling young girl between them. Nobody else paid any attention.

Renick's fist lashed at Fenbert so hard that the marceled head bounced off the door jamb and Fenbert fell forward in a headlong sprawl. It sounded with whip-lash sharpness through the reeking studio.

Dunkel let go of the girl and lunged heavily at Renick, his apelike arms outstretched to grip and crush. Pivoting smoothly Renick threw his left fist into that anthropoidal face. Dunkel's shaggy head snapped far back and he landed on his shoulder blades, skidding into the wall and slumping there, a shapeless hulk. Women were screaming shrilly now.

THERE was a roar of anger from behind and Renick spun on his toes and set himself. Bud Strakey, the strong-armed sculptor with the build of a wrestler, was charging at him. Renick swung his right and followed through on it, pouring everything from ankles to wrist into the punch. It rang like an axe on the

chopping-block. Strakey straightened up and back, tall and stiff, tottering sideways and collapsing loosely on a divan, rolling from there to the floor.

Then Charley Ceffren came through the crowd to stand before Renick, big, handsome, lithely poised, smiling that reckless smile. "It looks like I'm next, Renner. You want to fight me?"

Renick jerked his thumb toward the girl who was sobbing in the doorway. "She isn't more than sixteen."

The girl raised her disheveled chestnut head and ran to Renick, flinging her arms about his neck. "I'm seventeen," she protested loudly. "And you're wonderful! You're for me, whoever you are. Don't fight any more, just be nice to me. . . Be sweet to Carla."

A roar of laughter went up from the assemblage. Renick disengaged the clinging arms and pushed the girl lightly away. "Why don't you go home where you belong?"

Charley Ceffren was laughing with the rest. "I think you've got something there, Renner. I told these guys to lay off the jail-bait. They got what was coming to them, but good. . . . Now you under-age kids get the hell out of here, and us grown-ups'll smoke a peace pipe of marihuana." After herding the teen-agers outside Ceffren went into the room where Renick had disposed of the reefer. He returned in a few moments raging,

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"Somebody stole the tea! Now who in hell would do a thing like that?"

Fenbert, Dunkel and Strakey were on their feet again, nursing their wounds and eyeing Renick with malice. Fenbert said, "No doubt the genius did."

"Shut up!" said Ceffren tersely. "We'll have to get some more. I'll find out who took them sooner or later, but I can't bother tonight." He nodded at the haggard hollow-cheeked Lepper. "Get on the phone, Paul." Ceffren surveyed the rest of his associates with contempt. They were far gone with drink and weed or the effects of Renick's slugging. His intense violet-blue eyes swerved back to Renick with something akin to liking and respect.

Paul Lepper came back from telephoning and whispered, "Mario's."

Charley Ceffren smiled at Renick, "You want to come along. These others are better off out of sight here."

"Sure," Renick said calmly. "I could use some fresh air."

"You may have to drive unless Paul feels like it," Ceffren told him. "I'm kind of groggy myself." He smiled around at his guests. "Carry on, boys and girls, there's plenty to drink. And we'll be back with the goods very shortly."

Renick went out with Ceffren and Lepper, hiding his elation behind a poker-faced mask. The breaks, once they had started, were coming fast.

* * *

It was a high-powered sedan of the latest model. Paul Lepper drove in silence, his face like a death-head in the faint light. Charley Ceffren, sitting in the middle of the wide front seat, was stimulated enough to feel like talking. Seated on the outside Renick had turned the window down and was breathing in the night air. Even the city air smelled fresh and clean after that studio.

"Are you a reformer, Renner?" inquired Ceffren.

"Not at all," Renick said.

Ceffren sighed. "You and Elaine were in love once, I gather?"

"A long time ago. Just a high-school romance."

"You aren't pleased at the way you find her now?"

"Not very," admitted Renick, thinking that Ceffren was much more observant than he appeared to be. "But it doesn't really concern me."

"She's still a nice girl," Ceffren said. "In spite of my influence. Sometimes I'm not too proud of the life I lead or the company I keep. Not meaning you, Paul."

Lepper said nothing but his look indicated that Charley was talking too much. Lepper handled the car in traffic with cool detached skill. They were descending through a slum section toward the waterfront.

"This marihuana can be bad," Renick mused.

"I suppose so," said Ceffren. "Makes my throat dry. I'd like a cold beer."

"At Mario's." Lepper spoke for the first time.

"If your friends get hopped up enough they'll probably come back at me," Renick said.

"They aren't fighters, except for Strakey. I'll tell them all to lay off, Renner."

"That stuff leads to killing."

Charley Ceffren laughed. "We don't hit it that hard. Perhaps we aren't so depraved as you think. We just do it for laughs."

They swung into a long street lined with small stores, greasy restaurants, dingy bars, and cluttered pawn shops. Lepper pulled into the curb in front of a red-and-blue neon sign that spelled: *Mario's*. It was larger and more elaborate than the other places with plateglass windows, many mirrors and potted palms, gleaming showcases, a long mahogany bar in the background, tables covered with red

checkered cloths and lighted with candles.

"Come on in and have a beer," Charley Ceffren invited, ignoring Lepper's pointed look of protest.

Inside, Ceffren paused to talk to the short swarthy man at the cash register and then led the way to a table half-hidden by palms and a screen in one corner, ordering three bottles of beer. It did taste good after the whiskey and reefers, cool and soothing to the throat.

After a few minutes a man walked over to them. Without looking directly at him Renick secured the impression of a long lean lounging figure in extravagantly tailored clothes, the jacket cut full and loose enough to conceal a shoulder-holster. Ceffren asked him to sit down and have a drink. The man shook his head. "Couldn't get 'em tonight, boys." There was something dimly familiar about that voice. Suddenly conscious that the man was staring steadily at him Renick looked up and saw the tilted blond head and angular strong-boned face of Pete Caten, dead-panned and slit-eyed, a scar curving down one lean cheek. Renick smiled in surprised greeting but Caten remained expressionless.

Charley Ceffren nodded toward Renick. "Look, Pete, he's all right, he's one of us. You don't have to worry about—"

"Sure, I know he's all right," Pete Caten said. "I know him. But I couldn't get anything for you."

Renick stood up and held out his hand, Caten took it in a brief hard grip, and the other two watched in astonishment. "How are you, Pete?" said Renick. He grinned at his companions. "Meeting all my old schoolmates tonight."

"Yeah, we ought to have a reunion," Pete Caten said.

"Won't you have a drink?" asked Renick.

"A quick one at the bar—with you," Caten said. "Excuse us, won't you? Sorry about the stuff, Charley, but I tried.

There'll be a new shipment in tomorrow."

RENICK walked to the bar with Caten. The other two watched them go, their faces drawn tight with anger and suspicion. Charley Ceffren hammered a big fist on the table and ordered two double Scotches. They drank silently, their eyes fixed on the pair at the far end of the bar.

Pete Caten twirled his glass in long fingers. "What you doing with them, Dave?"

"I'm living in Halberton Square now. Elaine Adair introduced me to them. She told me she'd seen you around, Pete."

"What you living there for?" persisted Caten.

"I'm writing a book," Renick confessed rather sheepishly.

"You don't say," Caten murmured flatly. "You always was a smart boy."

"Couldn't you get any reefers, Pete?"

"You hitting the weed now, too?"

Pete Caten shook his fair head. "I can't believe it of you, Davey."

"We're having a little party," Renick explained. "Don't hold out on account of me, Pete."

"I know, that's all they do up there is have parties," said Caten. "I'm not holding out, not on an old pal . . . But listen, kid, don't underestimate that gang you're with. They're rougher than you think. If they had any idea . . ." His low toneless voice trailed off into nothing.

"About what?" Renick demanded.

"You ever know a guy named Walter Berrien?"

"No, I don't recall anyone by that name," lied Renick.

"He worked for the FBI, I guess," Pete Caten went on in his level monotone. "He was nosing around here for awhile. Disappeared all of a sudden, just like that." Caten snapped his fingers. "Never found a trace of him, and they never will. Kind of figured some of our boys had a hand

in it but they didn't. I happen to know the Halberton Square boys took care of Walter Berrien."

"What's that got to do with me, Pete?"

Caten shrugged. "Just a warning, Dave. Take it or leave it . . . But remember one thing, kid. I can smell the law ten miles away." Caten smiled crookedly and that scar became a deep crease in his cheek. "I started at thirteen, I should know 'em. If you're smart, Dave, you won't come around here again."

"I don't get it," Renick said. There was a cold hollow sinking sensation inside him. This wasn't going well at all. Too many people who knew him from the past. That wasn't good in this business. He'd have to communicate with McLain at once. Meeting Caten was running into a dead-end.

"I got to be going," Pete Caten said, clapping him on the back. "Watch yourself when you leave here, Davey. Them babies aren't so soft as you think." He walked away, still moving with the sinuous ease of an athlete.

Back at the table Charley Ceffren finished his Scotch. "Pete was going to deliver until he spotted Renner with us."

Paul Lepper nodded, studying his long narrow pale hands. "That's the way it looked to me, Charley."

Renick returned to the sheltered shadowy corner. "Two people I never expected to see again, Elaine and Pete," he said. "Odd to meet them both the same night." He could feel the difference in Ceffren and Lepper. It was not a pleasant change.

"Very odd indeed," said Ceffren. "But they always say it's a small world. Well, we'd better get back uptown."

When they got in the car Lepper took the wheel again and Ceffren stood aside to let Renick climb into the center of the seat. Renick didn't like this but he could make no logical objection. Maybe, he thought, they're just sore because they

didn't get the marihuana. But something told him it was more than that.

"I hope I didn't queer the party for you," Renick said.

"No, nothing like that," Charley Ceffren assured him. "To hell with the party anyway. I'm getting sick of those parties. I'm going to send 'em all home."

The studio building was in a poorly-illuminated night-deserted area of great gloomy warehouses. As they wound toward it Renick tried to catch street signs on the corners, but they were either obscured in darkness or non-existent. The streets all looked the same. When the car stopped and they got out Renick half-expected to get hit on the head with something, but nothing happened. Weary, dull and let-down now, they climbed three flights of stairs to the top floor.

The party had died out in sleepy drunkenness. A few of the waiting people were revived by their return, but sank back as Charley Ceffren spread his open hands and said, "No weed. The jamboree is over, folks. Everybody out." It took time to restore some of the unconscious revelers, but Ceffren and his aides finally cleared the room.

Renick started to go but Ceffren invited him to stick around for a night-cap. Elaine Adair was the last to go, pleading that she wanted Renick to see her home, but Ceffren disregarded her pleas and ushered her out.

Renick was turning from the door, aware of a lurking presence at his back, when there was a wicked *swish* and something exploded against his skull. Through blinding lights he glimpsed a distorted image of Bud Strakey's snarling face. Then his legs melted and Renick was on the floor. He struggled upright but a fist smashed into his unprotected face, stretching him out full length and half-senseless.

Numbly Renick tried to draw up his knees and get his arms in front of his

face, but they were all over him, kicking, slugging, mauling and beating him into the hardwood, Strakey, Fenbert, Dunkel, and others. Dimly he heard Ceffren cursing as he fought to pull them off Renick, but for every one Charley hauled away there were two more plunging in to batter the fallen man with boots, knees, fists, and elbows.

They're going to kill me, Renick thought through the shocking concussions and splintering pain. They're going to beat me to death here. A hell of an agent I am, beaten to death by a bunch of fake artists . . . From a vast distance came the thin high screams of a woman, and he realized it must be Elaine Adair. He was crushed, smothered, crippled, and helpless. The blows kept coming. Vivid lights rocketed through his head with searing agony until darkness closed in with a merciful rush, drowning the lights and Renick, burying him deep.

CHAPTER THREE

Showdown

TWO days later Renick was still invalidated in Elaine's apartment. Thanks to his natural toughness he had suffered no serious or permanent injuries, but he was badly bruised from head to foot, lame and stiff. By now, however, his cuts were healing, his dis-

colored eyes open again, the welted lumps diminishing on cheek and jawbones, most of the swelling gone from his nose and lacerated mouth. For a wonder no bones were broken, no teeth knocked out, and there wasn't any evidence of concussion. Renick had been quite fortunate.

Elaine had screamed outside the studio until Charley Ceffren finally broke up the one-sided battle and opened the door. She had insisted on taking Renick to her place, and Ceffren had driven them over in his sedan.

"I guess Charley's all right," Renick said. "He was trying to stop them."

Elaine laughed rather harshly. "That's what you think!"

Renick looked questioningly at her but she refused to say any more. Renick had to talk with McLain, not over the phone but face to face.

On the second afternoon when Elaine was out shopping Renick put a call through to the Chief's secret number. McLain agreed to meet him that night at Renick's apartment.

Shaving his battered face was a tedious and painful process but Renick managed it, and then took a long hot shower topped off with cold water. Elaine, surprisingly tender, thoughtful and domestic these past two days, had laundered and pressed his linen and had his suit cleaned and pressed, his shoes shined.

She had even bought a new tie to re-



place his ruined one. Dressing in the fresh clothes Renick felt much better. His pocketbook had been gone through but nothing seemed to be missing. They should be satisfied now that he was Dale Renner, at least.

Elaine Adair came back late in the afternoon, surprised to see him up, dressed, and looking almost like himself once more. She had been cooking all their meals and was prepared to get dinner tonight, but Renick declared that if ever a girl deserved to dine out she surely did. They went to a little place she knew, cosy, cheerful, intimate. Over the coffee Elaine grew suddenly serious,

"Dave, you won't go back there, will you?"

Renick laughed it off. "Not very likely, Elaine. I'm no glutton."

She was disappointed when he told her he had to meet his agent and couldn't spend the evening with her, but he promised to see her soon . . . Outside Renick bought a tabloid from a newsboy, stopping short on the sidewalk as a heading caught his eye, "SLAYING IN HALBERTON SQUARE." Leaning close against his arm to read the account Elaine gave a sharp gasp of horror, and Renick asked her what the trouble was.

"Why, it's that little girl the fight started over!" she cried.

Renick's face was grim and bleak. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Elaine murmured. "That's her name, her address, everything. Oh, Dave! . . ."

"Elaine, keep away from that crowd," he said tautly.

"Don't worry," she promised. "But Dave, you don't think *they'd* do a thing like that? . . ."

"On that weed they'd do anything, Elaine."

"Dave, I don't want to be alone tonight."

"Have you any friends—outside of that

bunch?" asked Renick. "Fine then, I'll take you there." He flagged a cruising cab, helped her in, and directed the driver to the address she gave. Arriving there he got out with her, thanking her for everything, kissing her good-by, and climbed back into the taxi to ride to his own place.

The apartment had not been torn to pieces or even much disarranged, but he saw immediately that it had been searched with thoroughness. Well, everything they found there would substantiate the story that he was a writer named Dale Renner.

It seemed an interminable time before the Chief showed up, but just seeing him made Renick feel like a new man. McLain explained that he had been detained at the police station of the local precinct. He brought Renick an automatic pistol and some extra clips. The familiar balanced weight of the gun felt wonderful in Renick's hand as he told McLain with exact conciseness what had happened to date. The listening McLain was patient and grave.

"There's no doubt in my mind that they killed this kid," Renick said. "We haven't much to go on but I wish we could hit them now. They may run out on us if we don't."

McLain nodded. "Lieutenant Koslow told me that girl had been smoking marihuana before her death."

"That wraps it up," Renick said. "We've got to move tonight, Chief."

McLain stood up. "We're on our way, Dave. I'll get the police on the radio in my car. We'll have to see Miss Adair for the studio address. Meanwhile I'll have Koslow send a couple of plain-clothes men downtown to pick up Pete Caten."

McLAIN parked a couple of doors away from the address Elaine Adair had given them.

Renick saw lights on the top floor.

McLain now had a sub-machine gun across his lap. "We'd better wait for the coppers," he said as Renick started to get out.

"I'll go over and wait by the door," Renick said. "You cover me, Chief. . . . Hey, there's one of them now!"

Sleek dapper Harmie Permane, the futuristic painter, emerged from the shadowed doorway across the street and strolled toward the corner. There was no one else in sight. Renick streaked lightly across to intercept the fellow. Permane whirled as he heard him coming and reached for his pocket, but Renick shouldered him hard into the brick wall and pinned him tightly there. Renick's left hand caught Permane's lapels, bunching them in a knotted fist at the man's throat, and Renick's right hand drew the spring knife from the pocket of Permane's jacket.

"Nice little toy," Renick said, pressing the button that sprung the six-inch blade out. "Who's upstairs, Harmie?"

"Go up and find out," Permane mumbled sullenly.

Renick shook him so that his head cracked the bricks. "You want your throat cut with your own knife? Who's up there?"

"The usual gang."

Renick closed the knife and dropped it in his own pocket. Then his open right hand flailed viciously back and forth across Permane's face, snapping his head from side to side. "Who's up there?"

"Ceffren, Lepper, Strakey," panted Permane.

"Where are the others?"

"I don't know."

"Which one's the murderer, Permane?"

"What the hell you talking about?" Permane gasped.

Renick's hand slashed to and fro again, and blood trickled from Permane's nose and mouth. "Who does the killing?" demanded Renick.

"You're crazy, man," Permane sobbed.

Renick closed his right fist and broke Permane's nose with a short chopping blow. Permane would have screamed but Renick's left hand tightened on his throat. Permane slumped limply on the wall with blood pouring down his wrecked face.

"Who killed Carla Bianchi?"

No answer. Renick's fist smashed savagely once more. Permane gave a strangled moan. "Charley—Ceffren."

"All right, come with me." Renick hauled him across the street and heaved him into the rear seat. McLain handed back two sets of steel bracelets. Renick handcuffed Permane's wrists behind him and locked his ankles together with the other pair.

"He says Ceffren killed the girl," Renick reported. "Ceffren's upstairs with Lepper and Strakey. If we took them it might save a lot of time."

McLain thought it over gravely. "All right, Dave, lead the way," he said finally. "I've been going stale sitting behind that desk."

They climbed the wide dirty stairs carefully and quietly. They were mounting toward the third floor when the street door opened below. They did not hear it, nor the cautious tread of feet that followed them up the dark stairway. McLain carried the machine gun and Renick had the automatic in his hand. At the top Renick rapped on the studio door.

Charley Ceffren opened it and looked at the two men with the guns. "Well, well," he said. "The renegade genius returns, armed to the teeth."

Leaving McLain to cover Ceffren, Renick slipped past the big handsome man into the room, his narrowed eyes sweeping the interior. Bud Strakey, sitting at a table with his wrestler's shoulders hunched tensely, lifted a blunt revolver as Renick stepped clear of Ceffren, but Renick's big automatic was already blazing and bucking in his hand.

Strakey, grunting and gasping, swayed from the swift impacts and collapsed face down on the table.

Renick pivoted smoothly as the death-head face of Paul Lepper appeared in the nearest bedroom door, but Renick would have been a dead man if McLain hadn't opened up with his machine gun. Flame streamed in continuous jets across the room and Lepper crumpled and reeled as the bullets all but cut him in two, the pistol dropping from his hand as he toppled backwards, literally shot to pieces.

The shattering sound of the machine gun died away and a single shot crashed from the stairway. Wheeling in horror Renick saw McLain shake his head sorrowfully, disgustedly, and sink slowly to his knees, drilled from behind. McLain pitched forward and the machine gun clattered loose on the floor.

Charley Ceffren dived recklessly after the weapon. Renick, firing into the outer darkness of the stairwell, threw himself in a running leap on top of Ceffren. They sprawled over the machine gun, rolling about in a wild thrashing tangle, and the men on the stairs couldn't shoot without hitting Ceffren.

As they wrestled about on the hard wood Renick ripped his right arm free long enough to slam the gun-barrel across that tawny tousled head, stunning Ceffren, beating him flat and helpless to the floor. With a lightning lunge Renick gathered up the tommy gun and scrambled out of line of fire from the staircase.

Bullets were crackling through the open doorway, but they only raked splinters from the boards and riddled the opposite wall. The studio was as smoky as the last time Renick had seen it, but now it was gunpowder instead of marihuana.

Renick was crawling along the wall toward the door, cradling the machine gun, when the deep vibrant scream of sirens rose from the streets outside.

Charley Ceffren was still stretched unconscious where he had fallen. Bud Strakey bowed in death over the table, and Paul Lepper lay lifeless on his back in the bedroom entrance. But what filled Renick with horror and grief was the thought of McLain out there on the landing, shot in the back and either dead or dying.

The sirens went on wailing and moaning until their blood-chilling cries filled the whole night. With extreme care Renick pushed the muzzle of the Thompson around the bottom corner of the door jamb and touched off two rapid tearing bursts. Shoes pounded the steps in panic, banging in hasty descent.

Four of them out there, Renick thought. Pretty boy Fenbert, Dunkel the gorilla, plump soft Lambourne, neat little Ballou. Trapped now, caught between two fires, me on top with a tommy gun, a cordon of cops down below with enough fire-power to blow up this building . . . And one of those four plugged the Chief in the back.

Renick unleashed another burst and sprang to his feet, gliding out through the doorway in a crouch, stepping carefully over McLain, and turning the machine gun loose down the dark stairwell. A shriek of agony and the bumping thud of a falling body floated up to him.

Renick smiled thinly. Flame speared up through the shadows scoring the walls, splintering the balustrade, showering Renick with plaster from the ceiling. Leaning over the rail, Renick swept the stairs with another terrible blast, and heard the men below running, tumbling, swearing in terror and despair.

THE noise of breaking glass tinkled up and Renick thought they must be breaking into a second-floor office to make a last stand there. Well, it wouldn't do them any good, they were doomed. Renick

was starting down the stairs, halfway to the second floor, when some instinct brought him spinning around. Charley Ceffren stood at the head of the stairway, swaying a trifle and smiling pleasantly in the dimness, a gun in his right hand. He leveled his gun.

Renick tried to get the machine gun up, knowing that he was too late, a damn fool for not finishing Ceffren, knowing that his time had come. But another pistol roared before Ceffren could fire and flame stabbed Ceffren between the shoulder blades, smashing him forward off balance. Falling in slow-motion Ceffren clawed frantically at the railing as he doubled across it and hung head down, long legs kicking the air. Then with one hideous scream Charley Ceffren plunged headlong into darkness. Renick heard his body strike the banister below and bounce off to thump and keel on down to the bottom.

Mac's alive! Renick thought, and mounted three steps at a time to do what he could to keep the Chief that way. The police were flooding in the street entrance now and stalking up the first flight, holding their fire.

"They're in an office on the second floor," Renick called down.

"We know," yelled back an officer. "We'll take care of 'em!"

That's fine, Renick thought wearily, kneeling beside McLain, who had propped himself up against the wall now, automatic still in hand. You take care of them and I'll take care of the Chief.

"It's not—too bad—Dave," panted McLain, the sweat standing out in large drops on his grave lined face. "Broke the shoulder—didn't hit the lung."

Renick grinned at him. "I'm kind of glad I had you along tonight, Chief, he said.

McLain shook his graying head. "From now on—I'll take mine—at a desk."

"To think," said Elaine Adair with a shudder, "of associating with such creatures!"

Harmie Permane, little Ballou, and apelike Dunkel, the only three taken alive and the latter two wounded, had made complete confessions, blaming the major crimes on the dead. According to them Charley Ceffren, Paul Lepper and Bud Strakey had been guilty of murder, while Fenbert and Lambourne could have been charged with assault. Their own misdemeanors, they insisted, were nothing more than a weak-minded over-indulgence in alcohol and marihuana. In the circumstances that was sufficient to convict them for sentences of no short duration.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Elaine, and then smiling, "Finish your novel?"

Renick grinned back at her. "No, I think I'll leave that to the one who started it. What about you, Elaine?"

"I'm going home," the girl said soberly. "I've had my fill of Halberton Square."

"That's great," said Renick. "I'll have a vacation coming after this next job. If it's agreeable with you I'll see you in the old hometown."

"That'll be grand, Dave. But this next job—is it Pete Caten?"

Renick nodded. "Yes, that the ticket. Pete and his whole outfit lammed out of town. They must have sensed something. Pete claims he can smell the law for miles."

"Dave, I'm afraid for you," the girl murmured.

Gently and comfortingly he held her in his arms. "Don't be afraid, Elaine. I'll be all right. Pete used to beat me in everything when we were kids, but I figure on taking him this time." Renick breathed in the fragrance of her golden hair and smiled, a slow grave smile that was somehow like McLain's. "It's about my turn."

KISS and KILL

By TEDD
THOMEY



Lola asked: "Will Bub
make a nice corpse?"

JERRY DALL didn't expect the pepper-red convertible to stop. But he wiggled his thumb at it anyway. His young, freckled face split into a jaunty grin as the big car slowed abruptly, its long nose snuffing at the pavement like a vacuum cleaner.

A bright little brunette package was driving.

She slid across the seat, waved at the

●

Jerry thumbed down the honey-and-spice brunette in the red convertible—and got himself a ride . . . down homicidal highway.

●

steering wheel and said in a voice which was honey and spice and all things nice, "Care to drive?"

Jerry Dall thought he saw something dangerous in her dark eyes, but he didn't hesitate more than a second. "Sure," he said. "And thanks." Tossing his shabby suitcase into the back seat, he got behind the wheel. He shifted to low and the twelve cylinders started to purr.

The girl was purring, too. Jerry didn't say anything more for a while, but he watched her with the edge of his right eye. She was small, with high, almost Indian cheek bones and a full, spicy mouth. She wore gold sandals, ebony pedal pushers and a red blouse which clung like adhesive tape. He figured she was twenty-two or so—a couple of years younger than he.

"Going to San Diego?" she asked.

Jerry nodded. "I heard that big plane factory is hiring welders. Still pretty far yet?"

"Only about thirty miles from Carlsbad where I picked you up." She hesitated, then asked easily, "Married—or anything?"

Jerry was confused. Her voice, her calm confidence, her whole appearance indicated good breeding. But her boldness didn't quite fit. Well, maybe she was just being friendly.

He said, "Nope. You might say I'm alone around—"

"A lone wolf?" she interrupted huskily. "That's nice." She slid across the leather seat and hooked her arm through the worn sleeve of his tan sport coat. "My name's Lola."

He was startled. He was shocked and sort of pleased. He felt her warmth. And her perfume—gardenias or something—made sparks skip up and down his backbone.

Suddenly, he felt her fingers pushing through his hair.

"I like men with butch haircuts."

She smiled. Saucily, like a mopet playing spin-the-bottle.

Jerry was having trouble getting enough air. The whole thing was so astonishing. A big convertible. . . A lithe brunette with ideas. . . Nothing like this had ever happened to him in Seattle.

Grinning, he reached up, took her hand off his hair and put it back in her lap. "You trying to wreck the car?"

"I can't help it if I think you're cute," Lola said, pouting. She folded her tanned arms. "I'm harmless, really. . ."

Like a pot of nitro on a hot stove, Jerry thought. He kept his eyes on the white center stripes. For a few minutes there was silence except for the wind and the swish of the tires.

Then she said in a small voice, "I know a swell place for a drink. Could we stop a while?"

Jerry's brown eyes twinkled. "Isn't it your car?" He looked at his wrist watch. It was only 3 p.m. "It's a little early for me, but I guess I could stand a small one."

"Swell!" Lola was happy again. At the small beach town of Encinitas they turned left and went along a small, little-used road.

"What kind of a place is this we're going to?" Jerry asked after they had driven another half dozen miles past the bright patterns of orange and avocado groves, gladiola and dahlia fields.

"Very exclusive," she said, her button-black eyes mysterious. "Turn left there!" She pointed toward a sandy road and Jerry turned the red convertible into it. They went up a hill, down the other side and into a small valley.

The road ended abruptly in front of a low gray house with brilliant yellow shutters. It was a Spanish-style structure, flanked by palms and lots of plushy lawn. A blue sedan was in the driveway by the terrace.

The girl vaulted from the convertible

and dashed up to the terrace. "Come on in!" she called. "And meet my aunt!"

Jerry was puzzled. He wasn't sure he wanted to go in. She had implied they were going to a bar or restaurant and now here they were at her home. But then he shrugged. It'd be interesting to see what kind of a house a rich gal like her lived in. Besides, maybe her aunt was pretty, too.

When he got to the door, Lola took his hand. They went inside, down a cool hallway and into a handsome sunken living room. A man was lying on the sea-blue rug.

Another man, younger, stood near him with a gun. He pointed the gun at Jerry.

JERRY thought the two men were rehearsing a play or something. So his first response was curiosity. He considered it merely an oversight that the gun, an ugly, blue-metal thing, was aimed at his belt buckle. He stepped over toward the large, flat, watermelon-pink davenport. And the gun was swung in an arc, still aimed at his middle.

"Say," said Jerry, uncomfortably. "That thing might be load—"

And then he saw that it obviously was loaded—or had been. Because, for the first time, he noticed the reddish blots on the dark green sport shirt of the man lying on the rug. Part of a white towel was under his outflung left arm and the rest of it was under his shoulder blades.

The hamburger with onions which Jerry had for lunch started giving him a little trouble. A wave of sickness rolled through him. And his brain felt like someone was walking on it.

The man on the floor was dead.

And the man with the gun looked ready to invite Jerry to take the same route.

Jerry grabbed Lola's arm and whispered harshly, "Maybe we can make a dash for it! If you can. . ."

"Let go of me!" she yelled. She twisted

away from him, ripping the shoulder of her red blouse.

She slapped his temple and the force of it rattled his toenails. She slapped him again and her long scarlet nails raked four bleeding tracks from the bridge of his nose to his left cheek bone.

Then she flounced over to the man with the gun. She stood beside him and glared across the room at Jerry, her lips parted, her blouse rising and falling with agitation.

The man lifted the barrel slightly so it was pointing at Jerry's chest. He said, "Stand still!" He shifted the gun to his left hand and wiped his perspiring palm on his coffee-colored slacks.

No one said anything for a long time.

Jerry stood there, the cords in his 70-inch frame tight as piano wire, his hands balling and unballing at his sides. He stared at the three of them, his mind a riot of disjointed ideas.

The dead man—he seemed to be in his late forties—had a peaceful look on his tanned face. He was narrow-waisted and about Jerry's height. His eyes were closed and his long, silver-gray hair was slickly in place. The watch was missing from his outflung left arm, leaving a whitish patch of skin around the wrist.

The man with the gun was tall, had wavy blond hair and snowplow shoulders. He was thirty or so, wore rimless glasses and his gray eyes were sharply critical as they roamed from the tips of Jerry's scuffed brown shoes to the worn elbows on his coat. The hand which held the gun was, like most California hands, tanned. But in addition it was well-manicured and trembling. Obviously, he was also new to this sort of thing.

The girl looked up at him anxiously. "Did you . . . operate yet, Spence?"

"No," said Spence. "I had to wait and see who you found."

"I was lucky," she said. "Will Bub make a nice corpse? Will he do?"

"Perfectly." Spence took a step toward Jerry. "Even to the watch. . . Well, let's get him ready."

Ready? The question burned a cavity into Jerry's brain. Ready for what? Some kind of an operation? His stomach wrinkled up into a small walnut and tried to drop into his right shoe.

He saw part of the situation. The obvious part. The girl had picked him up all right, out there on Highway 101. But not because her heart was overflowing with tender love. For some other reason. Something connected with the dead man. But what could it be? And what did Spence mean by that crack about the watch?

"Take off your clothes," ordered Spence.

Jerry wasn't sure he'd heard right. "My clothes?"

The tall, blond man moved his gun menacingly. "Be quick about it. And careful. I'm not used to guns and this one might go off if you wiggle an eyebrow the wrong way. . ."

Jerry slipped out of his coat and dropped it on the rug, wondering vaguely if he'd ever put it on again. He kept his eyes on Spence, trying to figure the man out. The situation was so damn screwy. Spence was certainly an educated guy, a collegiate-looking fellow. Not the kind you'd expect to find in something messy like this.

Self-consciously, Jerry removed his pants—looking to see if the girl was embarrassed—she wasn't—and stacked them on the coat.

But Spence wanted it done differently. "Toss the trousers here!"

Jerry rolled them up and threw them hard, so they slapped against Spence's chest.

"That was unnecessary," said Spence, his eyes snapping. He went through the pockets, removing the pocket knife, comb, crumpled handkerchief, the pencil stub and

tan pigskin wallet. He dropped the other objects into his pocket, tossed the pants near Jerry's coat and thumbed through the wallet's compartments.

Once he commented, "Guess he's got no troublesome connections."

In order to inspect this paper or that, Spence used his gun hand and this caused the gun to move around. Jerry tensed, wondering if he could jump those six feet across the rug and grapple for the weapon. He shifted his feet.

Immediately, Spence looked up. "Stay where you are and take off your shirt and shoes!"

Resignedly, Jerry slipped off his yellow T-shirt, his shoes, his socks. Shivering a little, he stood there in his white shorts and watched Spence step over to the cavernous, red-tile fireplace. A bundle of newspapers lay behind the burnished andirons.

Spence touched a match to them and they began to burn. When the flames were high, he tossed in the wallet. He said to the girl, "We'll take care of his clothes later. . ."

JERRY was silent, his eyes fastened on the wallet until it was black and twisted. The anger which swirled through him was much hotter than its ashes. Not so much because the wallet contained his last four dollars, discharge papers and union card. No dammit! The wallet was the last birthday gift he'd gotten from his brother Ed who rode a bomber down into the lagoon at Kwajalein.

He wiped some of the cold sweat from his freckled forehead and his eyes went from the fireplace to the man and then the girl.

"I don't know what you're trying to do to me. . ." His voice sounded strange, taut and unpredictable. "But you're going to have to fight because I'm no. . ." He groped for words. "Chicken. No chicken that doesn't know what an ax is. . ."

"All right," said Spence, sharply. "You've made a point. You're not a chicken." He brandished the gun. "Take off Zimmerman's trousers and shoes. His socks, too."

Jerry assumed that Zimmerman was the dead man. He didn't want to, but he forced himself to kneel beside the silent figure and unlace the highly-polished shoes. He removed them and tugged off the pants.

The girl stepped out of the room for a moment and returned carrying a Scotch-plaid sport shirt. She handed it to Spence who tossed it over to Jerry.

"Put it on and the rest of his clothes," Spence ordered.

Assorted fears began pummeling Jerry. This clothes business was definitely not good. He figured he was supposed to take the place of the dead man. Did that mean they'd kill him, too? Jerry swallowed and the saliva went down like gravel. A half hour ago he'd been walking along the highway practically carefree and happy. And now maybe he was only minutes away from—he hated to even think the word—death. He was scared, but surprised too. Surprised that he wasn't a nervous, babbling wreck. Maybe he was and didn't know it.

The dead man's clothes fit pretty well. The pants pockets were full of gimcracks. He felt keys, small tools and some kind of a notebook. As Jerry—fingers fumbling around like twenty toes—tucked in the tail of the plaid shirt, Spence said, "Now toss over your wrist watch."

Jerry frowned, unhitched the leather strap and pitched the square, gold time-piece. Expertly the tall blond man caught it. He took another smaller watch from his pocket and handed both of them to the girl.

She didn't say anything and stepped over to the mantel. Jerry decided the other watch must belong to the dead man. Using a long red thumbnail and a nail

file, Lola pried both watches apart. Completely baffled, Jerry saw that the dead man's watch had no works. The girl transferred the works from Jerry's watch to the other one.

She snapped both cases shut. "It's not a good fit," she told Spence, handing him both watches. "But close enough."

Spence nodded and tossed the dead man's watch to Jerry. "Put it on."

Jerry gave up trying to figure out what was going on. The whole thing was illogical as a one-legged chair. He strapped on the watch, noticing it was still ticking although the works rattled like peas in a tennis ball.

A glance shot between Lola and Spence. Abruptly, they started closing in. The girl's black eyes were polished with excitement. Spence's trigger knuckle was white and shaking.

This was it! And Jerry was having a horrible emotional shower. Fear and panic sprayed through him. This can't be happening to me, he thought. To anybody else, but not me. . . I didn't do anything to these people. I wouldn't—

The skin across his abdomen and chest crawled and twitched, waited for the hot smash of the bullet.

All at once the man and girl sprang forward—Lola first—and she threw her arms around Jerry's. Spence brought the gun butt hacking down.

Jerry hurled his 160 pounds to the right and the butt raked his ear and glanced off his shoulder. His ear roared its torment and then he and the girl were rolling over and over across the rug's furry surface.

Her small body was tough and elastic, perspiring, and her fingernails gashed his arms. He got his knee into her stomach, thrust hard and she flipped against the fuzzy pink sofa.

Jerry wondered where Spence was. And he found out. The butt came crashing down on his shoulder again. He got to his knees and flung a fist at Spence's belly.

He started to swing again and then Lola swarmed over him, clawing, kicking, grabbing his arm.

Spence grunted. And Jerry's skull rang like Liberty Bell, crack and all. As he pitched forward, blackness seeping over him, he swore. He'd been a fatheaded fool. . . He should have known they couldn't afford to shoot him. He should have run for it...run...run...

IT WAS the acid-stinging in his nose and his coughing which snapped him out of it. He lay there on his stomach, listening to the crackling, feeling the violent heat and the lumps of sickness in his belly and brain. His mind was fairly clear and he figured he hadn't been unconscious very long. He wanted to lie there for a comfortable year or so. But something kept urging him to move.

He sat up. Slowly, so his head wouldn't drop off. Heat waves lashed at his face. He opened his eyes a slit and then they snapped all the way open and he was almost blinded by the brilliant orange light which was leaping everywhere.

Fire!

The room was worse than any inferno Dante had ever imagined. Flames roared from rug to ceiling. Curtains of fire hung over the windows, fire danced upon the rest of the furnishings and the smell of gasoline mingled with the pungency of the smoke.

Jerry got to his feet, fear whipping strength into him. He saw that the dead man and the other two were gone. And that he was completely ringed in by hissing fire. Flames a dozen feet deep were between him and the windows and doors. More coughing wrung his lungs. He backed away from the fire and felt the mantel press against his shoulder blades.

He was trapped! His knees knew it and they were melting ice cream. His brain squirmed, as he realized numbly how clever the man and girl had been. The police would find what was left of a body in the ashes all right and they'd think it was that fellow Zimmerman. He heard a strange squeak of horror and discovered it had come from his own throat. . .

The flames were whipping at him now from only a few feet away. Where could he go? His back pressed against the mantel again and suddenly he saw a chance. A wild chance. Desperate.

Shoulders shuddering with coughs that came up from his shoelaces, he stooped down and looked into the fireplace. Up the chimney. But the damper prevented him from seeing whether it was wide enough. He seized the long iron poker, jammed it between the bricks and metal and twisted and turned till the damper clanked free. The chimney was wide, and far overhead—a thousand miles away—he saw a square of sunshine and blue sky.

But just for a second. Freeing the



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damper had started a draft and immediately smoke started gushing up the chimney. Jerry's head swiveled back to the flames. They were closer. . . He brushed smoking embers off his shoulders, stepped to the edge of the leaping tongues and snatched a cushion off the pink sofa.

He beat the flames from it, but when he got it to the fireplace, it was blazing again. He smashed it against the tile bricks and extinguished it. Then he crawled into the fireplace and jammed the cushion up the chimney as far as he could reach. Immediately, the chimney sucked less smoke.

Jerry stood and he was in a black, sooty world where there was no air. Digging at the bricks with his knees and forearms, he edged up. His lungs hurt and his belly was rotten-sick, but they were nothing compared with the fear which gripped his brain. He had to go up. . . Up! Up!

The cushion got in his way. Even the gadgets in Zimmerman's pockets—the book and tools—bothered him. He propped his knees against the bricks, feeling the skin peel off like almost-dry paint, and forced the cushion below him. Moving it caused more smoke to pour past him and he gasped and choked. His eyes were twin rushing rivers. But once the cushion was in place again, the smoke's intensity decreased.

Gradually the air got better and with victory in reach, his strength returned. And then his head popped out of the top of the chimney like something from an automatic toaster. He dragged himself the rest of the way out and flopped down across the hot tile roof. Smoke was everywhere up here, too, but there was more oxygen and his aching lungs sucked it in hoggishly.

He didn't want to move. He just wanted to lie there and stare up at the sky and gloat over being still alive. But he knew he had to get off before the roof caved in.

Crawling, sliding, he moved along, noticing for the first time that his clothes were black, tattered rags. Well, Zimmerman wouldn't complain. . .

He got to the edge and looked down at the driveway. The red convertible was still parked there. He wondered where Spence and the girl were. The smart operators! They had run little risk in setting the fire. Down here in this valley, the house was so isolated it might be hours before someone noticed anything was wrong.

Jerry swung out over the eaves and crunched to the lawn ten feet below. The key was still in the convertible's ignition. He leaped forward, thumbed the starter button and the car made a rocket-assisted take-off down the driveway.

He was in the biggest hurry of his life. He figured the nearest phone was in that little beach town where they'd turned off the main highway. If he called the police quickly enough, maybe Lola and the blond guy could be nabbed before they got too far.

The convertible churned along the sandy road, throwing out billows of yellow dust. When he was halfway up the wooded hill, roaring in second, it happened.

From behind a screen of trees came the long blue sedan. It rocked to a stop squarely in the road's center. There was no time to cut around it.

JERRY slammed the brake pedal nearly to the radiator. Wheels locked, sliding crookedly, the convertible did a Casey Jones into the sedan's flank.

Metal clanged, the plastic steering wheel bent under Jerry's clenching hands and the hood popped up like a startled eagle. He threw the convertible into reverse, wondering desperately if he could turn it around.

Something jabbed his left shoulder. His head twisted and then he took his foot off the throttle and let the car slow down.

Because Lola was clinging to the running board, black eyes glistening and the gun in her little hand was bigger than a stove pipe.

"Quite the hero, aren't you!" Her teeth were white and even under her curling lips. "Riding like crazy to the sheriff. Well, let's see you ride this!"

She slapped him—rattling his fillings—and stepped away quickly enough to avoid his flailing arm.

"Nasty! Nasty!" she taunted. "The hero isn't supposed to punch girls!"

Jerry didn't say anything. He was thinking what a fool he had been. He should have known they would have waited some place to make sure the house burned down.

Spence got out of the blue sedan. He and Lola had a little conference in low voices beside the convertible's left front fender. After a moment Spence slammed the convertible's hood down and fastened it. He got into the sedan and Lola climbed in beside Jerry.

"The cars are okay," she said. "Just follow him. And don't try anything tricky, honey."

Jerry didn't feel a bit tricky. He followed the blue sedan up the hill and down the other side, feeling the sweat on his raw face and the lump of defeat in his chest. They'd kill him, there was little doubt about that.

And he hadn't done a thing to them. He was just a guy they happened to pick. Thousands of guys roaming the highways and they'd picked Jerry Dall, the welder. The fellow who was going to weld his way to the top in the airplane business. Hell. . .

They drove for a dozen miles along little-used dirt highways. Finally, down in a canyon, they left the road and rolled across rocks and brush for fifty yards till both cars were hidden by a thick clump of poplar trees.

Lola told Jerry to get out. They walked over to the blue sedan. Spence was stand-

ing by its open front door, unsnapping a small leather bag. He brought out several small sharpened pieces of metal and their chromium sparkled in the sunlight.

"We can operate on him here all right," said Spence. His fingers trembled.

Spence set the bag on the ground and opened the sedan's rear door. "Help him!" ordered Lola, waving the gun. Jerry didn't know what was required, but he took a few shaky steps over to the door. He wasn't very surprised to see the nearly nude dead man lying on the floor in the back of the car.

"We've got to hurry," said the girl. "I've got to get back to the fire and look surprised."

"Yes," said Spence, looking down at his twitching hands. "Well, I've got a job here. . . I'd suggest that you—"

"Take care of the hero here?" She indicated Jerry with her elbow. "Might as well, I guess." She hesitated, then added with an uneasy laugh, "Two in one day. If this keeps up I'll need an adding machine. . ."

She steadied the gun. But Spence lifted his hand. "Please, Lola. Not here. The job'll be hard enough without—that."

Lola nodded. She made Jerry walk over rocks and past trees until they were two dozen yards away from the cars.

Eight feet separated him from the girl. "Turn your back," she said.

"No!" croaked Jerry defiantly. He didn't know what to do, but he was determined to fight.

She blew him a sad little kiss and moved the trigger slightly. "I'm sorry, honey. Really sor—"

Just before the gun cracked, Jerry jumped sideways. Like a Mexican jumping bean with a hot-foot, he hopped and whirled, fear pumping him full of electric energy. Twice the gun exploded and he felt death whisper past him hotly. But he was fighting back, picking up baseball-sized rocks.

THE first one smacked her shoulder, spinning her around a little and spoiling her aim. The second one just missed her ear. And the third was a beautiful pitch to home. It caught her between her perfectly plucked eyebrows.

Relief flooded through Jerry. He lifted the gun from Lola's loose fingers and walked slowly through the trees, crouching a little, keeping the noise of his steps down to a minimum.

Kneeling beside the body, Spence was too busy to hear Jerry come up behind him. Jerry watched for a moment.

Spence had made a neat ten-inch incision. Then he probed with a gadget which looked like a skinny pair of pliers. He found something, wiped it off and examined it.

"Better give it to me," said Jerry, quietly.

Spence spun around. His face fell apart.

Spence trembled from ankles to bifocals. He handed over the object and sat down on the ground.

Jerry looked at the thing, but couldn't figure it out. "What's it for?" he asked. "What was it doing—" he looked at the incision—"in there?"

Spence, his eyes weary, glanced up at Jerry. Then he bowed his head without answering.

Jerry dropped the thing into his pocket. Or rather into the dead man's pocket, since he was still wearing Zimmerman's clothes. Again he felt the little book and wondered what it was. Now that he finally had the time, he took it out. It was labeled "Pocket Diary." Jerry thumbed through it.

"June 26—The watch is complete. Wrist motion will make it run forever without winding. . .

June 30—My wife was out again all night.

July 14—There is no doubt about it. Lola and Spencer Barber are plot-

ting to steal the watch. I must get it patented right away. It should make me a million."

"Doctor," Jerry said, "why did Lola kill her husband?"

The blond man glanced up again. "It was an accident more or less . . ." His voice was flat, emotionless. "Zimmerman was a retired jeweler. And he invented this watch. He caught her today trying to steal it."

"She told me she got the gun out of her purse and ordered him to give her the watch. He opened up the case, but instead of handing her the works, he swallowed them. . . They fought over the gun and she . . . shot him. She drove over to my place and that's where we decided what to do . . ."

Spence covered his face with his hands. "We couldn't afford to have the autopsy show that Zimmerman had been shot and operated on before the fire. So we needed somebody his size to substitute."

Jerry heard a scraping movement in the rocks behind him. He tensed but kept his eyes on the doctor. He shook the watch he was wearing and the works inside rattled. "This watch," he said. "I guess it's Zimmerman's and you put my works into it so when my body was found I wouldn't be wearing a hollow watch to tickle the cops' curiosity. Was that it?"

The blond man nodded slowly. Jerry heard the scraping noise again and the sound of a pebble being kicked. He twisted around in time to see Lola come charging down behind him.

Jerry dodged, stuck out a foot and the girl's gold sandals flipped out from under her.

Keeping the gun alert, Jerry leaned over her. "I've got something for you, honey," he said gently, lovingly. "Something short and very sweet."

He slapped her cheek. Not too hard, of course. Just enough to burn his palm.



She said: "Meet me outside after the last number. . . ."

By JOSEPH N. CRYSTALL

Marty Spawn figured it was none of his business how the glamorous blonde singer paid her rent—until she offered him fifty bucks a day to keep her alive.

TUESDAY was an off night in the Village and the Samba Club showed plenty of white table cloth. Marty Spawn, the one man staff of the Spawn (We Never Sleep) Investigating Agency parked himself on a stool at the bar and or-

dered a double scotch from the bartender.

He looked around the club to see if he could spot anyone he knew. It was just the regular Village crowd, nothing special. That is, unless he considered those two rough looking characters at a corner table

HOMICIDAL RHYTHM

as special. A couple of Ricci's strongarm boys, Spawn realized, and they were usually a sign of trouble.

He had just turned back to devote his full attention to his drink when the lights went down and the show started. The rumba band was featuring a blonde vocalist who, on the numbers she didn't sing, remained the center of attraction as she kept a strong rhythm beat going with a pair of maracas.

Spawn didn't miss a shake she made. Her honey-colored hair hung loose over her bare shoulders and her nicely rounded body was encased in a skin-tight, emerald-green dress which accentuated every move. She had a pretty fair voice, too, now that he thought about it.

What puzzled him was that she seemed as interested in him as he was in her. Not that he was exactly repulsive. He was big, about six feet two, a well muscled 200 pounds and definitely red haired. But on the other hand, he wasn't quite the matinee idol type. He had made other people's business his for some time and he showed a bit of the wear and tear.

Still, she kept playing to him until the band took a break and then, first thing he knew she was perched on the stool beside him and ordering a coke.

One thing about her Spawn soon realized, she didn't believe in formalities.

"Hello," she said and gave him a warm smile. Her eyes were just the right shade of green for her hair and they sparkled mischievously. He nodded and she went ahead. "I'm Carol Wright. You're Marty Spawn, the private detective, aren't you?"

"That's right," he answered. "I didn't realize I was getting so famous."

She gave him that big smile again. "Are you available for business now?"

"That all depends on the particular job."

"I want you to keep me alive," she said bluntly.

"What makes you think you need my help?" This was beginning to interest him.

"There's a character I met when I was in Cuba with the band," she said slowly. "I tried to drop him fast but he followed me back to the States. Now he's annoying me again. Anytime I so much as look at someone else he starts to rage. He says if he can't have me, no one can."

"The tough guy's name wouldn't by any chance be Ricci, would it?" Spawn guessed.

The girl's poise was shaken for just an instant. "How do you know that?" she asked quickly.

"I didn't for sure," he replied. "but two of his boys are sitting over there and don't seem able to take their eyes off you—or us."

"We mustn't talk here anymore," she decided suddenly. "Meet me outside after the last number and we'll talk on the way to my apartment."

Her apartment turned out to be a three room suite in the Graham Hotel on West 65th Street. A little too richly furnished, Spawn thought, for a Samba Club singer. But then, it wasn't any of his business how she managed to pay her rent. She motioned him toward the sofa.

"I could use a drink," she said. "How about you?" Spawn nodded. As she went over to her well stocked bar and started to mix some cocktails, Spawn forced his eyes away from her, and checked the room. The most unusual thing around was a collection of assorted maracas in a big display case between the windows. They were all sizes, shapes and colors, about forty in all.

"My collection interest you?" she asked.

"It takes up more room than stamps."

She came toward him with two glasses. "If you show me that you know how to take care of special things I might give you a couple." She seated herself beside him and put her head on his shoulder. "I have a matched pair as a memento of a special evening," she purred.

Spawn leaned back and made himself

comfortable. "Be careful you don't spill the drinks," he said.

It was late when he left her. The sky was gray and wet looking but it had stopped raining. He tossed the newly acquired pair of maracas on the seat along side him and slid behind the wheel of his sedan. He had an appointment to see her again at noon and escort her around town. At fifty bucks a day plus expenses—business was definitely picking up.

SPAWN ground out his cigarette under his heel as he stepped off the elevator at five minutes of twelve later that day. In answer to his ring, the door was opened by a uniformed policeman. Behind the cop, at the far end of the foyer, stood Police Lieutenant Malcome.

"Hello, Red," the lieutenant greeted, "we were wondering what time you'd show up."

"Hello, Lieutenant." Spawn hesitated. "Where's Miss Wright?"

"She's here but she's not greeting her guests anymore. It seems she greeted one too many."

"She's dead?"

"You catch on pretty fast for a private dick. Coroner says somebody held her neck too long. A shame, such a lovely creature."

Spawn looked around the room. It was a mess. Lamps were knocked over, the contents of four or five drawers were on

the floor, the hobby display case was broken and half a dozen maracas lay crushed and scattered around.

"When do you figure it happened?" Spawn asked.

"About four-fifteen this morning. Doc says she's been dead a little less than eight hours. According to all reports, you were the last one to see her alive."

"You're crazy, Malcome, I didn't do it. I left her at three this morning and went right home."

The lieutenant leaned against the wall. "Relax, Red, nobody said you did it. I know you left at three. I had a tail on Ricci's muscle men at the Samba Club last night. They followed the gorillas who followed you and the girl here. They were parked down the street when you left this place, time . . . three-o-two. No, you're clear as far as that goes."

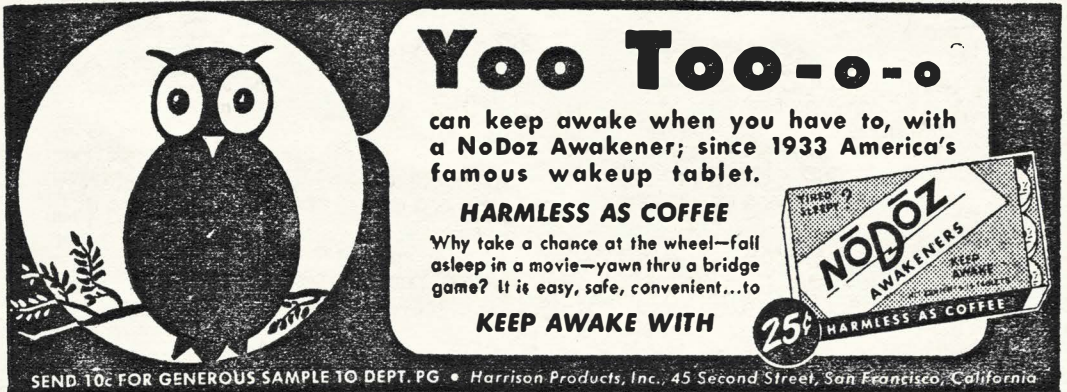
Spawn sighed with relief. "What about the two characters?"

"They never left their car. When you drove away they went over to Ricci's to report."

"Look, Malcome, the kid got a dirty deal. She hired me to protect her. She said Ricci threatened her life when she wouldn't give him a tumble. I don't think you'll have to look far for her murderer."

The lieutenant didn't move. "You don't say?" he mused. "She was afraid of Ricci?"

"Do me a favor, Lieutenant," Spawn



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said. "I'd like to go with you when you question Ricci. That's the least I can do for the kid now. Find the guy responsible."

"Sure," Spawn agreed, "I guess that's the least you can do."

* * *

Lieutenant Malcome and Marty Spawn were shown into Ricci's study by a butler who looked like he'd be more at home in a wrestling arena than a swanky pent house apartment. The boss, seated on the arm of a big overstuffed chair, stood up as the visitors entered.

At first glance, Ricci reminded one of the muscle half of an adagio team. His black, fitted jacket emphasized his broad shoulders and narrow waist and his coal black hair was slicked back crowning his not unhandsome face. He was taller than the lieutenant but not quite as tall as Spawn.

"What's on your mind, Lieutenant?" he asked, deliberately taking no notice of the red-head.

"Just a couple of questions to start with, Ricci," Malcome answered.

"Like what, for instance?"

"Like where you were at four this morning when Carol Wright was murdered?"

"I was home reading a good book," Ricci answered with a sneer.

"You don't seem surprised to learn she's dead," Spawn said.

"Shut up, punk," Ricci told him. "You got no business here."

Spawn started toward him. Malcome grabbed him and pushed him back.

"I'm handling this, Red. Relax." The lieutenant turned back to Ricci. "What do you know about her death?"

"Not a thing."

"He's lying," Spawn shouted. "Carol was afraid of him because he was jealous."

Ricci's face went milk white and his

eyes burned hate. "I didn't kill her," he said. His lips were thin bluish lines drawn taut. "But I got an idea who did. And I'll make sure it's the last thing he ever gets the chance to do."

"Quiet down, Ricci," Malcome warned. "If you know anything about this murder you'd better talk. The Department and the FBI are working on that diamond-smuggling case—and your reputation doesn't stand up so well.

Ricci shrugged and rang for his butler. "I don't mind you asking questions," he said, "but I don't like threats. If you have anything against me, Lieutenant, swear out a warrant. Otherwise, leave me alone." The big butler lumbered in. "Meadows, these gents are leaving."

IT WAS eight thirty in the evening and Marty Spawn stood in front of a mirror in his own two room place lathering up his face before shaving. There was a gentle tap at his door and a man's voice called, "Package for Spawn."

Shaving brush in hand, he walked to the door, opened it and had a .45 caliber pistol jabbed in his stomach. Ricci's two boys pushed him back into the room and closed the door after them.

"What's the idea?" asked Spawn.

"Shut up and you won't get hurt—much," answered one.

The water dripping down his arm from the soap brush in his half raised hand gave Spawn an idea. With a quick flick of his wrist he sent a stream of soap across the face of the thug holding the gun. As the gun went up automatically, Spawn stepped inside and brought his knee up into the man's groin. The fellow went down with a gasp of pain and his gun went sailing under a chair.

Instantly Spawn was ready for the second intruder. He met the onrush with a well-timed right to the mouth and the thug tripped backwards. Spawn pounced on him. With a minimum of time and ef-

fort he put both men to sleep by the simple method of banging their heads on the floor.

As soon as he was certain that neither of them would bother him for a while he sat back on his haunches to catch his breath and found himself looking down the barrel of a smaller but equally deadly gun in the hand of Ricci, himself.

"You'd better just spread out flat on the floor," the gang chief said curtly. Spawn did as he was told.

"You know, you look pretty good laying there," Ricci continued. "Somebody ought to make it permanent." He glanced quickly around the room, never lowering the gun. "Okay, wise guy, where is it?" he demanded.

"Where is what?"

Ricci shifted the gun a little. "Cut the innocent act. What did you do with the diamonds?"

Spawn raised his head. "Do with the what?" he asked.

"Lie down," Ricci threatened. "What did you do with the maracas you got last night?"

"Oh, those. They're in the desk drawer. What do you want with them?"

Ricci backed over to the desk, fumbled around in the drawer without taking his eyes off Spawn and pulled out two maracas with his free hand. He brought them in front of him and looked them over.

"These are fakes," he said coldly. "Where are the ones Carol gave you last night?"

"You're holding them," Spawn insisted.

"Look, you phony, nobody crosses Ricci. I've got a score to settle with you anyhow and I might as well shoot you now as later."

"That's not smart, Ricci." Spawn sat up slowly. "If you think I'm hiding something from you how do you figure you'll get it with me dead?"

Before Ricci could answer, there was a knock at the door.

"Who you expecting?" Ricci asked sharply.

"It's probably Lieutenant Malcome."

Ricci thought for a moment. "Okay, let him in," he decided, "but keep your mouth shut."

"What about your two stooges laying here?"

"Give me a hand getting them into the bedroom." Spawn got up from the floor and helped Ricci drag the two men into the other room. He came out, closed the door after him and then opened the door to the hall. Malcome and two plainclothes men were getting ready to force it.

"What kept you?" the lieutenant asked the disheveled red-head.

"I was fixing my tie," he grinned.

"Yeah, mind if we look around?"

"Nope, go right ahead."

The lieutenant had just motioned for his men to check the other room when the bedroom door opened and out stepped Ricci followed sheepishly by his mussed-up thugs.

"What happened to them?" Malcome asked.

Ricci looked behind him. "Oh, them," he said in a surprised tone. "The floor is very slippery."

The stocky police officer walked over to the desk and picked up the maracas. He started to shake them in an attempt to get a recognizable rhythm going. "Carol Wright was pretty good at this," he said absentmindedly.

"She was better looking, too," Spawn added and Ricci glared daggers at him.

"Where did you get these, Red?" asked the detective.

"They were a present from a lady."

"You sure?" The detective continued to shake them.

"Sure I'm sure. Why?"

The short man set them down on the desk. "A clerk at the music shop down the street says she sold a pair like this to a tall red-head this morning," he said.

"Yeah, so what?"

Malcome sat down on a chair near the door and took out a cigarette. "You're a detective, Red, but you're not on the Force. That sometimes puts you at a disadvantage. There are lots of times when you learn only half a story."

Ricci stood up to leave. "You don't need me for the sermon, do you?"

The lieutenant blew out the match he held to his cigarette. "Sit down, Ricci," he said in a half command. And then, "Relax." Ricci sat down near Spawn.

"A lot of things you don't know, Red," the officer continued. "For instance, that Ricci and Carol Wright were to be married."

"You're crazy," Spawn insisted. "She wouldn't have anything to do with that punk."

"Be careful, wise guy," Ricci warned. "She was my girl!"

Malcome looked at the redhead. "Oh they were close, all right," he said. "In fact, she helped him in a number of shake-down deals in Cuba. Am I right, Ricci?" The gangster just grunted.

"Now, Red, if you had known the full story you'd know how the rackets were worked. We know it. The FBI have got Ricci's friends—and we're getting ready to pin it on our friend Ricci."

"Aah, that kind of talk is cheap," commented Ricci.

"Yes," Malcome agreed with a sigh, "and sometimes you come up with a good story. The one about that last deal in Cuba, where you took that jewel merchant over the hump for a hot half million in diamonds. The trick was to get the stuff to New York where you could dispose of it. You tried a new angle, very clever. The stuff was sealed in a pair of maracas and your girl friend, Carol, was to bring the stuff across in her instruments. And it worked!"

"That's a pretty story, Lieutenant," Ricci said.

MALCOME flicked a long cigarette ash into a handy tray. "It gets better," he said. "When Carol arrived in New York she learned you were seeing another blonde from a club on 55th Street. You hurt her pride, Ricci. So, to teach you a lesson, she refused to see you and wouldn't turn over the jewels."

"Look, Lieutenant," said Ricci, "no matter what she did I wouldn't have hurt her. Even she knew that."

"You are probably right, she did know. But she wanted you to apologize to her in person. She didn't like to have your boys following her all the time. It bothered her to know you could have your boys break into her place and pick up the stuff anytime you wanted to. That's where Red came in."

Ricci turned his chair so that he could watch both Spawn and Malcome.

Lieutenant Malcome continued, "I'm not sure how she worked it but somehow she got Spawn to take care of the two special noisemakers. I don't think she told him what was in them."

"You're way out of line, Malcome," Spawn said. "There's nothing in them but dried peas or pebbles or whatever they put in those things." He pointed to the maracas.

Malcome put out his cigarette. "I'm sure there's nothing special in these," he agreed. "But these aren't what we're talking about."

Spawn stood up indignantly. "Just what are you getting at?" he demanded. "You're not accusing me of anything, are you?"

The lieutenant looked up at him slowly. "I didn't say anything yet, did I?"

"Not about me, but you sure established a motive for Ricci to kill the girl. He went to her place after I left and when, for some reason, he couldn't find the diamonds he killed her."

Malcome pointed to Ricci. "Yeah, Ricci searched the place for the diamonds—and

didn't find them. But she was already dead! Isn't that right, Ricci?"

"Oh no you don't, copper," barked Ricci as he got to his feet, too. "I ain't admitting nothing. I ain't sticking my neck out!"

"Relax, Ricci," advised the lieutenant. "When we were at your place earlier today you said you would kill the guy responsible for Carol's murder. Why?"

"Because I loved the kid and was going to marry her."

"All right, then, I'll make a deal with you. I know that up to this point my story is correct and you know that it won't be long before the Federals get you for smuggling anyway. If you'll admit that my story is right, I will guarantee that the killer gets what's coming to him."

Ricci sat down hard in the chair along side of Spawn. "You know who did it?"

"Yes, I know who did it. I've also turned over the complete records on your diamond activities to the Federals and they'll be coming for you soon."

"Okay, copper, you're on. Carol had the diamonds like you said."

Malcome stood up facing the two men. "Spawn," he said, "I received the report that you left the girl at three carrying a bundle you hadn't brought into her apartment. At three-forty-five I was up here to check it. You weren't home. Where were you?"

"Why, I was—er—"

"You were on your way back to the girl's place. What probably happened is that coming into your apartment you banged one of the maracas and split it. I'll give you credit as a fast thinker, Spawn. As soon as you realized what was in it you hid the stuff here and went back to quiet the only person who knew you had it.


"It's easy enough to avoid being remembered by elevator boys when you know the trade secrets like getting off at another floor and using the stairway to get where you're going. It might interest you to know that we recovered the broken maracas shells from the incinerator pile in this building earlier this afternoon."

Spawn stood there apparently stunned for a moment and then made a sudden dive for the pistol which lay on the floor half hidden by a chair. Still in a crouch but with the gun leveled he sneered, "That's as far as you go, Malcome, I'm busting you out of here."

That's when Ricci swung. He knocked Spawn on his back. The gun sailed across the floor, where this time Malcome picked it up. As Spawn got to his feet after that first wallop, Ricci tore into him again. Both men went down.

"Take those two yes-men out in the hall," Malcome directed, pointing to Ricci's boys. "I'm going to sit here and watch these two."

Boy, what a
HEADACHE!
starting to throb



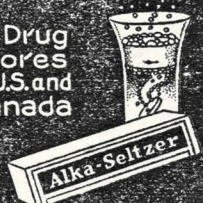
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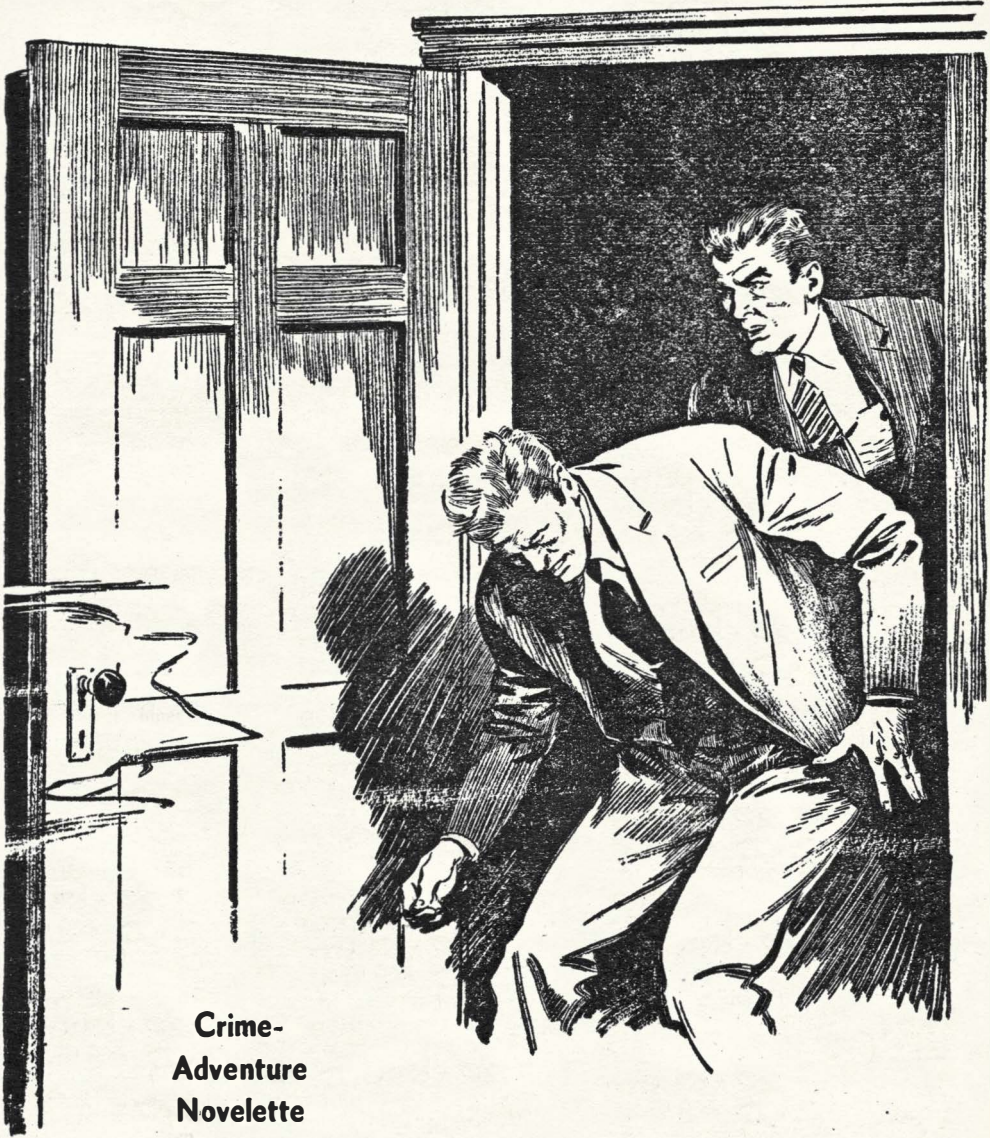
INHUMAN BONDAGE

By DEREK
LeBARRE



The automatic in her hand
barked four times.

To crack a gigantic international swindle G-man McVale had to play a crummy waterfront bum to a sensation-mad heiress.



**Crime-
Adventure
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CHAPTER ONE

Hide-and-Seek

THE tall man was gaunt as an alley cat, with the sullen wariness in his eyes of the outcast or the hunted. His shoulders no longer filled the sleeves of his dirty black turtle-neck sweater, and

as he lounged against the doorway of the waterfront saloon, his body sagged with a tiredness that was more than physical.

Each time a customer approached, he shuffled forward a few steps and muttered in a whining voice, "Buy a drink for a feller down on his luck, buddy?" then moved back against the doorway and

watched every passer-by to see if one would drop a cigarette butt worth sniping.

He moved forward now, stopping before a big man in a double-breasted overcoat with wide lapels. "Buy a—"

A huge hand shoving against his chest ended his words in a gasp. "Out of my way, bum!" the big man snarled. "I told you no yesterday, and the answer's the same today. G'wan, beat it!"

For an instant the tall man's gray eyes blazed, then the fires died out. He lowered his glance and slunk back to his position against the doorway of the saloon. A moment later he scurried across the sidewalk, reaching down into the gutter for a cigarette that had been flipped from a passing car. His fingers were almost on it when a heavy heel crunched down on his knuckles, bringing a sharp, startled yelp of pain to his lips.

He straightened instantly, cursing, then his fist lashed out at the bulbous red nose of the unshaven derelict who had challenged his right to the butt. The man grunted and flailed clumsily with both fists, driving his lighter opponent back with his bull-like rush. The tall man fainted, sank home a right to the stomach, and then the red-nosed man clamped an arm around his neck and they crashed to the sidewalk together, slugging and thrashing their legs as they turned over and over.

Men poured out of the saloon, joining the pedestrians who had stopped to watch, and in a few moments a crowd collected, laughing and shouting encouragement, jibes, and advice.

The tall man's lip was split, and blood covered the side of the old derelict's head where it had scraped against the concrete. The tall man struggled free and leaped to his feet, and when his opponent lumbered up, he measured him carefully and drove in a vicious blow to the neck that sent him sprawling to the sidewalk. He sat there shaking his head and blinking

his bleary eyes. He mouthed obscene curses, but he made no effort to get up.

The tall man looked around for the cigarette butt, spat with disgust when he saw it had been shredded to bits beneath their feet, then turned and faced the crowd. His glance found the big man in the double-breasted overcoat, and he said, half hopefully, half sneeringly, "That scrap worth the price of a beer to you?"

The big man hesitated.

"Go on, buy The Killer a beer, Al," someone laughed, and the man called Al looked at the tall man and nodded toward the inside of the saloon.

"Give him a beer, Nick," he told the bartender, throwing half a buck on the mahogany.

The tall man took two gulps, then walked over to the free-lunch counter and came back with a couple of sardines between two thick chunks of rye. He ate wolfishly, nursing the beer along.

"Get yourself a job, you can eat regular," said Al, watching him narrowly.

"Yeah," said the tall man. "Trouble is, most people ask for references."

The interest quickened in Al's eyes. "Stir?" he asked.

The tall man's lips tightened. He turned slowly and faced the big man. "Look, mister," he said. "I don't have to answer questions for one lousy beer." He set down his half-full glass and turned away.

Al's hand closed on his elbow and stopped him. "I got a job for you for tonight," he said. "And you won't need references."

"Straight?"

Al shrugged. "Well," he said, "technically, I guess not. Friend of mine's a sailor, and you know what you can do in some of those countries over there with a carton of cigarettes. But it seems the skipper was born over there and he don't like to see the people throwing their money up in smoke. One of those guys who don't smoke himself, so he won't let

any of the crew take along any extra cigarettes."

"So what's the job?" the tall man asked.

"Bring a suitcase full of butts to the pier, and slip past the watchman. My friend'll toss a rope down to you. There'll be ten bucks in it for you when you come back."

The tall man sipped his beer. "A suitcase full of cigarettes should be worth more than ten bucks. Suppose I sell 'em and don't come back?"

"If you can sell 'em," Al pointed out. "And if you figure you'd like to meet up with me again if you don't deliver them. Better play it for the sure ten spot. It would be a lot better all around like that."

The tall man nodded thoughtfully.

"It's a deal, then?"

"It's a deal," the tall man said.

"Good," said Al. "Meet me in front of this place at midnight."

THE fog pressed silently against the pale yellow lights of the street lamps, blotted out the outlines of the buildings, and muffled the sounds of his footsteps as the tall man walked along the cobblestone street of the waterfront. Out on the river a tugboat wailed, and he shuddered as he hunched up his shoulders against the cold, shifted the suitcase from one numb hand to the other.

Suddenly he stopped and pressed back against the dark wall of the building, sure that he had heard a soft sound of footsteps moving slowly to match his pace. He widened his eyes and stared through the shrouding fog till the tears came, then he shrugged and moved on.

"Hell of a night to play hide-and-peek," he muttered. "Hell of a night to be anyplace except in bed." He shifted the suitcase to his left hand, flexing the long fingers of his right to restore the circulation and lifting them to his mouth to warm them with his breath. "Hell of a night

to be starving and cold and wondering what the score is, and which way the lead is going to fly."

The wan light of the corner lamp told him that this was 12th Street, and before he reached the corner, he angled across the street, toward the heavy blackness that lay beneath the pier-shed roof. The moment he was out of sight he heard the footsteps again, unmistakable this time, hurried and urgent, and without pretence of secrecy.

The tall man hesitated for a long moment, and his indecision traced harsh lines on his gaunt face. He stared at the suitcase beside him, turned toward the approaching footsteps, and then moved softly into the depths of the shed, pausing from time to time to listen for the watchman.

His rubber-soled shoes made no sound on the timbers of the pier, and growing bolder, he quickened his steps, sure that the slapping of the waves against the bulkheads would drown out any sound he made. Suddenly he froze, holding his breath.

A man had coughed a few yards ahead of him, and now he could hear him clearing his throat. The watchman spat, and then his boots thudded dully on the wooden planking, in the slow, deliberate steps of an old man, with a long night ahead of him for his aching, weary legs.

The tall man held his breath as the steps approached, then began to sink slowly to his knees, twisting as he went down to hide the whiteness of his face. He heard the old man stop, so close that he could hear his breathing and the dry rustling of cloth and paper as he reached into his pockets. When he saw the brief flicker of the match against the cigarette, he gasped softly with relief. Temporarily blinded now by the flare of the match, the watchman wouldn't see him unless he stumbled on him. He waited a moment till the man had gone by, then picked up the

suitcase, and moved swiftly forward.

After a few yards the blackness about him seemed thicker, and reaching out with his free hand, his fingers felt the roughness of packing wood. He turned in the other direction, arm outstretched, and suddenly feeling a wall less than arms-length away, he knew for a brief moment man's ancient fear of darkness and imprisonment and living burial.

He smiled thinly and moved forward, not fighting the darkness with his senses, but letting the sureness of his instincts guide him. He stopped and faced behind him, and saw the faint glow of the watchman's cigarette as he puffed it. He moved again, and now he could see the lesser blackness of the sky ahead of him. He took one more step, and then two shots shattered the night.

The tall man heard the dull thud that a body makes when it falls, then silence, and then the pounding of running feet coming toward him. A flashlight knifed through the fog, its beam probing against the crate he had dived behind. The footsteps came closer and the tall man huddled into himself.

The eye of the flashlight grew brighter and he saw its beam making a methodical search of the wharf from left to right. He weighed his chances of making a run for it, but a moment later gave the thought up. There were too many crates on the wharf, and his eyes had gone bad from looking at the flashlight and from the tightness inside him, and he'd be sure to go crashing into something, and after that he'd be a dead duck.

Here behind the crate he still had a fighting chance. Whoever was looking for him would have to come around the crate before he saw him. A quick jab with the suitcase against the man's knees might knock him over. After that it would be every man for himself.

He spread his knees for balance, lifted the suitcase and held it ready. And then

he heard voices and knew that at least two men were looking for him and his chances were next to nothing. He heard his pursers shuffling closer and closer and he wondered whether the suitcase would sink if he heaved it into the water, and whether he could get close enough to the pier's edge before the flashlight picked him up and their bullets chopped him down.

He figured it was too late to weigh things, and if he hesitated any more he wouldn't have any chance at all, and he was gathering himself to spring forward when the shrill wail of a police siren slashed through the night.

The eye of the flashlight blinked out instantly and a man cursed.

"Hey, where you going?" another voice demanded. "We got to find him. We got to get that dough."

"You find him," was the answer. "I'm not staying around here to argue with the bulls. I'm getting out of here before Whitey shows yellow and drives away without us. You won't see Whitey hanging around long."

The siren wailed again, on a shriller pitch, and the tall man heard the sound of running feet recede, then fade into silence. For a while he was aware only of the gasping of his breath and the cold crawling of his sweat-soaked flesh. Then his mind, released from the grip of fear, functioned smoothly again and he knew that the danger was not yet finished. The police car had slammed to a stop before the pier and he could hear excited voices in the street telling the police that two men had run out of the pier, gone into a waiting car, and sped downtown.

A moment later there was a humming of gears that rose to a protesting wail, and then the siren began to scream again.

They're smart, the tall man thought. They'd stand no chance of catching the killers if they didn't use that. But that siren would throw a scare into anybody with something to run from, and here's a

good chance that they'll run smack into another radio car that would never suspect anything if they weren't speeding.

He was straightening up from behind the packing case when he saw a flashlight stab through the gloom and he realized that one of the cops had stayed behind to find the victim of the shooting. He heard a gasped grunt of shock as the light picked up the limp form of the watchman, and in the silence of his bated breath, the whispered words of the dying man fell like a death sentence on his ears, "Back there. They were looking for someone back there. . . ."

Instantly the light blinked out, and the tall man thought, he thinks I've got a gun. Maybe he's going to decide to play it smart and wait for help. He concentrated on this, as though his thoughts could reach the cop's mind and make him wait, but after a moment the light lanced out again.

He's holding it to one side, the tall man thought, trying to draw my fire. After a while he'll decide I'm not heeled, and he'll start coming in. Slow at first, then quicker. . . . He acted instantly, picking up the suitcase and lunging swiftly and silently to the edge of the pier. He threw the suitcase in, gasped in a deep breath, then dove after it.

CHAPTER TWO

Inside Job

THE coldness of the water smashed against his flesh like a brutal blow, and he felt his heart stop for an instant, then start pounding wildly. His limbs were numb when he reached the surface, and he grabbed frantically at the suitcase, knowing he had to get to the shelter of the pier before the cop came to investigate the splash.

He treaded water for a moment, gasping for air, then flattened out and swam toward the blackness beneath the pier.

Footsteps echoed above his head; light probed the oil-scummed water.

He swam silently until he found a V formed by the cross-brace of a pile, and kicking his legs, finally managed to lift the suitcase out of the water and wedge it in the notch. The effort spent his strength and he reached to the pile for support, recoiling with horror the instant his fingers touched the slime and seaweed-fouled wood. He clung to it, however, kicking his legs to fight off the numb paralysis that slowly gripped them, pressed tighter, and slowly reached up to his thighs, his belly, and groped with icy fingers toward his heart.

For a moment he considered calling to the cop and saying, "Don't try to stop me. I'm Steve McVale, of the F.B.I., and this job I'm working on is due to break wide open tonight. I know I look like a broken-down bum, I've been living the part so long—starving myself, sleeping in flop-houses and gutters, drinking smoke, and sniping butts—that sometimes I can't believe who I am myself. But I learned to play my part so well that after four months I finally got next to the shrewdest, deadliest enemy this country's ever had. You can check up with my headquarters tomorrow, but tomorrow will be too late; the trail will be cold. . . ."

The tall man laughed bitterly. Some chance of the cop believing him! He'd wind up behind bars, and if he squawked too loud, they'd stuff him in a white jacket with sleeves that tied around in back, and throw him in a psycho ward. He remembered what the Chief had said:

"You've got to lose your identity, McVale, and after you've lost it, you've got to get into the gang. The Treasury boys have been trying to bust in from the outside, and so far they've gotten nowhere."

"But if it's a Treasury job," McVale had asked, "where do we fit in?"

"It isn't only counterfeiting," the Chief had explained. "There are a couple of

murders tied in, too. But the counterfeiting and the murders are only a small part. The biggest part is that millions of dollars of fake American money are being sold to rich Europeans trembling about inflation—at black market prices. The money is hoarded, of course, and the people never realize they've been cheated. But the economy of the country is weakened by the drain of its own currency, and the efforts of the Marshall Plan are placed in jeopardy. And the payoff is that the foreign money is exchanged here for good American dollars—which are used to further fifth column activities!"

Even now Steve McVale remembered his mixed feelings of uncertainty and pride at having been chosen for the job.

"It's big," he'd said.

The Chief had nodded soberly. "It's big, so don't bungle it by rushing. Your man operates from the waterfront. Become a part of the waterfront. Make yourself fit into it. Don't just look hungry—get hungry. Get yourself pushed around for panhandling, spend a couple of nights in the gutter sleeping off a drunk. If you get picked up by the police for vagrancy, so much the better. Particularly if the right people see it happen. . . ."

Vagrancy— Murder!

The wail of the prowl car sounded again, and McVale watched the flashlight go out, heard the sound of receding footsteps. "Going out to order re-enforcements or the river patrol," he mused. "In either case, this is no place for me." He reached a long arm and yanked loose the suitcase, sighed deeply, and started out for the opposite shore.

For a while the movements of his limbs stirred up his circulation, but soon his arms became leaden, and it took almost all his strength to keep from sinking. He heard the low moan of a tugboat, and looking over his shoulder he saw its red and green running lights bearing down on him. Somewhere he found the strength

to kick his legs and thrash his arms, but in a moment he knew that his efforts were futile, and he would never live to escape from the smashing impact of the tugboat's bow, or the whirling screw that could chop a man to hashmeat.

Panic tightened the muscles of his belly, then he let go the suitcase, took a deep gasping breath, and dove beneath the water, twisting to one side and kicking desperately.

He exhaled the breath from his lungs to sink faster, but the tug's keel struck him wrackingly across the spine, and above his body's agonizing pain, he felt himself tumbling over and over as though a huge hand had shoved him.

His lungs ached for air, but he knew that the screw had not yet passed him, and he kept trying to go downward, even though he was no longer sure which way down was.

There was a roaring in his ears; a red mist swam before his eyes, and he was no longer conscious of his body except as one vast realm of pain. Then suddenly a vast pressure slammed into him, shoving him aside, and at the same moment that he knew that the propellor blades had missed him, he felt the certainty: his last weak hold on consciousness would slip and he would go down and never rise again.

His mouth had come open from the shock when the propeller wash had hit him, and now he was coughing helplessly and swallowing more water every time he gasped for air. With all his will he forced his mouth and nostrils shut, and the pounding in his ears became louder and louder, and the red mist before his eyes became a solid, impenetrable blackness. Then cold air was on his face, and air was in his lungs, and the pressure on his chest relaxed.

Through the shroud of fog he saw the stern lights of the tugboat rapidly fading, and he realized how far away the shore was, and that his agony was not yet over.

He groped for the suitcase without much hope, and his hand came into contact with a fragment that the handle was attached to. Countless threads clung stickily to his hand and wrist, and when he reached out with his other hand to wipe them off, he realized that they were shreds of tobacco from the cartons of cigarettes the tug's screw had sliced to pieces.

SUDDENLY he knew why he'd had the feeling when the man called Al had handed him the suitcase, that it wasn't yet time to make an arrest. Suddenly he knew why he'd had the hunch it would be better to play the game out Al's way . . . and at the very same moment he realized that Al had deliberately sent him out to die.

"He expected hi-jackers," McVale mused bitterly, "and he fed me to them—to kick up a fuss here and clear the way for him somewhere else." A slow anger began to burn in him, and a harsh desire to stand once more in front of Al and feel his fists smash against the big man's face. His hatred whipped strength into his tortured body, and clenching his teeth together, he swam on.

He heard the hum of a powerful engine, and for a moment he thought that a plane was passing overhead. But then he saw the broad beam of light sweeping the water, and he knew the police launch had arrived. The boat drew near, its light moving back and forth with the slow, de-

liberate movement of a windshield wiper, and McVale knew that in another instant he would be spotted. He cursed bitterly and dived.

When his bursting lungs forced him up again, the light was almost on him, and this time he barely had time to gasp in a mouthful of air before he went down.

The river was dark when he surfaced, and the hum of the engine was still. He turned on his back and floated, and after a moment he became dimly aware that consciousness was slowly ebbing from his body, and he no longer knew where his feet were, and where his head was; which was black water, and which was inky sky. He felt himself floating upward, lighter than smoke, and then he had the cold realization that he was sinking and tried to will his limbs to movement. He knew a great heaviness in his body, and then he knew no more until a violent, rhythmic throbbing beneath him, and a sharp slapping against his ribs told him he was in a speedboat, plunging over the black water with breath-taking speed.

He heard the roar of the motor rise to a shrill scream, and above its sound he heard the shriller scream of a siren. A light probed against the speeding boat, and then there was the staccato thunder of gunfire and the thin, high wail of steel-jacketed bullets whispering of death above his head.

He heard the dull thud of bullets

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piercing wood, and then splinters stabbed into his face like hot needles. The boat slewed savagely to the side, hurling him smashing against the gunwhale, and the roar of the engine became an insane sob as the screw lifted out of the water. Then the boat righted again, and now the sword of light no longer stabbed against it. He heard triumphant laughter—a woman's laughter—and he painfully turned his head.

The wind was whipping her golden hair behind her, and her full lips were parted in wild abandon. The light drew nearer, found the boat, and the machine gun barked again and bullets wailed as they ricocheted off the water and tore insanely through the night. Again the boat began its wild lurching, and again the light lost them. The girl at the wheel turned and looked backward, and for a moment McVale saw her face.

It was the face of a girl not over twenty, fresh and sweet and desirable . . . the face that haunted all men's dreams. And then he watched the eyes narrow and the full lips harden and grow tight, and he felt a sudden, inexplicable fear.

She turned and saw him then, and her lips parted like the petals of a flower, and she threw back her small, golden head and laughed. The police boat was drawing closer now, and once more steel-jacketed bullets were tearing through the side of the boat.

McVale lifted himself to one elbow, wondering if he had the strength to throw himself over the side. Then, dead ahead of them, he saw the dark, looming hulks of two ships anchored side by side. The girl was staring straight ahead, a small smile playing over her lips. McVale looked from her to the dark, towering walls in front of them, and back again and horror mounted inside him as he saw that she was going to guide the boat through the narrow space between them. His body tensed for the inevitable shock,

but at the last moment the girl threw herself against the wheel, skidding the boat screamingly over on its side. There was a shock, a rasping shudder, and then the boat righted itself and roared on an even keel.

The police boat didn't have time to turn, and it shot past them, into the narrow tunnel between the two ships. There was a rending, tearing crash of wood and steel. A bright light flared briefly against the fog-shrouded sky for a moment, then sank back into a dull, reddish glow.

McVale turned his glance away. He tried to look at the girl but he no longer had the strength to turn his head. His eyelids dropped, and he let his body sink gratefully into the blackness of oblivion. . . .

* * *

Whiskey was stinging his lips and mouth, spreading warm tendrils of fire through his flesh when he returned to consciousness. Bright lights burned blindingly into his eyes, and when he could see clearly again, he saw that the girl was bending over him.

"He's awake now, Whitey," she said, her voice toneless.

Whitey came into the room, paused before the bed, and there was something about the reptilian coldness of his pale, lashless eyes that made McVale try to jump off the bed and wait in readiness. Ropes bit against his wrists and threw him back, and the next instant Whitey's knuckles smashed against his lips in a back-hand slap.

"Where'd you hide it?"

McVale shook his head, and this time a fist jarred his head back.

"You carried a suitcase to Pier 17," Whitey said quietly. "Where'd you hide it.

Again McVale shook his head, and

this time the fist smacked into his nose and he could feel the warm trickle of blood coursing across his lips and down his chin.

McVale shut his eyes, trying to think. He could say that the suitcase had just held a couple of cartons of cigarettes, but he didn't know what that would mean to this deadly little albino called Whitey. He knew that Al used him, sent him out to be killed, but he didn't dare admit that he wasn't one of Al's gang.

This time the fist held a blackjack. It smashed against the bridge of his nose, exploding stars inside his skull and sending pain down to his stomach, making him gag.

"Easy, boss," said a voice that McVale had heard on the pier. "Put his lights out, and we'll never find it."

MCVALE blinked his eyes, looked at his captors carefully. Whitey was the brains; that was easy to see. The man who had just spoken was heavy-faced, dull witted—the muscle boy. The other man had black, opaque eyes and a mouth like a knife-gash. His eyes were never still, and the muscles of his sallow cheeks twitched nervously in rhythm with his darting, calculating thoughts. McVale laughed suddenly.

"What's the matter with you?"

McVale nodded toward the dark-eyed man. "Handsome, over there," he said. "He doesn't seem to care much if you kill me or not. Maybe he'd like it if you killed me. Maybe he'd like it a lot better." He saw the sudden flicker of fear cross the dark man's face, and the sudden widening of Whitey's eyes. He put on a grin and let himself sink back on the bed.

"Give it level," Whitey hissed, advancing with the sap raised. "Give it level, or—"

McVale shrugged. "Why not? All I'm saying is maybe he'd like it if you did kill me before I got a chance to say that he

knows as well as I do where the money—"

Whitey whirled, snarling. "Double-cross me, eh?"

"No, boss! Honest, I—"

Whitey kept advancing, lips twisted in a snarl.

The dark man's hand made a sudden move toward his coat pocket. It was his last. The sap smashed against his skull with the sound of a melon falling from a truck, and he sagged limply to the floor, a pink-tinged froth spreading from his mouth.

Whitey whirled like a cat, and now there was an automatic in his hand, trained on the big man's belly.

"I don't know nothing! Honest! I was in back of him on the pier. Remember? When the bulls came, wasn't I the first one to get to the car? I didn't see nothing."

Whitey turned to the tall man on the bed. "He knew where the stuff is?"

"Why don't you ask him? I'm no mind reader."

"Whitey, you've been taken." The girl was looking at McVale while she spoke, her eyes filled with interest and speculation. "He's smart. He got you to finish Harrigan. He wants you to do the same with Jim. Lay off Jim; he doesn't know anything."

For a moment Whitey's bloodless lips tightened, then he moved forward and struck like a snake, the sap smashing against McVale's mouth.

"Take it easy with him, Whitey," the girl said tonelessly. "He's no good to us dead."

McVale fought desperately to make his reeling senses work. The girl had queered the works for him, but good. Stalling was his only hope now. "Will you cut me in, if I talk?" he asked, his words blurred by the pain and blood on his lips.

"Where'd you hide it?" Whitey rasped.

McVale's answer was to bunch his legs beneath him and then lash out with both

feet. A heel caught Whitey under the eye, opening the cheek to the bone, and he screamed as he rushed in and struck from the side.

The pain was infinite and endless, and many times McVale thought that the slender threads that held together his sanity would snap. A scream strained at his throat, and only the strength of his hatred held it behind his lips. A red veil shrouded his senses, and beyond it he could see Whitey's face—devoid of emotion as a snake's.

Suddenly the pain eased slightly, and he could hear the girl saying, "That's enough, Whitey. Let me take a crack at him. . . ."

McVale felt whiskey burning through his mouth, throbbing through his skull, and slowly enveloping his pain with warm stupefying fingers. He realized, from the perfume in his nostrils, that the girl was sitting near him and even before he opened his eyes, he knew that they were alone.

Her fingers played idly over his temples as she looked at him, and the speculation in her eyes was now replaced with open approval. "We could go a long way together with a million dollars," she murmured.

McVale stared at her moist, full lips, parted in expectation of his answer, her round, luminous gray eyes. Slowly his glance took in the curves that her black sweater and tight black slacks molded, and then returned to her eyes again. He nodded slowly, and it was only half a lie.

The girl looked at him for a moment, then sprang from the bed and bent over Harrigan's body.

"Whitey!" she screamed. "Jim!" There was a sound of hurried movement beyond the door, and then the door swung open.

The automatic in her hand barked four times. . . .

"Whitey was beginning to act like he owned me," she complained as she cut the ropes that bound McVale's arms. "You'll never act like you think you own

me, will you now, big boy?" she asked. McVale shook his head.

"My father always acted like he owned me," she went on. "Just because he has fifteen million dollars, and could always threaten not to buy me pretty things, he thought he owned me. 'Do this, do that. Don't drink so much. Don't stay out late. Don't drive so fast!'" She broke off her parody of a pompous man's commanding voice, and turned to McVale, glaring. "He's got ten thousand reward out, to get me back just so he can own me again."

McVale rubbed his wrists, staring at them, till she came and stood so close to him that it was no longer possible not to notice her. He looked up at her, and the next moment she was in his arms, and for a second the world could have gone to hell before his eyes and he wouldn't have lifted a finger to stop it.

"I wouldn't care if you acted like you owned me," she murmured. "I don't think I'd mind that at all."

McVale nodded. "We'd better get out of here quick," he said. "Those shot's didn't sound like firecrackers, and maybe some of the neighbors heard them." He had to get out of there quick, and he had to take her with him. The automatic was still in her hand, and he wasn't at all sure she had forgotten it there.

"The nearest neighbors are half a mile away," she said, "but maybe we'd better go anyway. This place gives me the creeps."

CHAPTER THREE

Blind Hunch

THE car she led him to was big and black and powerful, and soon they were far from the cottage on the deserted beach where the three dead men lay, and purring toward the city. They had gone about a mile when McVale saw the car tailing them. He slowed down to

twenty-five, and the car drew no closer. He pushed it up to forty-five, and the headlights still stayed the same distance away.

"Somebody must have heard the shots," he said. "That's the cops."

The girl looked back, then rolled down the window and lifted the gun. "Slow down," she said.

McVale shook his head. "I don't think they're trying to stop us. They're tailing us. They could have stopped us long ago. I think I can shake them off."

Even as he spoke, a look through the rear-view told him he'd figured it wrong. The car behind was spurting closer, and as his foot jammed down the gas, a siren wailed.

The car leaped forward with a deep-throated roar, but the one behind was lighter, quicker, and the space between them closed rapidly. The road ahead was straight as a ribbon, and he began praying for curves, where the greater weight of his machine would be to his advantage. When he saw the cross-roads, he was a lot closer to them than he would have liked.

He hit the brake hard for an instant and then stomped the gas to the floor and wrenched the wheel. The tires screamed as the car slewed over on its side, and as he fought the wheel, he was sure they would go through the guard rail. The wheels left the concrete, sank in the soft shoulders, and the car slewed around again. The guard rails snapped like matches and the car bounced and pitched wildly, but at last the screaming wheels took hold.

McVale looked through the mirror and breathed with relief. The lighter car had slowed for the turn and lost fifty yards. It was all he needed to make use of his car's greater speed.

The next instant spider webs covered the windshield, spread from the neat hole the bullet had made in its passing. His

hand reached out to press the girl to the floor, and when her fingers closed warmly around his own, he drew them back like they'd been burned.

He kept the gas floored, thinking there wasn't much point to it, really. The prowl car would radio ahead, and they'd be after him like flies.

A wave of bitterness swept through him, leaving him thinking that this was a hell of a way to live for a lousy ninety bucks a week. A cool million wouldn't pay for what he'd been through tonight. A cool million! His lips came together; his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"What are you thinking about, big boy?"

He was thinking that Al had used him to feint with, while he himself struck. He was thinking that if only his brain would work smoothly for a moment he could figure out where Al intended to strike. But his mind wasn't working smoothly. He was painfully conscious of the girl's perfume and her troubling nearness, and at the same time he was picturing how far a million bucks could go in a place like South America or Australia. He was thinking how close he'd been to death tonight, and that he'd had a bellyful of pain.

He looked behind at the receding lights of the prowl car, and ahead at the glow of the city.

"I'm thinking that it's just about time to change cars," he said. "And that from here on the going will be a lot smoother." At the first intersection he turned right, then left, then right again. There was no sign of the prowl car behind, and he drove slowly till he came to a quiet residential section, and turning off the ignition and lights, he coasted the car deep into a vacant driveway.

"Across the street to that car, quick," he whispered to the girl. It took only a moment to lift the hood, short the wires, and get the engine running. There was no sign that anyone had noticed.

The girl snuggled up to him. "You are smart, aren't you?" she murmured.

He let his arm go around her shoulder, wondering just how smart he really was. "You have to be, to survive in this business," he said shortly.

The girl turned and looked at him for a long time. "You don't look like you belong in this business," she announced.

McVale's heart missed a beat as he wondered how much meaning was behind her words. He dared not turn to look at her. He laughed briefly instead. "You don't either," he said. "Maybe that's why we click so well."

He figured that by this time there was a good chance an alarm had been sent out by the owner of the missing car, and that it wasn't worth while to crowd his luck. When he saw the blue lamps of a subway entrance, he cruised along till he found a spot to park, and opened the door.

"Where we going, big boy?"

McVale wheeled around, saw the automatic in her hand. He forced an easy smile to his lips. "Put that thing in your pocket," he said. "You can't carry that through the subway."

She came out of the car slowly. "You wouldn't think of running out on a girl, would you?" she murmured.

He stepped forward to give her a quick, reassuring kiss, and he noticed for the first time the reason for the strangely luminous quality of her eyes. The pupils were contracted almost to pinpoints, and it didn't take any guessing to know what made them like that. The girl was higher than a kite on dope . . . and he must have been even further out of his senses to ever think of tying up with her.

It took half an hour to reach the waterfront, and as he swayed to the train's rhythm, he let his mind go over the few moments of clarity he had known in this interminable nightmare. He remembered deciding that Al had used him to distract attention from his own moves while he

himself delivered the suitcase with the money and logic told him that the feint had been made in the direction opposite to the real move. But where? Even if he wasn't already too late there was little chance that he could find Al along the endless miles of docks in the dark.

He felt his head swaying limply, and his eyelids sinking shut.

"Hey, where we going?" Her fingers beneath his chin were holding his head up.

"Eh—what?"

"I said, where are we going?"

He looked at the sign in the dirty-tiled station and suddenly he stood up. "Let's get out here," he said. A thought had struggled through to the surface of his mind while he dozed, like a diver slowly rising through the sea-depths.

HE FOUND an all-night drug store and used his last nickel to dial the operator. "Get me the Port Authority office," he told her. "This is the F.B.I. Emergency."

"Any ships leave the harbor tonight?" he asked.

"One, sir. From Pier 17."

"Any more due to leave?"

"The Madagascar, sir. From Pier 35, at five-fifteen this morning."

"What time is it now," McVale asked.

There was a moments pause. "It's exactly four-thirty-seven," the clerk said.

Pier 35 was six blocks away. They walked through the silent streets without speaking, the girl holding McVale's arm. He considered asking her for the gun, but there was a suspicious wariness in her eyes.

He tried to figure what he would do with her after he found the money, and decided it would be best to play the string out until he got a chance to take the gun away from her . . . then turn her over to the Narcotic Squad.

The sound of the shot came to him from a vast distance, and it was a long moment

before he realized that it meant that man named Al had come here and was not yet gone. He broke away from the girl and lurched forward in a stumbling run.

Two men were struggling above the body of a third man sprawled limply on the ground, and as McVale approached, he could hear the hoarse rasping of their breath as they swayed and twisted and strained against each other. He came nearer and caught the glint of metal between them, and saw that they were fighting for the gun. Suddenly the big man, the man called Al, lunged forward, butting with his head against his opponent's face and sending him reeling backward. As the other man stumbled and fell, a sense of recognition went through McVale, and the next moment he knew that he was looking at the red-nosed man—the drunken derelict he had fought with over a cigarette butt.

He watched Al raise the gun, and he threw himself forward, striking with his shoulder against the man's knees and with his head against the ground. A white light exploded inside his skull.

When he could see clearly again, he was staring into the muzzle of the old derelict's gun.

"You didn't just happen," said the man with the gun. "What's the score?"

McVale asked himself the same question. This man hadn't just happened along, either. And he wasn't a drunkard. Either he was part of another hi-jacking gang or—

"You can make your explanation to the police," the man said. He moved to one side slowly till he was standing over a suitcase that was the mate to the one McVale had grown familiar with. He bent down and picked it up without taking his eyes or his gun from McVale.

If he was willing to talk to the police, McVale knew he had nothing to worry about. "You're the T-man my chief spoke about," he said. "I'm—" He caught the sound of movement in the shadows behind him, and he remembered the girl with the madness of dope in her eyes and the gun in her hand.

"Lookout!" he yelled, throwing himself against the T-man's legs.

"You rat!" she screamed. "You dirty, double-crossing rat!"

Lead whined past his ear, and behind him he heard the automatic in the girl's hand snarl twice. He looked around and saw the T-man rise to one elbow and level his gun and squeeze the trigger very carefully. He heard a low moan. . . .

A numb, cold revulsion held McVale as he rose to his feet. "It's best this way," he kept telling himself. "It's much better than the chair. . . ."

He heard the distant wail of a prowler car, and he knew that this time he didn't need to run. The job was finished. He could go to a hotel and get a hot shower, and then some dry clothes and a drink.

"I'm a G-man," he said, grinning. "You wouldn't happen to have a cigarette, would you?"

THE END

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"Right over against the wall,
both of you."



CHAPTER ONE

Ninety-Grand Doll

SHE WALKED slowly, because walking is easier than standing, and attracts less attention. Slowly from the Astor Bar entrance up the few short blocks to Lindy's and back. In the heart of the tourist crush. In the granular slush of December, by the corners where the lean scarecrow Santas warmed their fingers in their armpits and jangled the tired

bells while the change dropped into the wire-covered pots. She was jostled and buffeted about, hearing the torn bits of conversation around her, fixing her mind on those overheard bits to keep from thinking of Al: ". . . So I tells him there's holes in his head and . . ."

"She ought to pay more attention to . . ."

"It's a lousy show and why it don't close is more . . ."

"Okay, okay, so it was five drinks . . ."

"And this other one, the blonde, says . . ."

"Get off my feet, stupid . . ."

It was a crosstown wind and at the corners it whipped her thin, worn coat, and chilled her ankles where the taxi wheels had spattered her stockings.

There was nothing spectacular about her. She attracted little attention. She was a frail girl, almost thin, with a grave face and level eyes. She had quiet beauty, and sometimes a man in the crowd would glance at her and be faintly troubled as he walked on, because she started him thinking of the things that might have been . . .

Her pale hair had a soft wave, and her coat was two years old and it was the third set of heels on her black pumps.

Al had called her at the office on Monday morning, and the documents for file had been piled high and Mr. Scharry had frowned and said, "There is a *personal* call for you on my line, Miss Gerald."

Al's voice had been a tight, harsh sound, full of fear. "Bad trouble, Glory. I need you. Listen and get this the first time. I got to give you something. Quit your job and every day from now on, go to the Times Square section. Be somewhere around the Raglan Bar. Don't speak to me when I show up."

The line went dead. Mr. Scharry was glaring at her. She made her voice light and gay and said, "Thanks for calling, Marian."

She had been paid on Friday. She left the office at lunch time and didn't return. It wasn't that she wanted to be thoughtless about not giving notice. It was just that Al Barnard was more important than anything else in her life, and the fear she had heard in his voice filled her mind so that there was no room for the common courtesies.

She walked slowly, and the crowd was such protective coloration, no one noticed that the same frail blonde girl never left those few short blocks.

In her small, dim scrupulously clean room on Eighty-eighth, there was a glossy eight by ten print of Al Bernard on her bureau. When she was in her room, she spent a great deal of her time looking at his picture. He was good looking in a conventional way. Clean lines of brow, temple, nose. But she failed to see that the mouth had an uncertain softness about it, that the eyes were perhaps a shade too small, a bit too close together.

The main thing was that Al was in trouble. She spent from eight in the morning until one the following morning on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. She ate only when she became faint with hunger, and then hurriedly. Al had asked her to be there. She would have walked those few blocks barefoot if the sidewalk had been made of crushed glass, and the pain would have been good, because it would have been for Al.

Always everything had been for Al. For the past year. Anything that happened before that time didn't count.

In all of the great city the only reality for her was the sound of his voice, his arms around her.

He had always been evasive about his work. His hours were odd. Some weeks he didn't work at all. She wanted to have a home and have his children, and yet she had learned that the vaguest reference to marriage brought that stubborn look onto his face, and she had learned to

take the golden days as they came to her.

When he was drunk he was abusive. She had learned how to best avoid the blunt lash of his tongue, how to discount the contempt in his eyes.

Her legs ached and her feet were blistered and there were fine lines of fatigue around her mouth, puffy patches under the clear blue of her eyes. And yet she did not feel that he had asked too much of her, that what she was doing was particularly difficult. She was annoyed that it was necessary for her to eat and sleep.

On Friday the shrill alarm awakened her at seven. She dressed quickly, ate a large breakfast at the corner cafeteria, and took the subway down to the place where Al wanted her to be.

She had no idea what his trouble might be.

The crowd was slim at first, but by eleven o'clock the sidewalks were thick with people. She was rudely jostled in the crowd, and something was thrust under her arm. She recognized him as he passed her, and her cry was stifled on her lips. The parcel under her arm was a shoe box, neatly wrapped, and quite heavy.

The thud of her heart was rapid. She angled out of the crowd, crossed over to the island in the middle and went down the stairs into the chill dampness of the subway.

She sat very straight on the worn fiber seat and the shoe box, neatly tied up in brown wrapping paper rested on her lap, her hands in the worn black gloves holding it tightly.

Back at the rooming house, she walked slowly up the stairs, locked herself in her small room, curbed her impatience as she took off her coat and hat, carefully hung up the coat in the shallow closet.

Only then did she sit on the bed and untie the string, unwrap the paper and lift the lid.

It was as though she had stopped breathing and her heart had stopped beat-

ing. The shoe box was packed neatly and solidly with currency. Worn, darkened bills, fastened in inch thick wads with rubber bands.

With trembling hands she unfolded the white note on top.

Glory, baby:

I trust you. You're the only one in the world I do trust. Here is about ninety thousand bucks. It was the Candor Club job on Long Island. The bills aren't marked, but don't try to pass the big ones. Now do this for me. Buy yourself some clothes and hop a plane to Florida. Get a place there in Daytona and hide out. Get the Daytona Times every day. When I get there, I'll put an ad in the paper. 'Help Wanted—Competent file clerk, knowledge Spanish and Portuguese. Write box—' Get it? And be careful, baby. Write to the box number and tell me where you are. Pick a new name, baby. Hide the dough real good. Use all you need, and then some. There's a lot of it. When I show up we'll figure a way to go someplace where they can't extradite me. I know a good country. Don't be scared and remember that I love you, baby.

Yours, Al

The box slipped off her lap, fell to the floor and spilled the packets of currency across the cheap, rose-colored rug.

She sat very still and looked at the far wall. The Candor Club job! There must be a mistake. Al wouldn't . . .

Yet all the little half-understood things during the past year became clear in the light of his note. She suddenly knew that she would have to find out about the Candor Club and what had happened.

SHE knelt on the floor and picked up the currency and put it back in the box. Then she stood in indecision, the box in her hands, staring around at the four walls of her room. The money—an incredible amount to her—was an overpowering responsibility.

She bit hard on her underlip as she considered various hiding places. She kept her own room clean and so there was no reason for anyone to enter her room. Yet the door was frail and the lock was cheap.

In the back of her closet was a pile of newspapers a good ten inches high. She took off the top inch or so of newspapers and, with a razor blade, clumsily hacked a hole deep enough for the shoebox. From the box she extracted ten five-dollar bills.

She replaced the top layer of newspapers. The pile seemed to be intact. She felt a bit more confident. Using the brown paper, she wrapped up the wad of newspaper she had cut from the middle of the pile.

At the corner, she dropped the paper into a refuse barrel. She went immediately to the Public Library to see what the papers of the past week had to say about the Candor Club. She was particularly interested in the Monday papers. Since Al had called on Monday morning, it would seem likely that whatever had happened had happened on Sunday.

Had she not been so thorough, she would have missed the item. It was not a news story. It was a sly remark by one of the evening columnists.

Many bigies are in a tizzy over the rude interruption of their fun and games on Sabbath eve at a palace of chance within earshot of the Sound. Seems that two rude boys came in without invitation and removed large amounts of cash from all and sundry, including the management. Rumor has it that the body found early Sunday morning ten miles nearer the city was that of one of the boys who did the heist. Probably the easiest way of dividing the loot. But this means that only one lonely gentleman will be haunted not only by the police, but also by any talent the Candor Club may see fit to hire. Run fast, boy.

She went away from the library with a purely mechanical walk. At the corner of 42nd a man grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back or she would have walked in front of a bus.

Al Barnard—a thief and a murderer!

Had he been merely a thief, she would have considered seriously turning the cash over to the police, knowing that no matter how long he was in prison, she would wait for him and work for him.

But a murderer!

She could not turn him in. She could not trap him. Because once they caught him they would kill him with all the careful, ponderous machinery of the courts, and then there would be no point in life itself, because she would be alone in the world.

Though she was still weary from the long hours spent waiting for him, she walked blindly, trying to make the necessary adjustments in her heart. Because he was a murderer and a thief, did that lessen her love for him? Was love the result of a character survey?

She went back to her room and fell immediately into a heavy, dreamless sleep. From the bureau the glossy photograph watched her with smiling eyes and weak mouth. . . .

Be careful, he had said.

Saturday noon she registered at a midtown hotel, wearing the new dark gabardine suit and the new coat, the silly hat, the heels that were too high. She registered as Gloria Quinn. Gloria Gerald was dying. Quickly. She told the desk clerk that her luggage would arrive later in the day. She gave a fictitious address in Albany.

One large suitcase and one overnight case. Matching. Dark leather. G.A.Q. in small gold letters. The bellhop carried them up to her room and she smiled faintly and tipped him a dollar.

After he had gone, she locked the door, opened the new luggage. They had the smell of newness. The clothes in them were new. Sun clothes. Halters. Slacks. Print dresses. Seersucker. Linen. New cosmetics.

Her old clothes were all in the battered fiber suitcase she had checked at the railroad baggage room. She had destroyed everything bearing her name. She stood in the pleasant room on the twelfth floor and carefully disposed of the baggage check.

Three things that were not new remained with her. The glossy picture, a cheap ring he had given her, in silver with a flawed Burmese ruby, and the shoebox. Four hundred dollars had been spent. But Al had said to be careful. Part of being careful was in destroying the past. Almost completely—except for the ring, the picture and the box.

She was not the quiet, almost drab girl who had walked through the endless hours, remembering the fear in Al's voice. The new clothes were becoming. Her color was heightened by the excitement. There was a tautness, an urgency about her that had not been there before.

In the early hours of the evening, she left her room, after taking two hundred dollars from the shoebox, and took a taxi to the airlines terminal.

THE taxi dropped her off at the terminal at seven fifteen on Monday morning, fifteen minutes ahead of the appointed time. She went up on the escalator, bought several magazines, found an attendant who promised to see that her luggage arrived at the plane.

He also told her that the limousine to take her to the field along with the others would be announced over the public-address system.

She sat down on one of the long benches and began to leaf through one of the magazines. She felt that someone was watching her, and she made each gesture casual. She glanced up and saw him. She let her eyes float across him as though she was completely unconscious of his presence.

Then she looked back at the magazine. But not to read. Al had written that she was to be careful. And the man had been looking at her with frank curiosity. She knew that he was still looking at her.

He was a dark young man, with the type of pale-sallow skin which made his freshly shaven jaw look bluish. He was

sitting across from her. She decided that he was probably tall. His legs looked long. He seemed to be well dressed. A small suitcase stood near his crossed legs. His expression was one of dark and sardonic good humor. Wryness. And competence. His overcoat was beside him, neatly folded. He held his cigarette so that the smoke curled up through the fingers of his brown, strong-looking hand.

She wondered if he could be the enemy. That is how she had come to think of anyone who threatened Al's life. And the columnist had said that there would be two groups after Al. The police and the gangsters that the gambling house might hire. His constant gaze made her nervous.

At last, to her relief, it was announced that the car was in front. She stood up, slipped into her coat and went down to the front exit. The airport name was on the small neat sign on the window of the black car.

The door was held for her, and she got in, sat back in the corner. Two men got in next. They were portly, red-faced, loud, and smelled abundantly of alcohol. One of them sat much too close to her. She moved away. They gave each other meaningful looks.

One of them stuck a fat red hand toward her. "I'm Charlie Grable. No relation to Clark. Ha, ha! Guess you're going our way, Miss. Might as well get acquainted."

She looked down at his hand, then at his blood-shot eyes and looked coolly away.

"Guess she froze you out, Charlie," the other one said. "Wipe those icicles off your chin, Charlie boy."

Charlie looked sulky. He mumbled something under his breath. An old man with abundant white hair and no hat got in next, followed by a couple in their thirties with two small children. The voices of the children were shrill and excited. The last person to get in was the young man who had stared at her in the terminal.

The door slammed and the car started

off through the crowded midtown traffic.

At the airport the list of passengers was checked against the manifest. Other passengers were already at the field. They were permitted to walk out across the apron and up the steps into the big ship. It was the first time Gloria had ever flown. She tried to seem nonchalant about it.

The pretty uniformed stewardess checked them off on a second list as they entered the ship. Gloria walked up toward the front of the ship and sat down. Almost immediately the second of the two red-faced men sat beside her.

"I wanna apologize for my fren, Charlie," he said, slurring his words. "Now me, I'm a gennamun. I don't go for none of this crude stuff. The hell with Charlie. You and I, we'll ignore the punk, hey?"

"On your horse, friend," a cool voice said. Gloria turned away from the circular window, looked up into the face of the young man who had watched her in the terminal.

"What d'you want?" Red-face demanded, growing even redder in the face.

"You happen to be annoying Miss Quinn. Also, you happen to be occupying my seat."

Red-face thought it over, heaved himself to his feet. "Sorry," he mumbled, lurching off to find Charlie.

Gloria demanded. "How did you know my name?"

"Listened when the manifest was checked. Thought he might bother you. I won't." He dug a paper-bound book out of his pocket and began to read.

"Thank you," she said in a small voice.

He looked at her, raising one eyebrow. "Perfectly okay." He went back to his reading. "I'm Steve Harris," he said, without looking up.

When the signal was given, Steve Harris groped for and found the loose ends of his seat belt, strapped it tight across his thighs. She watched him out of the

corner of her eye, learning how to do it herself.

The four motors, one at a time, bucked, kicked, spat and settled into a steady roar. The steps were being rolled away across the apron. She stared out the window at the busy airport.

Steve continued to read. Her heart gave a lurch when the plane began to move, began to trundle awkwardly down the strip. She bit her lips. The ship went a great distance, then wheeled around in a sharp semicircle. It stopped and the song of the motors rose to a high roaring whine, and the great airplane trembled and vibrated.

Suddenly they were rolling, and the acceleration pushed her back in the seat. Faster and faster, and then the ground was dropping away, spinning away into the distance, and she saw roads and tiny cars and the roofs of squat buildings speed swiftly by.

She let out breath long pent up and suddenly felt very tired. She leaned her head back, turning so she could watch the ground. The big wing stretched out into the horribly empty air. She saw the tip of it bend alarmingly and caught her breath.

"It's supposed to do that," Steve said quietly. "It's built to bend like that in the air."

"Oh, I—I didn't know."

"First time?"

Gloria nodded.

He said: "Dullest way to travel there is. But the quickest. Can't see anything or do anything and the vibration gives you a headache."

She was about to answer and then she saw that he had gone back to his book. She watched the morning sky for a time and then heard his heavy breathing. The book had fallen to the floor. His mouth sagged open a fraction of an inch. She saw that his eyelashes were very long, and very black.

CHAPTER TWO

Elusive Lady

STEVE HARRIS, his right eye open the merest fraction of an inch, inspected her fragile and very perfect profile. He felt very content. The future would bring many challenges, but at the moment there was nothing he could do without arousing her suspicions.

She wasn't the least bit like what he had expected. He wondered if she knew anything about what Al Barnard had pulled. He guessed that she did. She had acted pretty cozy about moving around, about changing names.

For the moment, the case was moving according to plan. Maybe a little better than that. Being able to chase away the drunk was a break.

Sure, probably Barnard had managed to slip enough dough to her for her to get dressed up and buy the transportation. She probably had a little extra to live on until Barnard showed.

It was by far the biggest thing that he had ever gotten tangled up in. He felt more than a mild distaste at putting his services at the disposal of Wesley Gibb, fat, pseudo-socialite owner of the Candor Club. But Wesley had made it worth while. "Twenty percent of whatever you can recover, Harris. In cash." One hundred percent recovery would thus net him eighteen thousand four hundred dollars, and the expenses would be on top of that.

Not too bad for an ex-cop from Peekskill who had been in a dead end because of department politics, he thought. Wesley Gibb, and everyone else, knew that Steve Harris was well-trained and completely honest.

Well-trained. Groundwork at Northwestern. CIC in the Army.

He watched her carefully while she thought she wasn't being observed. He

hoped in that way to find little clues to her character which would enable him to determine, in advance, her future actions. He looked at her hands. They were well cared for. Slightly squarish. Capable hands. And quite pretty.

In the bright light he could see the pale hair springing firm from the white clean scalp. Funny about her. He had gotten on her trail by routine work. The dead man was one Samuel Burkett. Burkett had a girl friend. She responded to sympathy and kind words, gave out with the names of four of Sammy's friends. He had dug up addresses for them. Three of them were where they should have been.

The fourth, one Albert Barnard had left his room, apparently for keeps. The landlady had broken down for a ten-dollar fee, and let him in the room. Wednesday afternoon, in Barnard's vacated room, in the wastebasket, he had found an eight by ten glossy print of a pale, rather pretty girl. He had pieced the bits together, found the photographer's name on the back. *Goldtint Special Three Huge Pictures for Two Dollars. Choice of Six Proofs. Glamorous Pictures. Like the Movie Stars.* There was a penciled number on the back of the print, just under the photographer's name.

"Yes, sir. We keep files. If you could tell me why you want . . ." The eye had flicked down and seen the numeral five on the corner of the bill. "If you'll wait just a moment, sir." The five changed hands.

"That's a Miss Gloria Gerald. Here, I'll write down her address. We mailed her the proofs and then she came in and told us which one she favored."

It cost an additional five dollars to get a new print of Miss Gerald and a new print of Mr. Barnard, using the negatives in their files.

With the name and address, it was relatively easy to find that she was a file clerk in a loan company, and **that she**

hadn't been on the job since Friday at lunch time. And yet she was still occupying her room.

He had a hunch that Barnard would eventually come to her room. So, to insure a constant watch, he had hired a reliable twenty-a-day man to split the shifts with him, giving him first a long look at the photograph.

But Barnard hadn't showed. Instead, she had moved. By luck, he had been on Saturday morning, followed her in a cab to the railroad station, saw her check the battered bag. Three times he had come closed to losing her in the stores. Then, seated on the far side of the lobby of the midtown hotel, he had seen her register.

Fifteen seconds after she had left the desk, he hurried up to the same man and said, "Say, did you see a blonde girl, dark blue gabardine suit, hat with flowers on it and—"

"Miss Quinn?"

"That's right. Did I miss her?"

"By just a few seconds. She's got room 1221, sir. You may be able to catch her at the main entrance . . ."

At six o'clock she followed the bellhop past his chair in the lobby. He lowered his newspaper after she had passed, just in time to see the initials G.A.Q. on the brand new luggage.

The darkness of early evening had helped him. He had been close enough to her taxi to hear her tell the driver to take her to the airline terminal. He had arrived there a few minutes after she did.

To the ticket agent he said, "Miss Quinn asked me to see if I could get a seat on the same plane she's taking. I believe she was here just a little while ago."

"Oh yes. That's Daytona, isn't it? We couldn't book her directly to Daytona. Jacksonville is the best we could do. Will that be all right?"

"Fine," he had said heartily.

"Be here at seven-thirty Monday morn-

ing, or at the airfield at eight-twenty, Mr. Harris."

"By the way, if she should come back here to check anything about her ticket, don't tell her that I got a seat on the plane. I'm going to tell her I couldn't make it, and then surprise her."

"Certainly, Mr. Harris."

Schedule time was five and a half hours. Certainly not a very long time in which to wiggle into her good graces. Particularly since she'd be cautious. She looked intelligent. No point in taking any chances at this stage of the game.

He remembered how delighted Wesley Gibb had sounded over the phone. "Good work, Harris! Excellent. Daytona, you say? And you figure that he'll join her there? This is much better than I expected."

One stop at Washington and one at Atlanta. Maybe there'd be a chance to get better acquainted. She'd feel bound to stick close to him just to back up the story he had handed Red-face.

He made the sounds and movements of a man waking up. She responded faintly to his smile.

"Going all the way to Miami?" he asked, making it sound like polite conversation.

"Just to Jacksonville."

"I get off there too."

HE saw her eyes narrow a bit. Was that pushing it too fast? He said, "This is the best time to go down. Before the mob hits Florida. Lots of people stay up north for Christmas. Last year I flew down in late January. Had a bad time finding a place to live. Are you all set for a place?"

"No."

"Well, don't fret about it, Miss Quinn. You'll find a place without any trouble this time of year. Of course, you'll pay through the nose for it. Prices don't collapse down there until April when the

season is about all over. Or have you been there before?"

"This is the first time," she said. And he saw the mistrust fading.

"I get down every year. Have to. Sinus kills me if I stay in New York. Of course, Jax itself is no resort town. You have to go down the line to find that. Daytona isn't too bad."

"I've always wanted to see Florida!" she said.

He saw the eagerness on her face, the light in her blue eyes, and she was like a grave child, suddenly pleased by an unexpected gift. He decided suddenly that he liked her very much indeed, and that annoyed him, because it is not healthy to like what you must destroy. A surgeon does not operate on his own. And Steve's business was, in essence, an operation. To remove the cash and turn the criminal over to the police. In that order.

He told himself that she was as crooked and dangerous as Al Barnard. He wondered what she would do if he got his small bag, opened it up and handed her the two glossy prints. Probably the serenity of her face would be distorted into feline rage, and her nails would reach for his eyes.

"What sort of work do you do, Mr. Harris?" she asked.

He had that all set, and answered quickly, "Commercial art. That's how I'm able to follow the weather around. Of course, I'm closer to my markets in New York, but a little sunshine is worth the trouble."

He saw her glance at his hands. He guessed that she was trying to visualize him sitting at a drawing board. He flexed his fingers, said, "I'd like to sketch you some time, Miss Quinn. Maybe we can get together in Florida."

"That would be nice," she said, smiling, "but I'm not exactly a cover girl."

"Turn your head a little. There. Now look up a little more. Fine. I'd want to get that line of brow and cheekbone. When

an artist sees that sort of bone formation, he knows he's looking at a woman who will merely get lovelier as the years go by."

She flushed.

"I bet your mother is a nice looking woman."

Gloria's mouth twisted. "She—she was, before she died."

"Sorry, Miss Quinn. Always have my foot in my mouth."

She frowned. "My ears feel funny," she said.

"Sure. Hear how the sound of the motors has changed? We're coming into Washington. Better fasten that belt again."

The stewardess, standing at the door, announced that there would be a delay of an hour before take-off. The scheduled stop was only a half hour. That meant that they would arrive at Jacksonville at three instead of two-thirty, provided there were no more delays.

Gloria walked slowly toward the administration building. It was much warmer in Washington than it had been in New York, but the air was thick and damp. She glanced up and saw that Steve Harris had fallen in step with her.

"Coffee?" he said, smiling. She found that she liked his smile. Yet it was hard to know what he was thinking. He had a—well, a masked look about his eyes. If she refused, the two drunks might give her more trouble.

"Good idea," she said.

They sat at the long bar in the coffee shop. Her coat was uncomfortably warm. She threw it back off her shoulders, and he took it and hung it up for her.

He was very polite and very nice, she thought. And he certainly looked more muscular than she had imagined any commercial artist would look. She had a vague idea of men with thick glasses and hair worn a little too long, and high nervous voices.

Funny, she thought, how a person's

mind can be split into two parts. One part of her mind was dark and miserable with thoughts of Al, and what danger he must be in. With another part of her mind she was enjoying the excitement of the trip, enjoying Steve's warm smile and his quiet courtesy. She half decided that she was merely shallow.

Steve said, "This delay is just the wrong length. If it had been two hours, we could have taken a run into town. An hour is just long enough to stand around and fidget."

At that moment a heavy hand landed on Steve's shoulder, and a booming voice said, "Steve Harris! What the hell are you doing in town?"

She saw the faint annoyance flicker across Steve's face, but he got up and pumped the big hand of a tall man in army uniform, silver eagles on his shoulders.

"Nice to see you, Bill," Steve said. "Miss Quinn, may I present Colonel Grydon, the guy who made my military career miserable."

COLONEL GRYDON was a tall, balding man with a wide mouth and small eyes. "Glad to meet you, Miss Quinn. We professionals had to keep amateurs like Steve in line. I got him so he was almost earning his pay." He turned to Steve. "I heard from one of my New York friends, boy, that as a private gumshoe, you're doing okay."

Gloria felt cold all over as she grasped the implications of his words. Steve laughed heartily. "No gumshoe, Bill. Art gum eraser. Have you been watching the famous Harris touch on you-know-what-cigarette ads?"

She was watching Colonel Grydon's face, saw the almost imperceptible narrowing of his eyes. "Hell, yes, Steve," he said quickly. "They're good, too. And don't forget, you got your training in the army. I ought to take a cut on the dough you must be getting.

"I'll mail you a dime tomorrow."

The colonel glanced at his watch. "Got to run, Steve. Nice to have met you, Miss Quinn. When you're in training, Steve, drop in at my office at the Pentagon and look me up."

He went off through the wide door into the waiting room.

Steve sat down on the stool, chuckled and said, "He was in charge of one of the propaganda outfits. I did poster work for him."

"It must have been very interesting," she said. Her lips felt numb. She felt as though she had been running blindly toward a vast pit and had slid to a stop on the very brink. Now she was cautiously picking her way back from the edge. It was important to smile, to be natural. "I'd like more coffee," she said. . . .

As they walked back to the plane, Steve Harris spent a long thirty seconds mentally cursing Bill Grydon. Such an incredibly stupid break. And he couldn't tell whether or not Gloria Gerald had caught on.

He sat beside her once more, pulled an envelope out of his pocket and, with a soft pencil, quickly drew a caricature of Bill Grydon. His anger at Grydon was such that it was even more biting than his usual efforts. It was a knack he had developed many years before, and it was all tied up with his ability to remember a face forever after having only seen it once. With that knack, he had amused countless people at parties, infuriating some, and sending others into spasms of helpless laughter.

He showed Gloria the drawing. She giggled. That was a good sign. Maybe the drawing would dispell any doubts Grydon might have given her.

"You did it so quickly!" she said. "I'd hate to have you do that to me. You've made him look like—I don't know what. Just awful!"

He began to relax a little. He smiled

to himself as he realized that part of his horror at being found out was based on a childish desire to have her think well of him.

The plane rumbled and lifted off the runway and made a long swing and headed south once more.

His fears were sufficiently allayed so that when, at Atlanta, she went off by herself, he did not worry. The early afternoon sun was pleasantly warm. The stop-over was short and he looked for Gloria in the crowd as, piecemeal, they strolled back to the ship. Her folded coat was on the seat. He saw her luggage stacked and tied with the others.

She still did not arrive. The stewardess was at the open door, looking worriedly across the apron. He could hear the metallic voice of the P. A. system in the terminal proper paging, "Miss Quinn, please! Miss Quinn! Your flight is ready for takeoff. Miss Quinn!"

He knew, then, that she wouldn't return. The stewardess said, "She had us untie the load so that she could get at one of her bags. I wonder what could have happened to her."

Steve didn't answer. He was wondering whether or not to get off himself and take a chance on tracking her down in Atlanta. The odds on missing her were too great. Besides, he knew her ultimate destination. She had not mentioned Daytona in her conversation, had not given herself away when he had mentioned it.

He felt chagrin, and yet a certain admiration for her. Grydon's words had tipped her off, and she had not shown her suspicion. Leaving the bags and coat on the plane had been a good touch.

The big door was swung shut, the steps pushed away. He went back to the seat and fastened his safety belt. At Jax he could check the different modes of transportation from Atlanta to Daytona and arrange to intercept her. . . .

From her vantage point Gloria watched

the big plane, and when at last it took off, taking Steve Harris with it, she heaved a great sigh. Carefully she searched her memory, decided that she had given him no indication that Daytona was her destination.

Harris would undoubtedly wait at Jacksonville, expecting her to arrive there by some other means. She went into the terminal and inspected the huge map on the wall. She carried her purse in one hand, and under her arm was the shoe box of currency.

She thought for a moment with despair of the pretty clothes and nice luggage winging their way south. No matter. The Atlanta shops were open and she had plenty of money.

Steve Harris had come so close to deceiving her. He had seemed so nice. It was faintly disloyal to Al to have found Steve so attractive. Maybe, under different circumstances, if she had met Steve . . .

CHAPTER THREE

That Killer Man

STEVE HARRIS spent three fruitless days in Jacksonville, made a discouraged phone call to New York, and went down to Daytona. His jaw was set in a grim line, because he saw eighteen thousand dollars slipping away.

At Daytona he got a room in a relatively inexpensive hotel. He set about finding Gloria Gerald-Quinn. After three days in Daytona, he began to wonder if Gloria had ever arrived there. No rental office claimed any knowledge of renting a cottage or apartment or even a room to anyone answering her description.

Yet he had a hunch that she was there. He sat in his room on the edge of his bed and slammed his fist into his palm, trying to think of some better way of tracking her down.

Gloria liked the high wooden windbreak that jutted from the corner of the cottage toward the blue ocean. Behind it she could sun bathe with no fear of being seen by the people that seemed to spend so much time walking aimlessly up and down the broad expanse of Daytona Beach.

She had been exhausted when she had arrived, her mind filled with cluttered memories of winding narrow roads, the drone of bus motors, the midnight streets of Tampa.

By all odds, Harris should still be up in Jacksonville. And yet she knew that she had to proceed on the basis that Harris knew that she would be in Daytona. She had checked the new suitcase in the Daytona bus terminal, had walked out into the morning sunshine.

Three hours later she had walked out of the beauty shop, her pale face achieving a new fragility under the blue-black of her hair. As she walked back to the bus station, she kept repeating the new name she had selected. Glenna Quarles.

The ad in the paper for the beach cottage had been the easiest part. She had found the right sort of man in the bus station. She approached him, saying:

"Could I talk to you for a moment?"

The man had looked startled and cautious. "What do you want?"

She had selected him because he looked clean and decent, but not flush. He followed her over to the bench and sat cautiously beside her.

In a quick, flat tone she said, "A man is trying to make trouble for me. He will follow me here. I want you to go and rent this cottage and pay three months' rent in advance. Rent it under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Quarles. Charles Quarles. I'll give you a hundred dollars for your trouble."

He had hesitated and she had looked directly into his uneasy eyes, and, with lips parted, had said, "Please help me!"

"I won't get in any trouble?"

"No trouble at all."

Two hours later he returned with the receipt, the door key and the address. She gave him five worn twenties and he had put them away quickly as though it shamed him to take money for helping her.

Yes, the cottage was perfect. She had found a store which would deliver groceries, and the delivery boy was willing to pick up magazines and books for her. There was a small radio in the cottage, and she had had it repaired.

Each evening the *Times* was delivered, and each evening, pulses thudding, she opened it and looked eagerly at the help-wanted column.

The shoe box, sewed in oilcloth, was buried in the sand near the windbreak. The money she had allotted herself she kept on her person. The sun gradually tanned her delicate skin, and, except for the constant, biting worry, she was almost content.

* * *

Wesley Gibb, his tiny brown eyes set into the pads of gray sweating flesh like currants in an unbaked cookie, sat alone on one side of the booth. On the other side, Steve Harris was against the wall. Gibb's 'assistant' was sitting on the outside edge.

The waitress had brought a wicker basket of large pieces of greasy chicken, wrapped in a starched napkin. Wesley's fingers were shiny with grease, as were his ripe lips. The 'assistant' was a completely bald young man named Harry. His melting blue eyes stared upward in a half trance and he beat his knuckles against the edge of the table in time to the music, ignoring the conversation between Steve and Wesley Gibb.

Steve took a deep drag at his cigarette, mashed it out in the chipped glass ash-tray. "So this is a checkup on me?" he said.

"Don't be difficult, Stevie," Wesley said in a gentle and oily manner. "You know how these things are. Fourteen days and no report and I guaranteed your expenses. You can't blame me for thinking maybe you have cleaned it up down here and you're letting the expenses ride."

"I don't operate that way," Steve said.

"Don't be annoyed, Stevie. Lots of people would. Everybody tries to take advantage of me because I'm generous. Besides, I own a piece of property in Miami and I always check on it this time of year and get them set for the big season."

"You're generous. Is that why you brought Muscles, here along to see me?"

Harry stopped drumming on the table, half turned and gave Steve a long look. "Watch your mouth, Harris."

Steve turned back to Gibb. "Do I have to listen to your cheap imitations of a Hollywood-type hood?"

"Go for a walk, Harry," Gibb said.

Harry snorted, stood up and wandered off.

Gibb said, "If it isn't asking too much, Stevie, could you let me in on what I'm paying for?"

"I don't know why I should, but here it is. I think she came here and got undercover fast. I think she's sitting tight somewhere in this town waiting for word from Barnard. I think Barnard is somewhere between here and New York, working his way down here, being very, very cautious about throwing people off the trail. When he gets here, I figure they'll leave the country by private plane or boat. I've spread a little dough around so that I can find out quick when they try to hire something. In the meantime, I keep my eyes open."

"And suppose you're wrong? Suppose they've already gotten out of the country?"

"Then you toss a little more money after bad money. Remember, you're not paying for my time. This is on spec.

You're only paying my expenses, Gibb."

"Maybe I'll leave Harry here to help you."

Steve smiled tightly. "I could stand him for maybe twenty minutes, and then I'd float him out with the tide."

"Harry's a good boy."

"He's maybe okay handling drunks at the Candor Club. Maybe."

Gibb finished the last piece of chicken, wiped his mouth and his hands on the empty napkin. He smiled. "I guess, Stevie, I meet too many angle boys. I keep thinking you are one."

Steve looked steadily at him. "Gibb, it makes me feel dirty to have you as a client. Twenty minutes after I accepted the case, I began to regret it. But I'll follow through and play square. But I wouldn't have anything more to do with you after this is over for five times the potential profit on this one. Understand?"

Gibb's smile was undisturbed. "Perfectly, Stevie. As long as we're being personal, I might add that I don't believe I'd hire you again anyway, not after the way you let a simple girl slip through your fingers."

Steve glanced at his watch. "Two buses and a train due. I've got to cover them." He stood up, walked out of the place. The night was warm. At the corner he turned sharply and looked back, caught a glimpse of someone melting into the shadows. He smiled tightly. That much was obvious. Gibb was anything but a trusting soul. It wasn't worth the trouble to shake Harry.

THE man who looked like Al Barnard hurried diagonally away from the bus terminal. Steve got one quick glance at his face. All of the uncertainty faded away. The face of Al Barnard was engraved on the surface of his mind. The man who had passed under the street light matched that image—and the new mustache, the rimless glasses were a feeble

smokescreen for Barnard's real identity.

The man carried a small brown suitcase. Steve glanced at the suitcase and his smile was tight. There goes eighteen thousand bucks for Harris! Hosanna!

Barnard was difficult to tail. He walked quickly, selected the quieter streets. Steve kept a good block behind him, cursing himself for not having shaken off Harry.

Barnard made a left turn and, as Steve got to the entrance to the block, he looked up and saw Barnard making another left. That made it a lot simpler to figure. Steve doubled back on his own tracks, grinning as he saw Harry pause, turn and scurry away. Steve hurried to the next street, looked up the block and waited.

In a few minutes Barnard went by. Stretching his long legs into what was almost a run, Steve went back to the brighter section of town, passing the familiar bus terminal. The street Barnard was on joined the street he was on just beyond the terminal. At the junction there were two cheap hotels.

A drugstore was opposite. Steve found a stool at the counter where he could watch the entrance to both hotels. Barnard went into the first one, pausing to give a long look back up the quiet street. He had walked ten blocks to get to a point only a hundred yards from the bus terminal. Twenty minutes later Steve had moved over to the same hotel. Fortunately the management made it simple by using a register book rather than cards.

The previous arrival was a Mr. Stanley Webster of Providence, Rhode Island, assigned to Room 412.

The desk clerk was an old man with the sallow bleary look of the backwoods native.

"Something on the fourth," Steve said to the old man.

He obtained Room 417. He carried his own bag up, marked the location of Room 412, diagonally across the hall and three doors nearer the elevator.

With the room light out, he sat in a chair and looked through the inch-wide gap of his open door down toward Barnard's room. At last the thin line of light under Barnard's door clicked out. On shoeless feet Steve tiptoed down the hall, listened with his ear against Barnard's door. The man was breathing heavily. He was evidently sound asleep.

Steve went back to his room, went to sleep quickly, telling himself that he should awaken at six, knowing that some unknown factor in his mind would awaken him within a few minutes of that hour. . . .

At nine o'clock, Barnard left his room, locking the door behind him. At nine five, the cheap lock responded to the lock pick, and Steve let himself in. The brown suitcase was in the corner by the window. A long ash from a cigarette significantly rested on the top surface of the suitcase. Steve squatted, memorized the general contour of the cigarette ash, blew it away and quickly seached the bag. Except for clothes, it was empty. He shut it, lit a cigarette, waited until the ash was the right length and then carefully placed it on the suitcase where the other one had been, touching it gently with his finger to move it into the exact position of the former one.

It took another five minutes for him to determine to his own satisfaction that the money was not hidden in the room. He fixed the inside lock, held the latch back with a thin strip of celluloid, pulled the door shut and pulled out the celluloid, letting the latch snap into place, locking the door.

At nine-twelve he rode down to the lobby, glanced into the grimy dining room, walked across the street, saw Barnard at the counter of the drugstore, lifting a coffee cup to his lips. Knowing that Barnard had no way of knowing him, he went into the drugstore, stood at the rack of postcards a mere six feet from Barnard's back, and began to carefully select cards. He

turned slightly sideways so that, out of the corner of his eye, he could watch Barnard's movements.

In a few minutes, Barnard wiped his mouth, slid off the stool and turned toward the cash register at the front of the store. At the same instant, Steve turned sharply, blundering into him.

"Watch where you're going!" Barnard snapped.

"Sorry, friend," Steve said.

Barnard grunted and walked up to the counter, reaching into his pocket for change to pay the check. Steve stooped and picked up the scattered cards, a scowl on his face. In the instant of collision, he had determined that, no where on his person, did Al Barnard carry a bulk which would represent the money he had stolen.

He saw Barnard cross the street and go into the hotel. He sat on the stool at the end of the counter where he could watch the hotel entrance. Of all the damn fools, he thought. *That girl had had the money all the time.*

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the bald and sunburned head of Harry. He turned and smiled peacefully at him.

Harry turned away quickly.

Once again Steve scowled. If Harry had seen him blunder into Barnard, then Harry would know the score. If he got eager to take over and cut Steve out, he might upset the applecart, but good. He paid for his breakfast, went up to his room and pulled a chair over where he could once more sit and watch Barnard's door.

Within twenty minutes a pimply young boy with cornsilk hair knocked on Barnard's door. When it opened, the kid said, "You wanted an errand run, mister?"

"Come on in." The door slammed shut. Steve hurried down to the lobby. Five minutes later the kid came whistling out of the elevator, an envelope in his hand. Steve tailed him to the office of the Daytona Times.

Fifteen minutes after the kid had emerged from the office, Steve went in and smiled at the very pretty girl behind the desk.

"Say, I'm Mr. Webster. I sent an ad over here a while ago and I think I made a mistake on it. Mind if I check your copy?"

She smiled nicely. "Not at all, Mr. Webster." She took the pink duplicate out of a wooden tray and handed it to him. *Help Wanted. Competent file clerk. Knowledge Spanish and Portugese. Write Box 81.*

He thought fast. It would appear in the evening paper. Gloria would write at once and mail it the same evening. It would be delivered in the morning to the newspaper. It was worth a gamble.

"Good!" he said. "Guess I didn't make a mistake after all. I'll be in tomorrow to pick up the answers, if any. What time will they be ready?"

"Didn't that messenger boy tell you? Quarter after nine."

"That's right. I forgot."

The next morning the girl handed him four letters. He took them over to a table in the corner of the room, trying to guess which one was from Gloria Gerald. The handwriting on all the envelopes was feminine. He held them up to the light. One seemed lighter than the others, and there seemed to be hardly any of the dark blur showing through to indicate a lengthy letter. He took out his pocket knife and, using the dull edge of the blade, ran it under the gummed flap.

The folded slip of paper inside said, *Phone 3831.*

Quickly he resealed the envelope, walked to the street door. He had five minutes to wait before the messenger came walking toward the building.

He stood in the doorway, gave the boy an official looking smile and said, "I guess you want the Box 81 replies?"

"That's right." The boy took the letters

without suspicion, turned and headed back toward the hotel. . . .

The girl at the telephone company said doubtfully, "Now if you had the name, or the street address, we could give out the number, but the rules say that . . ."

"Ever see one of these before?" Steve asked. He showed her his license.

Her eyes widened. "Gosh, are you a private eye?"

He grinned. "Lady, I know who you've been reading. The only slang term I've ever heard is *op*, and I haven't heard that often. I could call on the local cops for help, but it would take too long. This is rush business. How would you like a twenty-dollar hat? Just a present from me to you."

She came back in five minutes, a conspiratorial whisper in her voice. "Two ten, Beechbreeze Road. About two miles from here. A Mrs. Charles Quarles is using the phone temporarily. It's actually listed in the name of a Mr. Baker Henrich."

"I'm lousy at picking out hats. Here. You buy one."

"Oh, I couldn't!"

He turned away, left the bill on the desk. When he looked back from the doorway the bill had disappeared and she was smiling after him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gal With a Gun

BEACHBREEZE ran parallel to the beach. The taxi took him by the cottage and he paid the driver off a block away. It was a little after ten. He went through a vacant lot down to the beach itself and located the cottage again. A wooden windbreak cut diagonally out from one corner of it. He suddenly realized that if he could get on the far side of that high windbreak, he couldn't be seen from the cottage. That meant risking a

walk down the beach, passing in the sun's glare a mere hundred feet from the windows.

It seemed worth the risk, as it was probably that Barnard had already phoned her, and even if she saw him and recognized him, she could do nothing to prevent Barnard's arrival.

The cottages were a good hundred yards apart. He kept his face turned toward the sea as he walked by. When he estimated that he was far enough, he looked back and saw that the windbreak masked all of the beach-side windows.

He walked back up across the beach, keeping the windbreak between him and the windows. Once up to it, he sat on the sand and leaned his back against it. From that vantage point, he could see enough of the road itself to determine when Barnard arrived, or when Gloria left.

With his right hand he loosened the flat .32 automatic in his shoulder holster. It was a trim gun, Belgian manufacture, Browning patent, and though it packed nowhere near the wallop of the Positive, the lesser bulk he felt compensated for that shortcoming.

A steel spring inside the leather clasped the gun firmly, held it with the grip in handy position. He never carried it unloaded.

He tightened as he heard a movement on the other side of the windbreak. Had she seen him? He rolled up onto one knee, waiting.

At first he couldn't identify the sound. A soft chucking sound. Then he smiled grimly. A spade being driven down into the sand in rapid strokes. Let her continue. He was confident that he had beaten Barnard to the cottage. Let her do the labor.

The shoveling ceased. He heard the slam of a screen door. At that moment a car moved slowly down Beachbreeze, as though someone were looking for numbers on the cottages. He moved back behind

the angle of the cottage wall, heard it stop outside, heard the chunk of the car door shutting, the motor starting up again.

The taxi made a U-turn and headed back toward the bridge.

She would meet him at the front door. He walked quickly around the edge of the windbreak, walked silently up to the screen door, eased it open and stepped inside, the automatic in his hand.

Her voice, coming from the front room, was almost a sob. He heard the harsher murmur of Barnard's voice.

He stood in the middle of the small kitchen and let the voices come closer to the doorway. Then, with a swift sure movement, he took two quick steps to the doorway, covering them with the gun, his hand steady and unwavering.

"Right over there against the wall!" he snapped. "Both of you!"

Barnard backed against the wall slowly, his eyes venomous.

Gloria stood and looked at him with wide eyes, her face whiter than death. "Steve!" she gasped.

"Over against the wall," he ordered.

"So you know him!" Al said in a thin voice. "Very nice. How are you two going to split the cash?"

"Shut up!" Steve said.

Gloria turned to Al. "Do you think that I—"

"He was here waiting for me, wasn't he?"

She gasped. She whispered, "I'll show you, Al. I'll show you."

She turned and walked directly toward Steve's gun, shielding Barnard. Steve tried to move to one side, but she rushed toward the gun, reaching for his wrist. She caught his wrist just as Barnard said, "Okay. Drop it, guy!"

He was covering Steve with a heavy revolver, a belly gun with a short barrel and no trigger guard and no front sight.

Steve let his automatic thud onto the rug. Gloria picked it up and backed away.

She laughed nervously. "Now what do you think?"

"You're okay, Glory. I'm sorry. If he'd been smart he'd have clubbed you and taken a pot shot at me. Who are you, guy?"

"He's Steve Harris, Al. He's a private detective from New York."

"Private, eh? That smells like Gibb and that makes it easier."

Steve had been unable to cope with the way she had walked into his gun. Everything had been so carefully planned and executed, except this last move—the move which lost everything for him.

"What's easier, Al?" she asked.

"Honey, they can only burn you once. You seen the New York papers?"

"No."

"They know it's me, honey. They know I did it. Now that they know, I don't have to hold off on our friend here. Where do you want it, guy. Through the head?"

"Al!" she said, her voice almost a scream.

"Don't soften on me," he snarled. "This joker is probably working alone. We got to think he's alone. We've got an investment to protect. If you don't want to watch it, go on out in the kitchen and shut the door. Hey, maybe you got a towel I can wrap around this thing. We don't want publicity."

"You can't, Al! You can't!" she said.

Her lips quivered and Steve saw that her hands were tightly clenched.

"You don't understand these things, Glory."

"I won't let you!" she said.

"You soft on this fella? Smarten up." Barnard looked carefully at her for a moment and then said, "Honey, there's other girls, you know. Lots of them. All I've got to have is dough. If you try to foul me up, I can leave you here right beside him."

Steve looked at her, saw her shoulders slowly slump, saw the bitterness around

her mouth, saw some of her youth leave her eyes, and knew that it would never return.

"I'll get a towel," she said.

"Now you make sense, Glory."

She went into the kitchen. Steve heard her dull steps on the linoleum. She came back with a heavy beach towel. She carried it toward Al. The shape of it didn't seem quite right.

Steve didn't catch on until she jammed it against Al's ribs. Al, his revolver still steady on Steve, slowly turned his head and looked down into the white face of Gloria Gerald. Steve guessed what would happen. He would spin away from the pressure of the gun, Steve's gun that she had picked up. Al would slam her over the ear with the revolver he held.

SHE must have suddenly sensed her danger, as she started to move back. The sudden flat jar of a shot slammed against Steve's ears. Even as his body quivered in anticipation of the brutal thud of lead, his mind told him that the sound had been too thin and brittle to have come from the revolver Al Barnard held.

Al Barnard's upper lip was a bloody ruin, the flesh smashed away from the broken teeth. He moved back one step, his pale eyes blank and bewildered. The second shot cracked and a small black hole appeared in the middle of his forehead.

Bald-headed Harry, the smoking automatic in his hand, stepped from the kitchen into the small living room. Wesley Gibb, a full head shorter, waddled along behind him, a beaming smile on his suety face.

Gloria, the towel still clasped in her hands, stared down at the broken face of Al Barnard.

"Al!" she said. "Al!" And it was the tone of voice that a woman would use to an obstinate, yet well-loved child who has fallen and who stubbornly refuses to get up.

Steve sagged with reaction. Wesley

Gibb pushed by Harry, walked over to the small table at the end of the couch and picked up the box, sewed into gay oil-cloth in a checked pattern. "Come home to daddy," he said.

"For once I'm glad to see you, Harry," Steve said, trying to smile. He walked over to pick up the heavy revolver.

"Ah-ah!" Harry said. "Mustn't touch."

Steve turned and glared at him.

A glance he couldn't decipher passed between Harry and Wesley Gibb. Harry moved in close, slapped his left armpit, his jacket pockets.

Gloria still stood and looked down at the dead face of Al Barnard. Gibb stepped to the front door, strolled out onto the shallow porch and looked up and down the street.

He came back in and said, "This lovely neighborhood is undisturbed, Harry."

Steve said, his voice sounding curiously hollow: "Gibb, you've got your dough. There it is. Count it and take out my slice and I'll be on my way."

"How did it happen, Harry?" Gibb asked. Harry still held the automatic.

Harry frowned. "The big rod belongs to Barnard. I guess his prints are on it pretty good. Use a handkerchief and they won't smear too bad. I guess Barnard knocks off the girl and Stevie and we come in just in time to gun him down. Okay?"

"She might scream if I give it to him first, Mr. Gibb. And shooting women is worth a little bonus. I'm saving you some money, Mr. Gibb. Say a five-thousand bonus?"

Gibb shrugged. "Okay, Harry."

Gloria turned and looked at Harry and at Wesley Gibb, actually seeing them for the first time. An odd little frown appeared between her eyebrows. "Are you going to kill me?" she asked. There was no hysteria in her voice. Only bewilderment at something she couldn't understand. "You killed Al. Are you going to

(Please continue on page 127)

On his birthday eve, hot-spot-owner Fen McPhelan's wife left him; his girl friend two-timed him, and her kill-crazy sweetie wished him. . . .

HAPPY MURDER TO YOU!



The blow packed all of my 180 pounds.

By
DON JAMES

THIS was a hell of a way to spend the eve of my thirty-fourth birthday. The apartment was as quiet as a bank vault at midnight. A fifth of whiskey was half gone. Somewhere a thousand miles or so to the east an airliner was droning toward New York—and in it was Jenny. In my hand was the note she'd left propped on the table.

Jenny could be brief and poignant. She'd written:

Fen: I'm leaving Portland to you and Alicia Toll. I'll take New York—and a divorce when I get around to it. . . . Jenny.

There it was. No "luck." No "sorry." Just period—Jenny.

I finished my drink and went to the telephone. I dialed the club. It was a nice, profitable club on the edge of town. It was called The Place and it was owned by Fenton Sean McPhelan. That's me.

Only Fenton Sean McPhelan hadn't been spending as much time at The Place as he should. And when he did, his mind was occupied too much by one member of the personnel and not enough with the cash registers, the customers, or the possibility that some of the boys might be knocking down a little on the side.

My watch said 1:00 a.m. Porky should be in the office checking receipts and holding down the place.

One member of the personnel I did *not* have to watch was Porky Shadler. It was because of Porky Shadler that I could be a little absent minded about details.

Every man who runs a hot spot sooner or later collects a "man Friday" to himself. Short, squat, shrewd Porky was my man. What I hadn't taught him about the business he had already learned from an uncle who had known all the angles, and from his widowed Aunt Susan who could

spot a marked deck, bake an apple pie, or handicap a horse race with equal ease and efficiency.

And although my personnel trouble at the club certainly was not Porky, I wasn't kidding myself that he wasn't aware of it. He was young enough to appreciate the cause, and wise enough to keep his mouth shut.

Porky answered the telephone from my desk after the second ring.

"Did Alicia show up for her number?" I asked.

There was a slight hesitation, as if he had bad news and didn't want to give it to me. "No. She phoned about an hour ago and said she couldn't make it. I got those two hoofers we had last week. Lucky they were home." His voice carried a note of worry.

"Okay, Porky. Stop worrying. I'll handle it."

"Sure." He sounded relieved.

"I won't be out tonight," I said. "Tomorrow's my birthday."

"Congratulations, boss—drink a couple for me!"

I smiled grimly. "Yeah. I'll do that." I hung up and went to a window and looked down into the street. It was raining. I hoped it wasn't storming wherever Jenny was and I wished she hadn't found out about Alicia.

Then I wished I'd behaved myself. But it was too late to wish that. To do anything about that, it would have had to start back when I was in grade school. About once a year some girl came along and I had to play. I thought that Jenny had stopped it, but Alicia came along.

The trouble was—it was just play. I realized how true that was, now that Jenny had pulled out. Like a lot of men, I'm dumb about some things until it's too late.

I left the window and poured another drink. "Happy birthday, stinker!" The drink didn't taste so good. I got a rain-

coat from a closet and a snap brim hat. I called a taxi and went down to wait for it in the entrance to the building.

The driver knew me and called me McPhelan. I gave him Alicia's address.

We'd been drinking all afternoon and evening. I'd left her at ten and gone home. She had a show at eleven and another at one. She hadn't shown up.

The lights were on in her apartment and I pushed buttons at random until someone released the street door. On the other side of her door I heard voices. I knocked.

A man's voice said, "The guy with the bottle."

The door opened and I pushed a tall, lean man out of the way and walked in. Alicia was putting a stack of records on the console's record player. She wore a house coat I'd bought her, and it went well with her black hair.

The man I'd pushed recovered his balance. He flexed fingers and said, "What makes, tough guy?"

"Get out," I said. "Scram."

ALICIA looked up and her eyes widened. She exchanged a glance with the man. He said, "Me scam? You got it wrong. Out, tough guy. Get lost." He doubled a fist and started a swing.

I caught it on a shoulder, countered with a fast jab, and followed with something that packed all of my 180 pounds. It jarred me down to my toes. The tall, lean man crashed across a table and looked at me from the floor.

I pulled him up by coat lapels, picked up his raincoat and hat, and tossed them after him. I closed the door.

Outside he said, "I'll get you for this!"

Alicia watched me with an amused smile. "My, my!"

"What's his name?"

"Barney Coggin. He's from Chicago and very tough. An old friend."

"Friend?"

She shrugged and turned on the record player. A platter dropped and *Stormy Weather* reminded me of an airliner in the night and I hoped again that it wasn't storming wherever she was.

I said, "Jenny found out about us."

"Why not?"

"Look," I said pointedly, "we kept it too deep in a cloud for her to find out—without help."

"Oh?"

"Did you make sure she learned about it?"

Suddenly she stopped smiling. "Do you remember what I asked this afternoon, glamour boy?"

"That's what I thought. You try to put the bite on me for five grand. I say no. You call Jenny. Is that it?"

"For a boy from the sticks, you catch fast."

"Is that the way they do it in Detroit?"

"In Detroit a man who wants to keep a wife plays it smart. Five grand isn't so much."

"I ought to slap you to sleep."

"Don't make with the tough-boy corn. It won't work, lover."

I walked toward her. Maybe I intended to do a little slapping. I had a good start with the character from Chicago and it had helped the way I felt.

She must have been something in my expression. She drew back against the console and said "Get away from me!"

When I didn't stop walking, she screamed. For a girl who sang hot and low, she could make a fast change. The scream was shrill and high. It didn't stop with the first. There was a second and a third.

Then I stopped and stared at her. Suddenly I felt a little sick. I'd had enough. It was as cheap as a skid-row flop-house.

She was smiling again when I walked out.

Down the hall a couple of doors closed

fast. I ignored them and took the automatic elevator down. The character from Chicago wasn't in sight. I walked toward town and found a taxi a couple of blocks away.

It was a hell of a way to spend the eve of my birthday. . . .

* * *

The telephone was insistent. I fumbled for it in the dark and found the bed lamp first. I snapped it on and glanced at my watch. Five o'clock. I answered the telephone.

"Boss, this is Porky."

"Look, it's five in the morning and—"

"Get dressed and the hell out of there, boss. I'll be parked in the block in back of you. Use the back basement door."

"What—?"

"Bits Sullow—my friend the dealer—lives in the apartment house where Alicia—"

"Hold it, Porky. What gives when you or any of you boys think you can—?"

"Listen, boss. Listen to me! They just found Alicia dead. The door was open and someone on that floor coming home from a party looked in. Bits wasn't asleep and got in on the excitement. A couple of people saw you leave after she screamed. One of them knows who you are. The cops are on their way to your place now. . . . Will you please scam out of there?"

You add things fast sometimes. "In the block in back of here," I said. "Thanks, Porky."

I'd never dressed so fast in my life. I took a look out the window just before I left and saw two cars stop in front. Men piled out. While they waited for the elevator, I went down the back stairs.

Porky was waiting with his car lights dark. He didn't turn them on for several blocks.

"I didn't kill her," I said.

"Do you think I'd be here if I thought you did?"

I looked at his squat body, the shrewd eyes, the tight lips. He was a good guy to have on your side. "You probably would," I said.

He didn't answer me.

THE house was in a suburb west of Portland. There was a view of the Tualatin Valley and in the morning sunlight, that had displaced the rain, the view was peaceful and green. Porky mashed out another cigarette and looked at Susan Shadler, his aunt.

She sat complacently and comfortably as a woman in her fifties can do when she has ceased to be surprised with life. She was thin and angular. Her black hair was streaked with gray. Before her husband had died and left her the house and a sizeable bank account, he had sold his gambling house in Reno. Aunt Susan knew her way around.

I'd told them everything that had happened and now we were thinking about it. Aunt Susan broke the silence:

"With a wife like Jenny, you were a fool to ever look at another woman."

I said, "It wasn't—"

"I know," she said. "My Pete was that way. I let him play until he got involved with a B-girl. Then I ran her out of town and lowered the boom on him. He behaved after that."

"Jenny should have lowered the boom on me."

Aunt Susan looked as if she agreed. "What are you going to do about the cops?"

"Do you think I ought to go in and tell them the truth?"

"They wouldn't believe you."

"But I didn't kill her."

"You sound like a stuck record. We know you didn't kill her, or you wouldn't be here. I don't fool around with killers."

She saw the thanks in my glance and

gave me a smile. "We'll have to make a plan," she said.

Porky said what we were thinking. "Find whoever did it."

I said, "The Chicago character. Barney Coggin."

"You want me to do some checking?" Porky asked.

I shook my head. "First, let's try Chicago. Aunt Susan, will you place the call? Carl Kinkaid. He's a pal of mine."

Ten minutes later Carl's voice came over the wires.

"I'm in a spot, Carl," I explained. "Forget this call. I want to know all I can about a guy named Barney Coggin. Tall, lean, tough. About forty."

"You're right about the tough part, Fen. He's beat two murder raps with alibis that smelled. Gunman. Rackets. Nobody misses him around here."

"Ever hear of a girl friend of his named Alicia Toll?"

"Alicia? Sure. From Detroit. She's his weakness. She's had him half nuts for years. One of those guys who was bumped was playing with her. On the other hand, Barney put her in a hospital another time. Only she isn't his girl friend."

"What do you mean?"

"She's his wife. That name Toll is her stage name. . . . What gives?"

"I'll be in the papers, maybe. Forget this call?"

"I don't know you."

I dropped the telephone in its cradle and told Aunt Susan and her nephew what I'd learned.

Porky smiled. "He gets a hot burn about you tossing him out, comes back after you've left, asks her what makes between you two, goes off his nut and bumps her."

"What else could it be?" I said.

"Of course!" Aunt Susan said.

Porky picked up the telephone and went to work. It took him half an hour of calling, but he finally put down the instru-

ment and smiled with real satisfaction.

He said, "Barney Coggin is living in a fourth-rate hotel—the Burnside. What do we do now?"

I'd been thinking while he was calling. "We don't do anything. *I* do it. You people have put your necks out far enough already."

"Don't be noble," Aunt Susan said. "You need help."

I shook my head. "I'll handle Coggin. All I want is your car, Porky."

He dug the keys out of a pocket and gave them to me. "I can use Aunt Susan's if I need one."

"Thanks, Porky. Last spring I loaned you a twenty-two target pistol. Is it here?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take Barney Coggin to a little spot out of town among the firs. I'm going to get a signed confession if I have to beat it out of him."

Porky gave me a sharp look, but left the room and returned with the gun.

Aunt Susan looked worried. "Why the gun?"

"Bluff. To persuade him to take the ride."

"Be careful," she said. "He won't be any good to you dead. They'll say you blew your top when you discovered they were married and killed both of them. Jenny's leaving you will help to make it look that way."

"I'll be careful. I don't intend to shoot."

Twenty minutes later I was parking near the Hotel Burnside. The gun was a satisfactory weight in my pocket, and there were no cops in sight.

COGGIN was in a room on the third floor and the hotel was so fourth-rate they didn't bother to announce visitors. I went up and knocked on the door. The gun was in my hand when the door opened.

Coggin appeared to be holding his

breath. There was that kind of tenseness about him. He smiled thinly. "I wanted to see you," he said. "We got unfinished business."

"That's right." I jabbed the gun into him and pushed into the room. He wore trousers and no shirt. "Get dressed," I said. "We're going for a ride, unless you want to sign a confession now."

"She's dead," he said. "And I said once I'd get you. I'm sure I will now."

He wasn't showing surprise that I was there, nor grief over Alicia. He was showing something worse. I've heard that a killer gets a look in his eyes. He had it.

I said, "You're wrong. I've got the gun. Not you. I don't intend to sniff gas for a killing that belongs to you. Get dressed. We're leaving here for a place where I can work on you in privacy."

He shook his head, but slowly put on a shirt. He took a coat from the back of a chair and got into it. He was faster than I knew he could be. He had an automatic out of a coat pocket in one smooth motion. Instinctively I pulled the trigger on the pistol. An empty click sounded. I hadn't checked to see if it was loaded because I hadn't intended to shoot it.

His automatic cracked down across my wrist. Pain ripped up my arm. I dropped my pistol.

Coggin picked it up in another smooth movement and put it in a pocket.

"Not loaded," he said. "You're dumb."

I didn't say anything. Everything in my mind was about me, not him.

He laughed a little. "So now we take that ride—and you write the confession. And when they find it with this gun beside you and a bullet in your head, they'll say suicide. I'll be careful to put your fingers on the gun. Only yours. Not mine."

"So you're going to make sure I die for killing her?"

"That's right. But good. I don't trust the law and juries."

He seemed to know something about

Portland. He watched street signs, but he told me where to turn. His choice of spots was as secluded as mine.

There was an abandoned logging road that disappeared in brush and fir. A battered sign read: *Private Property*. He told me to take the road. A hundred yards from the highway, and completely screened from passing cars, he told me to stop.

"Get out." His voice was as curt as an ice pick.

I got out.

He said, "We'll use that fountain pen and paper you brought for me to use. Simply write, 'I'm sorry I killed Alicia.' Sign it. Use the fender to write on."

"No."

He whipped the automatic lightly across my temple. I staggered and went to my knees.

"Write," he said.

Anything to stall for time until my head cleared. Until the weakness went out of my legs and arms. I fumbled for the pen and paper. I wrote what he dictated, slowly, uncertainly, trying to get time.

He read it. "Okay." He sounded pleased. "Now you get a piece of lead where I hit your temple. So-long, sucker."

The shot seemed oddly far away. I was braced for whatever was coming. Nothing came. Coggin's gun-hand went down and he stumbled in a circle and then sprawled face down to the ground. I saw the small bullet hole in the side of his head.

All this happened in seconds.

Another shot sounded and something stung the tip of my ear. I went to the ground and reached for Coggin's gun.

Another shot. Something kicked my shoulder. I rolled and fired at Porky crouched by a tree. I fired three times. The first was enough. Porky staggered toward me. A gun echoed my shots, but the bullets were wild and away from me. Porky went into a huddle on the ground

and suddenly it was grotesquely quiet.

I went to him and grabbed his wrist that held the mate to the .22 Coggin had taken from me. Another gun, a yard away from us where it had been dropped in Porky's forward lunge, looked like a .38 automatic.

Porky's weak hand couldn't hold the gun from my grasp. I jerked it away and the movement hurt my shoulder. I glanced at my coat. There wasn't much blood. It looked like a clean hit and the feeling was more numbness than pain. I felt blood slide down my neck from the nick on my ear.

"I don't get it," I said.

Porky spoke without lifting his head. "I think I'm dying."

"What is this, Porky? You got him—saved my life. Why try for me?"

PORKY coughed and it sounded clogged and wet. "I was a sucker, too. Alicia took me for five grand of your dough—club dough. Wanted more tonight or she'd spill it to you. She knew how I got it. I killed her. That's a real payoff."

Maybe I should have hated him right then. I didn't. I said, "When your pal, Bits, called, you had the idea. Get me to go on the lam to make me look guilty for certain."

"That's right."

I remembered the confidence with which Coggin had come at me while I had a gun in my hand. The lack of surprise at my appearance.

I said "You called Coggin and tipped him that I was on my way with an unloaded gun. Told him I'd killed Alicia, but planned to pin it on him. Suggested what he might do and even told him how to find this place. Probably said you hated my guts, too."

"You got the idea, Fen."

"Then you use my .22, which you didn't give me, to kill Coggin. Did you buy an-

other like mine after I gave it to you?"

"It's a good gun."

"And you came out here with mine and shot him with it. You could leave the gun here and take away yours. Mine was registered in my name. Then you planned to bump me with the thirty-eight, and leave it by Coggin, and take his gun away. Make it look like a double killing. The cops would read it that way. You'd be in the clear. I'd never know about the five grand you took. I'd be blamed for murder."

Porky coughed again and moaned. He barely said, "You're smart, Fen."

"But why Barney Coggin? Why bump him?"

"He had the five grand. Got it from her last night before you came. That's why she called me and put the bee on me for more. He had the dough. It must be on him or in his room." Porky coughed again. "I could have used five grand. . . ."

I was down beside him now. I used a handkerchief and my necktie. I stopped some of the bleeding, but I knew it was only temporary. No one was going to save him.

"Porky," I said, "why didn't you let him kill me first with his own gun? Then bump him? It was easier."

"He'd leave powder marks at your temple from a close shot. The cops aren't dumb. I had to make it look like a gun fight."

Suddenly I stood and hurried to the highway. I flagged down a car. Three men were in it. They listened and went with me. Porky still was conscious.

"You're going to die," I said to him. "Tell them what happened. All of it, from the beginning."

"Sure, Fen. Why not?"

He told them and they listened carefully. Later they told it word for word to the D.A. They shook hands with me after the D.A. said I was in the clear and could leave.

Sunshine still flooded the patio when I finished talking. We were silent for a moment and then I said, "Look, Aunt Susan, I'm sorry about Porky. He was your nephew and—"

"Only by marriage, Fen. I helped you because of you—not him. He always was a rat. My Pete knew it most of all. You're a lot like Pete was. That's another reason I helped, maybe."

I remembered what she had told me about Pete and the B-girl. I said, "Maybe too much like Pete."

She knew what I meant. "I fixed that," she said. "I talked with Jenny just before you came. She was already packing to come back. She'd heard they were looking for you for murder."

"You mean, after everything—?"

"Naturally. She loves you."

"I—I don't know what to say."

"You won't have to say. You won't have a chance. I'm going to tell her how to lower the boom on you, young man!"

I didn't remind her that murder already had done that. I simply nodded and poured drinks for us. Aunt Susan lifted hers and studied it thoughtfully before she took it to her lips in a small salute.

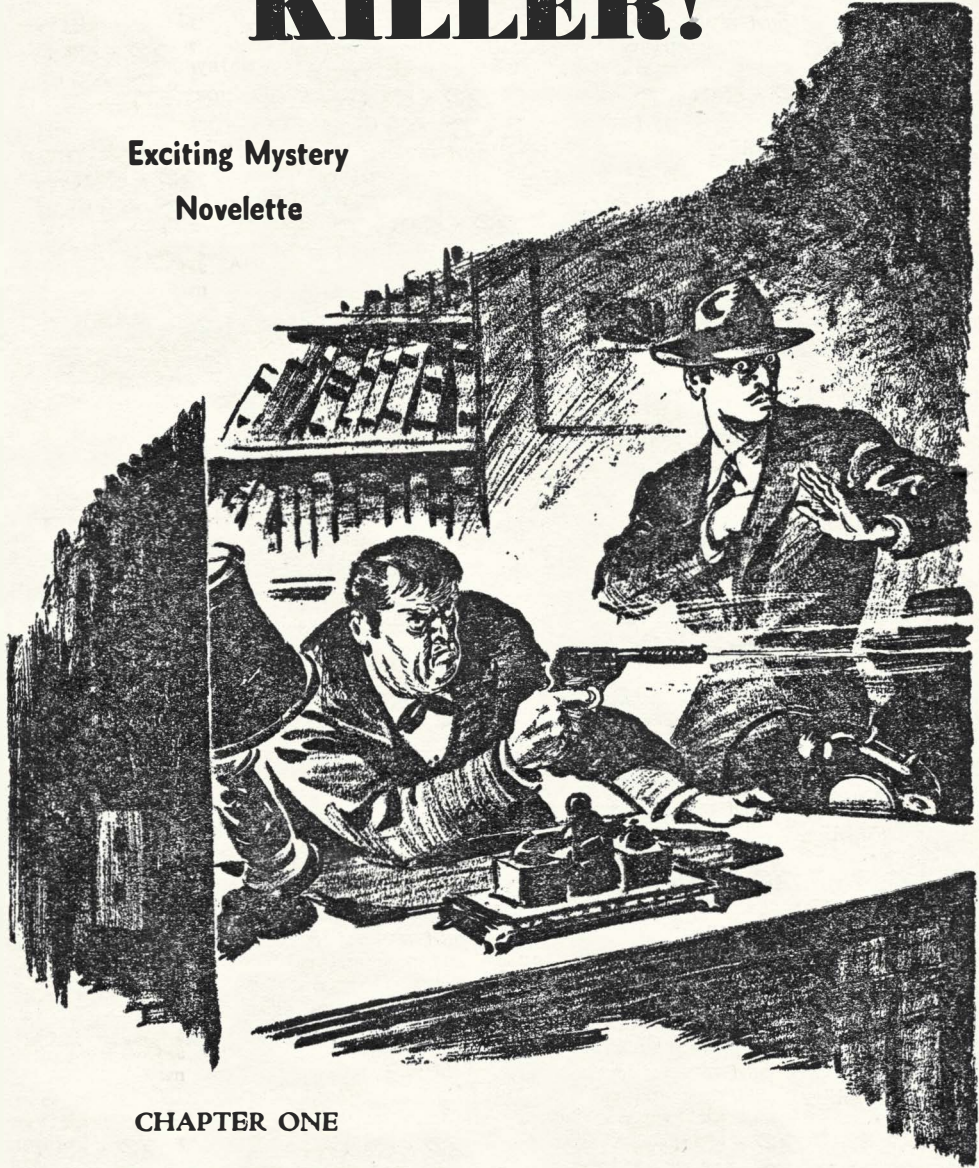
"Happy birthday!" she said.

— TO OUR READERS —

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YOU'LL BE BACK, KILLER!

Exciting Mystery
Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

Green-Eyed Booby Trap

THE wheels moaned a song on the rails and the tune was a symphony of death! As we approached Grand Central, my nerves unwound and the

deadly purpose of more murder seemed no longer impossible. I hadn't faced it in prison.

For fifteen months I'd been closing my eyes, throwing my arms wide and letting

*I had a four-day murder alibi that I couldn't prove—
because a luscious booby trap mixed me a devil's cocktail.*

By RAYMOND

DRENNEN, Jr.



Nonie covered my back. . . .

destiny step in to smash me at will! I knew now it wasn't destiny, but one of the cleverest murder frames anyone had ever dreamed up! The parting threat of Calvin, the acting warden, had hit me like a shot of adrenalin in a mangled heart.

"I'll see you back, killer! I promise you that!"

I'd folded the precious parole paper, walked slowly out of his office. An hour later, I hopped a ride on the prison produce truck to Monroe City. There'd been something foul and prophetic in Calvin's parting challenge. My sudden parole wasn't explained, and I knew parole boards didn't release killers after only eleven months of a thirty-year murder stretch!

The Metropolitan Hotel in Monroe City had offered me a job. They'd changed the name and it hadn't meant anything to me until I walked in. Then I saw it was the same hotel where Ed Bennett was murdered. That didn't confirm my hunch that there was something phoney about my parole, but it put my guard up.

The desk clerk looked me over. My black hair was short and bristly, my skin gray, a jailbird pallor you can't miss.

"Mr. Mark Stewart, huh?" He squinted sullenly at me and I tried a grin because if the job offer was on the level, then I needed it, and the goodwill of the Metropolitan Hotel if I wanted to stay out of prison.

The clerk jerked his thumb. "See the manager, mack."

He was a heavy man in his forties. His face was brown, his little eyes hanging in tired paunches. He sat behind his desk in a little cubby hole of an office and regarded me dispassionately. Then he shook his head like a tired St. Bernard. His name was Beglin.

"No job for you here, buddy. There must be some mistake."

I'd never seen Beglin before and I couldn't even guess at the part he was

playing. But one thing I knew now. There was no mistake!

"It says here you got a job for me and you'll report my progress each month to the parole officer," I told him. "It says, no job and I go back to prison. In time for breakfast maybe." I waved my parole in front of him. He didn't even look at it.

"Not if you get out of Monroe City, Stewart," he said quietly. "Why don't you go to New York?"

I frowned at that. "I'm supposed to report regularly to the parole officer," I said reasonably. "What do I do? Commute from New York?"

His brown face smiled faintly. "I wouldn't worry about that, Stewart. I'd just go to New York and I wouldn't ask any questions." He stood up, pulling a thick wallet from his hip pocket. His thumb riffled bills. "I always like to give a guy a break. Here's a hundred bucks to tide you over."

He was offering me a hundred bucks to skip parole and go to New York. But it wasn't enough for a payoff. He knew I'd be broke and the hundred was for expenses.

His eyes were hard and level on me and there was no smile on his face. They carried a threat that couldn't have been more direct if he'd put it in words. He wanted me in New York, which meant he wanted to use me for something when I got there! That's why he—or they—had gotten me out of prison.

"Who do you work for?" I asked.

His face showed mild displeasure, but he made no effort to reply.

"Let's understand each other, Beglin," I said slowly. "Fifteen months ago, a guy by the name of Ed Bennett was murdered in this hotel. I was in New York, two days away by train, but I was fingered for it anyway. My fingerprints were on the murder gun and a whiskey glass in Bennett's room."

"Tough break, Stewart," he said ab-

sently. "You were drunk, weren't you?"

"I was, according to witnesses in the tap room," I admitted. "They remembered me buying drinks on the house and boasting that I'd kill Bennett." I studied Beglin for a minute, could see no reaction in his passive face. "I don't remember seeing you that night, Beglin? Were you the manager then?"

Beglin chuckled and shook his head.

"No, of course you weren't here," I said levelly, "and neither was I. I took the rap for killing a guy I never even knew! And now you want me to go to New York. Why, Beglin? What's going to happen when I get there?"

His paunchy eyes gazed at me vacuously for a moment, then he shrugged. "I was just trying to help you, fella," he wheezed. "Like I said, we got no job here for you."

I stepped quickly against the desk, leaned over it until my face was near his. "I'll tell you what's going to happen," I said softly. "I'm going to find out who killed Ed Bennett and why I was framed! If the answer is in New York, that's all right with me. If it's not . . . then I'll be back, Beglin!"

His brown face glistened because he knew I meant business and he hadn't counted on that. It had been so easy the last time. He squirmed uncomfortably in his chair and I knew his hand was feeling for a button under his desk. Almost immediately I heard the door open behind me and a moment later felt a gun jam into my back. Beglin smiled serenely and rocked back in his chair.

"See that Mister Stewart leaves the hotel, Marty," he said.

I turned around slowly, saw a thin, hollow-cheeked kid with round shoulders. His chest didn't fill out his baggy, brown suit. His shiny new snap-brim hat was pulled low over his dirty gray, acne marked face.

"Put your hands in your belt," he or-

dered. "Clear up to the wrists." There was no inflection in his thin, nasal voice. Just hungry desperation that knows no satisfaction.

I watched him a minute, then did as he told me. The cruel sneer of his bloodless lips marked him as trigger happy. His gun lashed out suddenly, raking my cheek. I felt the gash open, warm blood run down. He stepped back then as my hands came out. His dull eyes carried a momentary gleam as he motioned me toward the door.

"You'll pay for that, Marty," I promised, as I went out.

I caught a bus down to Chain Street, walked south past pawn shops and second hand stores until I came to one with a display of guns in the window. I went in and bought a .38 caliber automatic and a shoulder harness. I also bought a leg knife that was balanced for throwing. It's an old hobby of mine. The leather sheaf fit inside my calf like it grew there.

Then I caught the night train for New York.

I HADN'T had breakfast as I walked up the familiar ramp at Grand Central. At the top stood a long limbed girl with deep red hair looking over the passengers. Her gray flannel suit was smoothly tailored, and the green scarf gathered in an ascot at her white throat matched her alligator purse. She waved as I came nearer, a smile parting her full red lips. Then she stepped back, turning to let some passengers ahead of me pass. The smile faded from her mouth and she looked beyond me.

I'd gone only a few steps past her when I felt a hand on my arm. The train weariness left me and my nerves tightened as I turned my head to look at the big man who swung in beside me. I'd wondered what would happen when I arrived. I'd guessed they would plant someone at the station to tail me, keep me covered until

I'd found a place to stay in the city.

"How did you get out, Stewart?" His cold gray eyes were three inches over my six feet. Suddenly my stomach felt like a bag of cement. Perhaps it was his quiet confidence, the uncompromising look on his solid jaw.

"Police?" I asked.

"Lt. McNeal, Homicide."

"I was paroled."

"Did the parole say you could leave the state?" he asked quietly.

"I'm supposed to report to the parole officer in thirty days," I hedged. We stopped, let the crowd surge past us and I asked bluntly, "Do you have a pick-up for me?"

He shook his head. "Not yet, Stewart. Maybe soon." He studied me a moment. "They tell me you were framed for Bennett's murder."

I looked at him with sudden interest. "Who told you?" I demanded.

He smiled coldly. "Well, weren't you? They always are."

I scowled. "Yes, I was framed. What do you want?"

"I just wanted to talk to you, Stewart," he said enigmatically. Then he added, "I wanted to find out if you were after someone. You told me."

He turned away then and I watched him walk on into the waiting room that led to Forty-second Street. I headed for the cab line. McNeal had as good as told me that if anything happened, they wouldn't look very far beyond me for someone to hang it on. I wondered if I'd been very smart. I took the front cab and as it started to roll, the door swung open again. The red head in the gray flannel suit and the green scarf slipped in beside me. Then I knew what had happened. She'd been waiting for me at the head of the ramp, until she'd spotted McNeal.

"What was the matter?" I muttered, looking her over. "Did junior scare you off?"

Her worried eyes were of a shade of green that matched the brightness of her scarf, contrasting with her red hair. She fumbled for a minute with the purse on her lap, finally laid it on the seat between us.

"What did he say?"

I didn't reply. It wouldn't hurt to worry her some until I found out how she fitted in. I told the driver to head up Fifth Avenue, cut into the park.

"How did you recognize me?" I asked her. "You've never seen me."

She was displeased but she didn't press me about McNeal.

"From your picture," she said. Her wide spaced, green eyes held mine for an instant as we explored each other. Then she gave me a broad, warm smile, said, "I'm Nonie Verdun, Mark. I . . ."

She broke off, frowning as I picked up her purse, opened it and poured the contents in my lap. She stiffened and her mouth hardened some, but she made no effort to stop me. Then I scooped the stuff back in, pausing speculatively over the small silver plated automatic nestled in my hand. I dropped it in the purse, laid it back on the seat.

She looked at me darkly, asked in a low voice, "Why did you do that?"

"Why not?" I asked. "It's a rough game and it's going to get rougher. From now on, I want to know how the cards stack."

"What did you find out?" she asked tartly.

"You said you were Nonie Verdun, but you're carrying no identification. No letters, address books or other items any woman carries in her purse."

"Maybe I'm not Nonie Verdun."

"Maybe not," I said, "but you're well heeled with the green stuff, and the shooter says you're expecting trouble."

"I've found trouble," she murmured. Then she smiled approvingly, adding, "They told me you were easy to handle,

but I think your soft voice is a booby trap." She leaned forward on the seat, gave the driver an address on Sixty-eighth Street west of Broadway. I waited until she moved back, then I said,

"Maybe I should warn you, Miss Verdun. If you were sent to fetch me someplace, you better tell me what it's all about before we have trouble."

She frowned, annoyed. Her skin was of the lovely, transparent texture of a true red head. Her straight nose flared a little at the nostrils, quivering sensitively as her worried green eyes regarded me.

"It'll be best for you to come with me," she declared, ending the matter.

We crossed Madison Avenue then and I ordered the cab to the curb in front of a commercial photographer's.

"If you want to wait for me, you better have your story ready when I get back," I told her. Her worried eyes followed me into the photographer's shop. I knew she'd wait because she had her orders. They were to take me to the address on Sixty-eighth Street, but I couldn't guess why.

WHILE waiting in the shop, I thumbed through the Manhattan directory, found Jerome Kline's office on lower Broadway. He was the little shyster lawyer who'd tightened the screws on me after guaranteeing to get me dismissed. I'd been in the Monroe City jail a week when he appeared with a letter of introduction from the university. I'd hired him, because he said he believed in my innocence and wanted to defend me. I traded him my bank account for thirty years, and hadn't seen him since.

A girl told me Mr. Kline wasn't in.

"It's very important," I insisted.

She told me then I might catch him at the Peacock Cafe. It was a cocktail lounge and restaurant across from Grand Central. I knew the place, because I'd been there the night I'd blacked out, two days

before Ed Bennett was found murdered.

"Where'll I find him? At the bar?" I asked.

"He'll be in Mr. Main's office if he's there," she sniffed. "Who shall I tell him called?"

"Ed Bennett," I growled and hung up.

Nonie Verdun was nervous as a kitten when I climbed in the cab beside her. "I thought you'd left me," she said, drawing a breath of relief.

"Had to mail an insurance premium," I told her, grinning. She drew her lip between her teeth, studying me doubtfully. "Now look, sugar," I said patiently. "What do you want?"

"You'll . . . have to trust me, Mark," she said huskily. I laughed and she went on quickly. "I mean it. I believe you're innocent. I think you were framed for Ed Bennett's murder, but . . . something else is going to happen and . . ."

"If you believe I'm innocent, you'll tell me what's going to happen," I said reasonably. "If you don't tell me, then you don't believe in me, or you're lying about the whole thing."

"I'm not lying, Mark!" she declared passionately. "It's just . . . you've got to come with me. There's someone waiting to see you." She ended too quickly and I didn't believe her.

"Get out, sugar," I snapped, opening the door. "I've got a thirty-day leave from the big house and I'm going to make it count."

Her eyes grew fierce and determined. "I can't tell you," she whispered. "I don't know! If you won't come with me, then I'll come with you." Her chin quivered and my throat tightened as I looked at her. She had an unrelenting purpose that I liked and wanted to know more about. She was as convincing as a six-figure bank account, but I couldn't forget that she was an agent of death.

No matter how easy it would be, I couldn't afford to fall for the line she gave

me. But I couldn't afford to discard her without draining her of any information she had. I agreed to take her with me. I could drop her later if she wasn't worth the investment.

The driver took us to the address of a hotel I gave him on Forty-sixth Street. Nonie stood near the elevator while I registered, then followed me up without saying anything. I told the bell boy to bring up a bottle of rye and some soda.

"Some ginger ale for me," she amended. It was the first she'd talked and her voice was so small that I had to grin at her. She held her breath until the door closed, then demanded suddenly, "Did you kill Ed Bennett?"

Her wide, serious eyes gave me a queer feeling that she wanted to tell me things, but was afraid.

"That's a hell of a question, sugar," I told her. "You make me wonder if a little cultivation would convert you to my side."

Her lashes flickered fractionally but she wasn't deterred.

"You haven't answered my question," she insisted. "You have nothing to lose by telling me. You were convicted for it, but now you're out and it makes no difference how you answer. Tell me the truth, Mark . . . even if it was an accident." Her pleading eyes followed me as I walked to the window and opened it.

"Damn you," I muttered. There was something desperate in her tone, something behind it that didn't make sense. It was a small room, with a double bed, a chest of drawers, a small writing table in front of the window, and a bathroom. I turned from the window, and she was still looking at me. She was sitting on the bed, motionless as a piece of statuary, her eyes wide and waiting for her answer.

"No, I didn't kill him," I snapped, "but I might have!"

I went into the bathroom abruptly and closed the door. I heard the boy bring the whiskey, heard him thank her for the tip.

I hadn't slept much on the train and I was tired and dirty. After I washed up, I felt better. When I came out, she was sitting in a chair by the desk with a drink in her hand.

"Why do you say: You might have?" she asked quietly as though she'd been thinking about it all the time.

I poured some whiskey and ice in a glass, looked for the soda.

"He didn't bring any," she said, her eyes following my every movement. I filled my glass with ginger ale, took a long swallow, sat down on the bed. If I played it straight with her, she might talk.

"Because I might have," I said bluntly. "I left the university that night to catch my train at Grand Central. While I was waiting, I had a couple of drinks in the Peacock Cafe. I remember leaving there all right, starting for the train, then things blacked out. Four days later, I woke up in Central Park. The police were waiting for me when I got home. It's two days by train from New York to Monroe City, and two days back. I had ticket stubs in my pocket when they searched me." I glared at her. "Are you satisfied?"

She nodded slowly. "You might have killed him," she repeated. I felt the whiskey taking hold of me as she looked up, an odd smile on her mouth. "You were a mathematics professor at the university, weren't you?"

I nodded, loosened my collar. If I had to get tough, it was time. "Now, sugar. It's your turn," I said thickly. "Who sent you to pick me up?"

She stood up, smoothed her skirt over slender hips, walked to the door, opened it and looked out. Then she closed it, went back to her chair. She weaved a little as she walked and I leaned back on the bed. The room was hot and her white face seemed to have lost the smile it had carried. Something burned in my senses, the elusive bitter taste under the sweet ginger ale.

"Why don't you lie down, Mark," she whispered gently.

I felt myself slipping backwards, saw her white face floating somewhere above me. The room was growing dark and all I could hear were faint words . . .

"But you didn't kill him . . . you must trust me, darling . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

The Sniper

I WAS twisting interminably on the bumpy bed, the faded pink walls closing in around me like collapsing heat waves. I struggled to the edge of the bed, let my feet drop over onto something solid, sat wagging my head stupidly trying to get my eyes open. My tongue rubbed over my parched lips and against my teeth trying to get the brackish taste out of my mouth. I squinted my eyes open, shifted them blankly around the room, brought them to rest on my arm in front of my face, trying to make out the time.

It was almost noon. My train had pulled into Grand Central at a quarter to eight. Nonie Verdun was gone. I tried a laugh, but it came out a hollow cackle from my parched throat. "The perfect pushover for a set of ankles and promising lips," I thought sourly. Four hours in New York and I was working off a hangover already.

I felt weak from hunger as I started to push up from the bed. My feet sank into the solid thing they were resting on, slipped off to the floor. My eyes jerked open then and the cobwebs vanished from my foggy brain.

The body was lying face down, parallel, half under the bed. He was long, square-shouldered, thick-chested, wearing a gray flannel suit. A sticky crimson stain spread from the neat slit in his back just below his left shoulder blade. His gray, snap-

brim hat was mashed on the back of his head. It fell off in my hand as I turned his face to get a look at it.

It was the Homicide dick, Lt. McNeal, who'd met me at the station. The bump over his ear felt like a new tennis ball in my palm. He was still warm. I didn't waste any time searching him.

My glass on the table had a dry, stained residue in it. Three hours shouldn't have done that, I thought, puzzled. I raised the whiskey bottle to my lips, rolled some of the rye around on my tongue, spat it out in disgust. It was bitter, loaded with enough barbituric acid to dream off a whole regiment. I'd ordered club soda and Green Eyes had told me the boy hadn't brought any, so I'd made my drink with ginger ale she'd ordered. It had been sweet enough to cover the bitterness. Then I found the soda in the chest of drawers where she'd stashed it while I was in the bathroom.

The sudden, clanking noise of the elevator door sliding open drove home to my clouded brain that if anyone walked in and found me nursing a cop's corpse, I'd have about as much chance as an unhatched chicken in a kettle of boiling water. I jumped to the door, twisted the key silently in the lock. Then I saw the knob turn.

The window, with a five inch ledge four feet below the sill, was the only way out. It was over a cement court six stories down. I was feeling for the ledge with my toes when they discovered their skeleton key was blocked by the key I'd left in the lock.

"Open up, Stewart!" a gruff voice bawled. "It's the police!"

Bubbles of sweat rolled down my skin, made my palms slippery as I clawed the window casement, inched along the ledge stretching for the next window. I was spread-eagled half way between when they started crashing the door. I mumbled a prayer that the ledge I was standing on

wasn't as rotten and crumbly as the red brick I was clinging to. It would give before long.

I stretched, moving too fast as the door in my room burst open. My palm folded into the next window, but I would have fallen if it hadn't been open. I swung out over the cement court like a yo-yo, came up with my head and shoulders inside the room, identical to mine. It was lived in, permanently, with a radio, knick-knacks and a pink-ruffled bed spread with a smell like a dime-store perfume counter.

The girl wasn't home, but it was no place to hide. With my door locked on the inside, it wouldn't take the police long to guess how I'd gotten away. Hoping they wouldn't spot me in the hall, I leaped to the door, twisted the knob slowly, and my spine felt cold. It was locked. The key would be down at the desk because the girl was out. I was trapped.

I flattened against the wall behind the door, clubbing my gun, ready to split the first skull that poked in the room. Footsteps shuffled the corridor outside, went on by, and I breathed. Then a key slid in the lock and the door swung open, concealing me. My arm started down, froze half way as I glimpsed the trim, female foot that cleared the door. She was limp and blonde, with wide, startled eyes and the dime store smell that went with the room. I dropped my gun, clattered my hands around her mouth and throat. Footsteps were coming back along the corridor now. They stopped at the door this time, knocked heavily.

"Tell them you're alone," I hissed in the blonde's ear, "or I'll crack your neck like a toothpick."

Abject terror flooded her face and I could feel shivers run through her neck clear to her toes. The newspaper and purse under her shaking arm fell to the floor.

"You . . . you're Mark Stewart!" she breathed. "A m-m-murderer!"

THE scowl on my face aged her another ten years. I squeezed her neck and her bleached head bobbed hysterically. I took my hand away from her mouth, scooped up my gun as she turned unblinking eyes to the door.

"W-who is it?" she managed weakly.

"Sorry to disturb you, Miss Kovek," an apologetic voice started. It was cut off by a gruff bark:

"Police, miss. Open the door. We're looking for a man."

The girl hesitated, stiffening, and I jabbed my gun in her ribs.

"I just got home," she said, running her words together. "I can't let you in. I don't have any clothes on."

"Are you alone?" the apologetic voice asked. That would be the manager, I hoped, persuading the police not to bother a guest.

"Of course," she said. Her face agonized as the voices mumbled a minute and walked away.

"How did you know me?" I demanded.

Her eyes dropped fleetingly to the newspaper on the floor, then away to the window.

"I . . . I didn't," she lied fearfully. "I don't know who you are . . . leave me alone and I'll keep quiet."

"Sit down," I said. I motioned her to the bed, picked up the paper and sat in the chair by the window facing her.

It was all there under the headline, but it took a minute to soak in.

ESCAPED CONVICT KILLS NIGHT CLUB OWNER!

Then I knew why the blonde hadn't had any trouble recognizing me. My picture was big and clear in the middle of the page. I almost forgot her as I read the account incredulously:

Mike Potorski was killed in the Peacock Cafe shortly after three o'clock this morning when Mark Stewart, escaped murderer,

came up to the table where Potorski and a party of friends were celebrating his birthday. After blasting three shots into his victim's chest, the killer ran to the washroom, escaping through a window to the alley. . . Stewart made good his escape from Monroe Prison three days ago by concealing himself on a prison truck going to Monroe City . . . where, a year ago, he shot and killed Ed Bennett in a hotel room. . . .

I looked up as the girl shifted uneasily on the bed. She shrank in terror.

"Are . . . you going to kill me, too?" she stammered.

"Not if you behave yourself," I muttered. I was searching my brain for a flaw in my alibi. I couldn't have killed Potorski because I hadn't gotten to New York until eight o'clock this morning, five hours after the shooting! The conductor could prove I was on the train.

My eyes drifted back to the paper, hung on the dateline. Then I knew it wasn't an impossible murder frame after all. They'd gotten me out of prison, coaxed me to New York to frame me for Potorski's murder. It was a good frame, because I'd arrived in New York Wednesday, the 16th. Today was Thursday, the 17th! Nonie Verdun had doped me out for twenty-seven hours!

That explained the gnawing hunger in my stomach, the dry residue in the bottom of my whiskey glass. I remembered Calvin's words, "I'll see you back, killer! I promise you that!" The parchment-faced little warden had known what the plot was all along. Up until now, I'd considered my parole was legitimate, even though it might have been obtained by pulling strings. Now I knew Calvin had been bribed to let me out. Then, at the right time, he had reported my escape to cover himself. But they'd overlooked one thing. Even though my parole paper was phoney, it would hang Calvin. He'd endorsed it in front of my eyes, in his own handwriting. And it would prove I hadn't escaped!

Even as I reached in my pocket, I knew

it wouldn't be there. That had been one of Nonie Verdun's duties. Evidence to be gotten rid of after I'd passed out. It was probably ashes now.

The girl's stark eyes followed me as I stood up, paced the room. I had as much chance as a spider web in a furnace. They were probably laying McNeal, the homicide dick, out on a slab in the morgue by now. On the police book, I was an escaped convict, a cop killer and wanted for Potorski's murder!

The blonde had recognized me instantly from the picture—my black, curly hair, my slightly crooked nose from a football tackle. I didn't even have a hat and it was still daylight. I couldn't leave the hotel now. The police probably had the lobby covered. Even if they didn't, some sharp-eyed citizen would spot me before I'd walked ten feet. As I gazed down at the pleading face of the girl, trying to decide what to do, she sobbed convulsively, trembling from her bleached head to her painted toes. She gave me an idea. A lot of blondes had started out as brunettes.

When it was dark, I cut her telephone cord, locked her in the room and dropped off a fire escape into the alley. I found a hat in a cheap shop on Forty-second Street, and some Sun-light Hair Rinse and peroxide for good measure in a drug store. Then I ducked into a movie. In the washroom, I became a blond, then went up and watched the picture until my hair dried.

I was weak from going without food for two days, and Jerome Kline, my little shyster attorney, had to wait until I caught up. His apartment was in Madison Avenue and there was no answer when I buzzed from the lobby. When he keyed open the door a little before eight, I was waiting in his dark living room, a gentle breeze cooling my neck from the open window behind me. The telephone in the foyer jangled for the third time as he entered. He switched the light on, barked, "Hello," into the phone, then listened.

"Canal Street Hotel?" Pause. "No, I don't want to see him." Pause again. "Ed Bennett?" Softly. "Impossible!"

KLINE dropped the phone, stepped on into the living room and switched on the table lamp by the sofa. He was a slight little man with a sallow, pinched face and very thick eye-glasses. He spotted me then, but his cry of alarm died in his throat when he saw my gun pointing at him.

"Nick!" he said thickly.

"A lousy memory," I muttered. "The name's Mark Stewart. Remember?" I motioned him to the sofa with my gun. "Sit down and we'll talk."

His mouth fell open and his sallow face quivered.

"What . . . do you want? How did you get in?" he stammered.

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "Through the fire escape, and I want some straight answers," I said.

"You'll get nothing out of me," he blustered. The initial shock had worn off. "I did everything I could for you at your trial."

"Yeah, with a phoney letter of introduction from the university," I said drily. "Get this now, Kline. I'm wanted for murder and a cinch to burn if they catch me. Killing you won't make a damn bit of difference to me."

His face twitched as he nodded quickly, the bluster gone.

"Of course, Stewart. I'll tell you anything I can. You got a dirty deal and I'd like to help you."

"Never mind that," I growled. "How long have you been George Main's attorney?"

He squinted narrowly through his thick glasses. "I don't even know the man."

"You're secretary told me you were with him in his office at the Peacock Cafe this morning," I said flatly, reminding him, "She just told you on the phone when

you came in that Ed Bennett had called."

That shook him, but he didn't break. "So it was you who called," he mumbled. Then he hedged, "I went to see Main at the request of a client. I'm not his attorney."

His gray face turned uncertain, then fearful as I got up, walked slowly toward him. My gun lashed against his jaw. "I might have swallowed that a year ago," I snapped, "but things have changed. You're his attorney right now. How long have you worked for him?"

Kline cringed back on the sofa, his fingers rubbing blood on his quivering chin. "About . . . four years," he admitted.

"Main owns the Peacock Cafe?"

Kline nodded.

"Was Ed Bennett a partner before he was killed?"

The little lawyer hesitated and I raised my gun. "Yes," he cried quickly. "Bennett owned fifty percent. Main and . . ." He broke off.

"Potorski!" I supplied. It was a guess, but it fit.

He nodded again. "Main and Potorski owned the rest. A quarter interest each."

"Did they pay you to come to Monroe City and see that I was convicted for Bennett's murder?"

Through his thick glasses, the little shyster's eyes glazed with fear as he looked up at me. Then they waivered fractionally, as something back of me distracted him. A muffled report punctuated the room, and a red hole blossomed over Kline's right eye. His head whipped back, he shuddered convulsively and was dead.

I dropped to the floor instinctively, twisted on my belly behind the overstuffed chair I'd been sitting in, and brought my gun around in the direction of the window. The killer on the fire escape couldn't see me and I didn't stick my head out for him to pot at. I glued my eyes over the top of the chair on the curtains near the ceiling.

There'd been no noise up to now. His gun was wearing a silencer. I held my breath, waiting, then I heard the iron steps rattle further down. When I got to the window, I couldn't see him at first. Then he was like a shadow in the dark, moving silently down the fire escape. I squeezed a shot at him and instantly regretted it. My bullet caromed off an iron step, and the killer dropped to the alley, faded back under an overhang of the building where I couldn't see him.

Kline couldn't tell me anything now. But if I hadn't fired, I could have stayed and searched his apartment. As it was, the noise of my gun had already brought excited voices to the hall, and I had to get out quick. I followed the sniper down the fire escape.

CHAPTER THREE

Insurance Premium

IL AID two dollar bills on the cigarette stained marble slab under the naked, fly-encrusted bulb. The mottle-eyed, shiny-headed old man wheezed cheap liquor fumes across the slab and pushed a grimy register book toward me.

You had to walk up a dim, refuse littered wooden stairway to get to the Canal Street Hotel. The lobby was on the second floor, and next to the dirty marble slab, an open-caged, creaky elevator served the next three floors. A threadbare carpet covered the lobby floor. A purple mohair sofa and two chairs, all with padding and springs showing, sat across from the desk behind which the old man slept in an ancient swivel chair.

That was the lobby. The bald-headed, little old man and I were alone and the only noise in the place filtered up the narrow stairway from Canal Street. I scanned the register as my two bucks disappeared into the goofer's pocket. I didn't

know who I was looking for. Beglin, the hotel manager. Marty, the trigger happy kid. I even considered the red-headed green-eyed booby trap, Nonie Verdun. I had nothing to go on, except the hunch that I ought to follow the lead Kline had unwittingly given me.

An elevator door rattled then, clanged slowly open on the floor above. The old man shifted mottled eyes to the cage standing by the desk. He cursed feebly, coughed violently in my face. Then the scream came.

"A-a-a-a-h!" It wasn't loud. Just a weak, naked cry of stark terror and despair. It crescendoed as our eyes fastened on the open elevator shaft. A white body hurtled down, hit the pyramid top of the cage, cutting the despairing cry short.

It was a naked body, except for white shorts stained red with blood. The body rolled down the sloping top of the cage until it jammed sickeningly against the open iron work of the shaft, over the marble counter where the old man and I stood. The head slipped out between the iron work, hung upside down with death glazed eyes bulging out of gaunt sockets at us. Blood was dripping from torn ribbons of flesh. They were evenly spaced ribbons, stripping his chest and arms to the bone. They were made by a knife. A bloody cloth gag had come out of his mouth, hung by a cord around his neck.

The old man wheezed hoarsely. His eyes held transfixed on the corpse dripping blood down on the dirty marble slab in front of him. "It's the new guy, come in this morning. Henry Martin."

I wasn't listening. I was rubbing my teeth together and swallowing, trying to force my eyes away from the bloody parchment face. I jerked away abruptly, muttering:

"I'll get the police."

I stumbled down the dim, narrow steps, forced myself to walk along Canal Street to the subway. Henry Martin, the old man

had said. The blood on that agonized parchment face told me something else. It told me Calvin would never go back to Monroe Prison!

It was nearly ten and I was still shaky when I dropped my cab near the entrance of the Peacock Club. Everything pointed to George Main. Motive was clear. By eliminating first Bennett, then Potorski, he ended up owning the Peacock by himself. Kline and Calvin had helped him. By killing them, he disposed of any immediate split with them and also any future black-mail demands they might make on him.

It was very neat. The only thing I didn't know was who had actually killed Bennett and Potorski, and how I had been framed for the murders. Impartial witnesses had positively identified me from my picture as the killer in each instance. I wasn't worried about Kline and Calvin. Their slays were probably done by one of Main's hired gunmen.

I wasn't too keen on going to the Peacock right now, but none of the directories listed an apartment for Main, and telephone information couldn't give me anything. I had to see him before the police trapped me. If they had him blocked off from me, I might as well toss in and wait for my last haircut in the big house death row.

I pushed through the revolving doors and my muscles stiffened fractionally as my eyes swept back from the bar to the hat check stand across the foyer. Even in the pastel light, I could see that the girl behind the counter had velvety, transparent skin, framed in soft, deep-red hair. Her wide-spaced, green colored eyes glanced over me as I approached. Her quick frown, followed by a smile of recognition flushed black doubt through me.

Nonie Verdun would turn up again, I knew, but I didn't think it would be so close to the flag pole. If she could recognize me in spite of my bleached hair, I might as well forget about it. She'd warn

Main, or the cops, or both and it would be all over except the fish fry. I sauntered over, tossed my hat on the counter in front of her.

"Hello," she said coolly. "I thought you'd be in the country by now."

I forced my eyes away from her, into the bar. Was she trying to warn me to get out? That irrational feeling that she was playing a deep, dangerous game of her own nagged at me again.

"Why go to the country?" I murmured.

"The boss told you to come," she said, puzzled.

"Main?" I asked casually. I turned back to her. She looked at me queerly, paled. Her eyes narrowed fractionally, then through her dazzling stage smile for the benefit of a crowd that just walked in, she dropped her voice to a cautious whisper.

"Meet me in the alley in five minutes."

I GRINNED at her coldly. "Where's Main's office, sugar?" She was trying to bait me into a trap where it would be easier for Main's hoods to take care of me. I kept my hand twisting on my shirt button because I didn't know how soon I'd have to go for the gun under my arm.

"He's not in his office, Mark," she whispered intensely. Her chin was quivering, her eyes moist, pleading with me. "Please trust me. Meet me and I'll take you to him."

"Sure, I'll meet you, sugar," I said drily, "but I won't trust you. Where's his office?"

The new customers came up then. She whispered quickly, "I'll wait for you," then, nodding toward a door across the foyer, said, "He's not up there. He's in the country."

I could feel her eyes following me as I walked away. Behind the door was a narrow staircase leading up to a dark passage. George Main's office was at the end, over the alley.

Dim street light coming through tilted venetian blinds outlined his desk. I closed the blinds, switched the desk lamp on. Main had a luxurious layout. It was done in white birch, with thick, rose-colored carpet and pastel walls. White leather furniture was grouped around a fireplace on one wall. The opposite wall carried ceiling high drapes, concealing a private bathroom and an outside entrance leading down to the alley.

I wasn't having much luck with the papers in Main's desk, when a soft noise at the door made me snatch up the gun at my fingertips. I waited, watched it swing open slowly. A huge creep, with a barrel chest sauntered in.

He had a crimson gnarled nose in the middle of an otherwise mangled countenance and was dangling a large revolver on an index finger at his side. He walked half way to the desk, his eyes riveted on my gun pointed at him. Then he stopped, his revolver still dangling as though he didn't know it was there.

"Drop it, Fauntleroy," I growled.

The light went out then and I heard the drapes concealing the alley door behind me, swish aside. I leaped around the desk, was backing across the room toward the fireplace in the dark. I knew there were guns on either side of me. The light came on then, and my rod was waving air.

"Give up, sucker," a gritty voice snarled behind me. It was the creep, I knew. In the dark, he'd made the sofa behind me. "Drop your heater."

I let my gun fall because I didn't want a bullet in the back. Then the drapes covering the bathroom entrance parted and the thin, pasty-faced kid stepped out.

"Okay, Marty?" the creep asked behind me.

"Yeah, that was all right, Duke." His bloodless lips stretched tight as he looked at me, said nasally, "You just ain't a believer, sucker. Get his rod, Duke."

The creep picked up my gun, shoved it

in his belt, then fanned me to see if I had another one. Marty pulled back the drapes over the alley door. Duke jammed a fist in my shoulder blades and I stumbled toward it, off balance. My back felt suddenly paralyzed. As I passed Marty, he swung at my face with his gun. I'd half expected it, caught the blow on my arm. He cursed obscenely, kicked me from behind.

As I started down the dark stairway, his gun barrel crashed on my left shoulder. He wanted me to cry out, I guess, but I rubbed my teeth against the pain flashes.

A black sedan was waiting for us in the darkened alley. Nonie Verdun sat beside another gungel at the wheel.

"Put her in back," Marty ordered.

Then I got a shock. After the big creep got through pulling her out of the front seat, mauling her and hurling her viciously in back against me, I felt like chewing out his face in spite of my crippled arm. I was rubbing it and it was numb, but I didn't think the shoulder was broken. Nonie choked back a cry as she huddled against me. The dim light coming through the rear windows glistened on tears in her eyes. Red welts were on both cheeks. She'd taken a beating before we'd come down. I could hear her teeth grinding as Duke climbed in, sandwiching her between us. Marty sat by the driver.

"What happened, sugar?" I muttered, not knowing what to make of it.

She shuddered against me as though she were cold.

"They overheard me calling the police—" she chattered.

"Why should they care if you turn me in?" I asked sarcastically.

"I wasn't turning you in," she cried softly. "You and I were going out to Main's place in the country and I knew we'd need some help when we got there." She shuddered again. "You don't know how cruel, how efficient he is. . ."

I frowned in the dark, trying to figure her. "What's your angle, sugar?" I asked.

"I knew they were going to frame you for something, Mark, but I didn't know what," she whispered. "George Main told me to meet you at the train, take you to the room and give you enough knock-out drops to keep you quiet until the next morning. You wouldn't go with me, so I had to go with you. I knew if they framed you for something, they'd do it during the period you were unconscious, and that's the reason I called Lt. McNeal. . ."

"You sicked him on me?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes. I told him all I knew," she admitted quickly. "I told him there was a possibility you'd been framed for Bennett's murder, and they were going to frame you for something else. He promised to keep an eye on you because he'd been interested in your case before."

"Is that why he didn't try to follow me away from Grand Central?"

She nodded. "I'd told him I was going to take you to the room on Sixty-eighth Street, but you went to the hotel instead. I called him after leaving you." She hesitated, biting her lip cruelly. "Don't you see, Mark? I wanted to protect you by making McNeal your alibi for the period you were doped out. Then they couldn't make a frame stick and the police would have to get to work on the whole dirty mess."

It seemed incredible, what she was telling me. I didn't know what to believe. "You knew McNeal was killed in my room, didn't you?" I asked carefully.

Her face shot toward me, disbelief widening her eyes.

"No," she breathed. She thought a minute, said levelly, "Then Marty did it. He heard me tell Main where you were and Main told him to keep an eye on you."

We were on the Marine Parkway now, heading out along the south shore of Long Island. I was cudgeling my brain trying to figure where Nonie fit into the picture.

"Why did you do all that?" I asked quietly. "Why do you care about me? You're Main's girl. If you want to double deal him, you don't have to go to all this trouble." Particularly, I was wondering why she wanted me so desperately to believe and trust her.

I felt her shoulder sobbing gently against me as Marty gave a quick, gleeful laugh, turned around in the seat to face us.

"You tumble slow, don't you, sucker?" he sneered, pleased with his lightening brain power. "Don't you get it?"

The sedan braked suddenly then, swerved off the highway into a private gravel drive. I didn't know what Marty was sneering at, and I didn't have a chance now to pump him or Nonie. Whatever she was, she was deathly frightened and she needed help. I decided to cultivate that.

WHETHER Nonie had intended to or not, she'd done me a big favor when she'd called the police. For no good reason, I suddenly knew the answer to how I was framed for Bennett and Potorski's murders. It wasn't what Marty had said, but the way he'd said it. I tumbled slow, and I hadn't tumbled when Kline had given me the answer, or when Nonie had confirmed it. I was slow, but maybe it wasn't too late if we could hold out until the police came.

It was so dark without a moon, you could hardly make out the big house as we eased up in front of it. There were no lights, except for slivers coming through closed venetian blinds in the south end. A black shadow appeared suddenly beside the car, played a flashlight through the windows.

"Cut it, Vance," Marty growled. "Is the boss in?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He and Duke herded us up the dark veranda, through a gaudily furnished entrance foyer, toward the lights in the south end. Nonie had recovered her composure, ran

her hand through my arm and smiled briefly. The red welts were still ugly on her face, but they were just bruises. One eye was swollen and discolored. I grinned at her reassuringly.

I'd never seen George Main, and as Duke prodded us through the archway with his gun, I felt a momentary twinge of disappointment. Two faces that had been in my mental rehearsal were missing. Then suddenly I knew why one of them was gone. It was there, but I just didn't recognize it.

I walked across the ornate library, toward the ebony polished desk, stood in front looking at the heavy brown face of Beglin, the passive hotel manager. His tired, paunchy eyes held anger in them. They also held amazement.

"So, you're George Main," I murmured. "You kept it so simple, it confused me. It didn't occur to me you'd play the role of a hotel manager and do your own dirty work." The amazement faded from his eyes then and I laughed shortly. My bleached hair had thrown him. "Yeah, I'm Stewart," I said, "Not Nick."

Marty was standing at the corner of the desk, Nonie next to me. I shook her arm off and shrugged Duke's gun out of my back. A smooth looking man lounged in a chair by the desk, expertly fingering a gun. He was smooth except for one missing ear.

"So, you know," Main murmured thoughtfully. Then he glared at Marty. "Why'd you bring the girl here?"

"She's a ringer," Marty drawled through his nose. "She made a deal with Stewart to raid you, then called the coppers to come. I overheard her."

Suddenly Main's face was no longer tired. Behind his passive front, he was cruel and clever and could strike fast. He withered the kid with a sneer.

"I told you not to think with your head. You're a trigger brain and that's

all. Why didn't you leave the girl there and let the coppers come and get Stewart? They'd have congratulated us for catching the murderer." He smiled thoughtfully. "Maybe we still can. What did she tell the police?"

"She told them who she was, boss, and asked them to send some dicks to help her. I figured you'd want me to bring her out." He hung a cigarette in his thin lips. "She's Ed Bennett's kid, boss. She's been playing us all like snow birds for six months. Figures the coppers didn't hang her old man's killing on the right guy."

Main and I swung out heads in unison to stare at Nonie. Only we held different emotions. His was fear and vicious anger.

"Better think fast, Main," I taunted. "The cops will be here any minute."

"No, they won't, sucker," Marty laughed gleefully. "I cut her off before she told them anything bad."

That hurt, but a quick glance at Nonie told me it was true. Main relaxed behind the desk, his muddy brown eyes tired looking again. "We'll hold the girl until we decide what to do with her, and we'll take Stewart back to the police," he decided.

"Dead or alive?" Marty asked eagerly.

"Alive, I think," Main murmured. "No knife work, Marty. We'll let the state kill him. He doesn't know anything that will hurt us."

I laughed coldly. "Just the whole story, Main," I snapped, "and it'll be in the morning papers. I phoned in a full statement tonight."

Main chuckled dreamily. "Let me hear it, Stewart."

"I could tell it better if Nick was here," I said. "I've never seen him, but he must be good." I was stalling, hoping Main would swallow my line about the papers.

"Who told you about Nick?" he asked, then looked at Nonie, nodded. "Ah, yes. She must have told you."

"Kline told me," I said. "He called me

'Nick' when he spotted my bleached hair, but I thought it was just bad memory. Then Nonie mistook me for Nick when I walked into the Peacock. She thought I, meaning Nick, was in the country."

Nonie looked at me, frowning thoughtfully. "I've had the answer all the time, Mark, but couldn't see it. It didn't occur to me that Nick. . ."

"He's my double, except he has blonde hair," I said. "When he puts on a black wig, he looks just like me. If he didn't, all those witnesses for both murders couldn't have identified me so positively. That's what gave you the idea, isn't it, Main?"

The brown face nodded placidly. "I used to watch you come in the Peacock for a drink while you waited for your train," he murmured, pleased. "It was a very clever plan."

I had to agree to that. "So you had them dope my drink that night when you knew your partner, Bennett, was going to Monroe City. You hid me out and kept me doped for four days while Nick took my identification and went after Bennett. He played drunk in front of witnesses, killed Bennett and returned to New York."

"But the fingerprints . . .?" Nonie asked.

I WAS easy to get my prints on the whiskey glass and the gun while I was unconscious. Nick carried them with him to Monroe City. When he got back, before they turned me loose in Central Park, they put his ticket stubs in my pocket. That cinched it. They worked it the same way on Potorski." I grinned coldly at Main. I had to give him the whole story and give it to him straight if he was going to believe it. Then he might believe my yarn about giving it to the newspapers. If it sounded like I wasn't squooshing him, he'd hold us both until he had a chance to check the papers. If he didn't believe me, we'd be dead in an hour.

"As far as you're concerned, Main," I said slowly, "you had a perfect plan. You were smart enough not to do any of the killing yourself and if you're lucky, you might get away with it." I sneered at Marty. "You had the kid really on the double, Main. Until I saw him again tonight, I wasn't sure that it was him who killed Kline from the fire escape. It kept him hopping to get down to the Canal Street Hotel to carve up Calvin."

Marty cursed, stepped toward me. Main glared at him, motioned him back.

"The kid is stupid, Main. He thought he left Calvin dead in his room. But he came around after Marty left and was so crazed with pain that he staggered out in the hall and dove down the elevator shaft. I wasn't sure he'd killed Calvin, either, until you told me a few minutes ago that he did knife work." I hesitated, watching Main's reaction. "The thing that'll get him, was the knife work on the Homicide dick, McNeal."

"The lousy copper was in the way," Marty drawled. "I spotted him coming into the hotel after the quail told him where you were, so I followed him in and let him have it."

"A nice, easy kill, Marty," I said. "That's what'll kill you, because that's one I didn't like."

Main laughed softly. "You've called every shot right, Stewart, but it won't do you any good. On the record, you're an escaped con, and no one will believe you without proof."

"When I find Nick, I'll have all the proof I need."

Main shook his head sadly. "Don't you give me credit for taking care of that little detail, Stewart?" He stood up suddenly, snapping, "Marty, take our visitors down and let them meet Nick. After the papers come out, we'll decide what to do with them."

"Get going," Marty snarled nasally. Nonie locked her arm in mine, turned

frightened eyes up at me. We marched ahead of him through the deserted kitchen and down a stairway to the basement. Duke followed us as far as the kitchen, then returned to the library. The smooth gungsel stayed with Main, watching him fit a silencer on his gun.

"You'll like the play room," Marty drawled. "When I get a client, as that shyster Kline would say, that's where I practice my techniques. You like that job on Calvin, Stewart?"

We were walking down a dank, cement blocked corridor.

"This is it, Sucker," Marty snapped. "Open the door and walk in."

It was a steel door, with a six inch peep window at eye level. Light was coming from a recess in the high ceiling. It was a large room, about twenty feet square, solid cement, soundproof, with three or four wooden benches on the bare cement floor. Marty motioned us to the far wall opposite the door. We watched him walk to a corner, kick an overturned bench aside.

The figure that was lying there might have been Nick, but the only way you could tell it, was from the blond hair. His face was shapeless, reminded you of freshly ground hamburger. He was naked from the waist up, but the carving wasn't as bad as on Calvin. Marty kicked viciously.

"The lousy scum couldn't take it at all," Marty drawled slowly. He turned around, eyed Nonie and me sitting on the bench near the wall. He hadn't taken the corner of his eye from us at any time, and now his bloodless lips stretched in a grin.

"Wonder if the boss will make me turn you in alive, Stewart? If he does, the quail better be good."

He backed to the door, a sneer on his acne face. I was tense, my arms hanging down between my knees. He stepped through the door, started it shut, and I cried out suddenly,

"Hey, Marty! You stinking rat!"

As my voice echoed against the cement walls, I had my arm poised over my head. I'd expected Marty to swing the door open again, but he didn't. His face appeared suddenly, white with anger, framed in the peep window.

It was my only chance, I knew. I threw swift and hard. It was a good target. The throwing knife that I'd kept strapped to my calf streaked straight and sure to Marty's face. The point struck on the bridge of his nose, between his eyes, and the thin, razor sharp blade pierced on in. Marty's pasty, blank face hung suspended for an instant, then dropped heavily like a stone.

"Come on, sugar," I said.

MARTY was dead on his back. I gripped the knife, pulled it out of his face and wiped the blade on his coat. Nonie shuddered, turned her eyes away. I took his gun and we crept back up the stairs to the kitchen. In the dining room, we could hear Main and the gungsel talking. Then Duke's thick voice mumbled, "Marty oughta be back by now."

Main told him to shut up and I stepped into the living room. Nonie was right behind me. Then, without warning, Duke's bulky frame moved out of the library. He took a couple steps before he spotted us, then his jaw hung open incredulously for an instant. It was too long. The cry of alarm that sprang from his chest, died in his throat with a faint gurgle. My knife sliced clear through his neck and he slid silently to the thick carpet.

I held my breath as Main's placid voice stopped abruptly in the library. Then the smooth gungsel cut in and I breathed again. Nonie moved forward quickly, stooped beside Duke's body and found my gun in his coat pocket. She examined it expertly while I retrieved my knife. Then she gave me a firm smile. A light was shining in

(Please continue on page 129)

(Continued from page 6)

is used, the print is in reverse and must be viewed with a mirror—or, as is usually the case, photographed. Most experts use transparent scotch tape, and that's the "lifter" that your fingerprint kit will include.

The F.B.I. urges that all latent prints be photographed, except in cases where a print is apt to be destroyed before a camera becomes available. Photos not only provide permanent, indestructible records, but the print remains where it was found—a vital factor when the print is to be used to obtain a conviction before judge and jury.

A striking true-life illustration of this point occurred recently in the famous DeMarigny murder trial in the Bahamas. The print around which the trial revolved had been lifted by an expert with a piece of scotch tape. As Erle Stanley Gardner pointed out in his startling reports on the DeMarigny case for *Argosy* magazine, if the print had been photographed, there would not have been any doubt as to whether the print presented at the trial, and the print lifted from the screen in the murder bedroom, were one and the same fingerprint.

Direct prints are made directly from a subject's fingers. The tips are inked and then rolled, not pressed, on a white card. There is a simple, easily learned technique for this which insures complete and unmarred prints.

The chances against the pattern of ridges on the tip of any one of your fingers matching exactly the pattern on the same finger of any other person are one in sixty-four million.

The F.B.I. takes direct prints on square white cards that measure 8"x8" and are ruled to provide two rows of boxes for the prints from the fingers of each hand. Many additional spaces are provided for such information as age, sex, habits, characteristics, deformities, aliases and so on,

Here are the classifications and their subdivisions.



Tented Arch



Exceptional Arch



Plain Arch



Accidental



Lateral Pocket Loop



Central Pocket Loop



Twined Loop



Whorl



Plain Loop

all of which are indexed and cross-indexed and have a direct bearing on the speedy identification of any latent print.

The F.B.I. has often performed miracles, but one which it cannot consistently perform is the identification of any and all latent prints in two shakes.

Unless the F.B.I. receives along with the latent such information as sex, approximate age, weight and so on, identification may take days, weeks, or even a month. With criminal prints—the F.B.I. maintains a separate file for some 3,000,000 prints of known criminals—action is much faster. The known-criminal files contain hundreds of sub-divisions for types of crime and their perpetrators. Criminals, fortunately, have a strong penchant for staying true to type.

FOR its non-criminal files, which contain well over 11,000,000 fingerprints, the F.B.I. uses the Henry system,

devised by Sir E. R. Henry of Scotland Yard. This system treats the prints from all ten fingers as a single unit, and divides all prints into one of four groups: Loops, Arches, Whorls and Composites, the latter being any combination of the first three.

Sub-division is piled on sub-division by means of counts of the ridges taken outward from the pattern core to the "deltas" that mark the beginning of each new sub-pattern. Code letters and numbers give identity to the patterns and counts, and to other factors which serve to speed up the process of elimination when a latent print is to be tracked down.

The enormity of the F.B.I.'s task, and the almost miraculous efficiency of its system, is easily seen when you realize that it would take you a score of life-times to track down, by direct comparison, the mate for a single print that lies buried among some 11,000,000 prints.

(Please continue on page 124)

RECENT RULINGS

St. Joseph, La.: It is illegal for baseball players to toss an Irish potato around instead of a ball in order to bewilder the other side.—High School Umpires.

* * *

Asbury Park, N. J.: Bingo is a game of skill.—City Prosecutor.

* * *

Jackson, Miss.: No vehicle can be driven at less than 30 miles an hour on Federal highways when the roads are clear.—State Law.

* * *

London: A farmer can't shoot a pigeon, even if it is raiding his fields, if it retains the intention to return to its loft.

Washington, D. C.: If there was a preparation that really grew hair, there wouldn't be any baldheads.—Judge Alexander Holtzoff.

* * *

Pottsville, Pa.: No matter how mad a person gets because his car won't start, he doesn't have the right to roll it down an embankment and set it afire.—Justice of the Peace Lawson Dietrich.

* * *

Brisbane, Australia: People should expect when they take after a cockroach that the cockroach is going to make a break and not just stand still.—Municipal Court.

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F.B.I. Detective Stories

(Continued from page 123)

Working by means of direct comparison and group elimination, you can easily match up a latent with its mate from among a limited number of direct prints. You can also check points of similarity just as the experts do. Courts of law usually require at least fifteen points of similarity between direct and latent print before the print becomes evidence.

But first, let's get your finger print kit together. Obtain from your druggist a small quantity of each of the following:

1. Dragon's blood powder.
2. Gray powder—a mixture of chalk and mercury.
3. Black powder—lampblack or ground charcoal.
4. Metallic powder—ground aluminum or bronze. Use the dragon's blood powder, or the metallic powder, for development of latent prints on hard, highly polished surfaces, such as silverware, chrome, door knobs, or knife blades. Use the gray powder for all glass surfaces, and the black powder for light-colored surfaces, including those that are painted. For dark-painted surfaces, you should use the gray powder.

From your stationer obtain:

1. A number of large, plain, white index cards.
2. An inexpensive magnifying glass.
3. A roll of 1" scotch tape.

From your hardware dealer obtain:

1. A 4"x8" piece of glass, preferably plate glass.
2. A small quantity of benzine or denatured alcohol. Use care in handling benzine, which is highly inflammable.

From a printer or printer's supply shop obtain:

1. A tube of printer's ink.
2. A 2"x4" roller that printers use for galley proofs.

You are now fully equipped to handle both direct and latent prints. Rule off the

How to Take Fingerprints

index cards into two rows of five boxes each, one row above the other. Label top row, right hand; bottom row, left hand. Label boxes: thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger and little finger.

To take direct prints, ink the glass plate by dropping onto it a small amount of printer's ink and rolling the ink out into a film with the roller. If the ink in the tube is not free-flowing, warm it under a hot water tap.

Ink the subject's fingers by rolling them, one at a time, on the ink film on the glass plate. At the start of the roll, the finger should be on its side, tip facing outward. At the finish, the tip should be facing outward in opposite direction. It is important that the ink cover the finger to a point below the first joint.

Place the card at edge of desk, table, or counter, but be sure that it is high enough to accommodate subject's arm in a horizontal position. Fasten card firmly, to prevent moving and consequent marring of prints as fingers are applied. Place subject at arm's length from the card. Take hold of each finger in turn, and roll it in the designated box, from one side to the other, as when you inked the finger.

AFTER all ten prints have been imprinted on the card, you can then proceed to group them, and so mark the card. The Loop Group patterns are U-shaped. The Arch Group patterns run in wavy lines from one side of the print to the other. The Whorl Group patterns are circular and revolve about a central point, or core. The Composite Group is a combination of any or all of the other fingerprint classifications.

Place one or more of your prints on a cigarette case, glass, door knob, or any other hard-surfaced object that is handy. Dust the object with the designated powder. Particles of the powder will cling to the sticky ridges on the prints. Tap off,

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When you peel off the scotch tape, the latent print comes with it and is clearly visible because of the tape's transparency. Take your time and use care, in order to prevent a slip that might mar the print's pattern. If you wish, you can affix the tape to a white or dark card, depending on type powder used. Or you can affix a second strip of tape to hold the print in a scotch tape "sandwich," in which case be sure to mark the tape to indicate which side is up.

Examine the latent print to determine the group to which it belongs—Loop, Arch, Whorl, or Composite. Check it against your direct prints in that group. Check points of similarity by counting the ridges outward from the pattern's core to the first "delta" or triangle that marks the beginning of a sub-pattern, and then on to the next. Look for such other points of similarity as broken ridges, scar tissue, and defective deltas.

For greater ease and accuracy, use the magnifying glass. Clean inking plate frequently with benzine or denatured alcohol. Gummed ink, lint, or dust will cause defective prints.

A word of warning: Do not meddle with prints at scene of a crime, or that are in any way connected with a crime, unless you are asked to do so by a qualified official.

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Periodically, J. Edgar Hoover circulates bulletins that deal with fingerprinting and many other branches of police work, you'll find many of these interesting and informative publications on file at your library.

Loot for the Unlucky Lady

(Continued from page 96)

kill me too?" The towel was still clutched in her right hand.

Her answer was the way Harry licked his lips and coughed nervously. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket with his left hand, glanced toward the revolver which still lay ten inches from Barnard's dead hand.

Her mouth opened and she gasped. She put the back of her hand to her head, reeled helplessly a few steps toward Steve and then fainted against him. Instinctively he caught her, and though her body was limp, her eyes closed, her right hand, shielded by her body, thrust the towel at Steve.

He comprehended immediately and gently lowered her to the floor. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Harry make two quick strides, snatch up the revolver, the handkerchief between his hand and the metal.

As he lowered her to the floor, his hand flashed up under the folds of the beach towel, grasped the butt of the Belgian automatic, his thumb pushing the safety down. He swiveled it toward Harry, and pulled the trigger back and held it there for a moment.

The five shots were an almost continual roar, the automatic bucking in his hand. Harry coughed, a high shallow cough.

Steve twitched the towel off the gun, stepped across Harry's body and said, "I still don't like your methods, Gibb."

Gibb put his fat hands up, palms toward Steve as though, with pudgy fingers, he could halt death. "No, Stevie."

Steve cut the minute pressure on the trigger. "Why not?"

"It—it was bad judgment. I would have stopped him."

"What's the story?"

Gibb licked his suddenly pale lips. "Like this," he said eagerly. "Harry got big ideas. He saw the money here. He was

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going to kill all of us and get the cash."

"There's some paper and I see a pen in your pocket. Sit down and write what I tell you to write: I, Wesley Gibb, do hereby confess that on the seventh day of January I gave my employee, Harry Something-or-other, orders to kill both Stephen Harris, licensed investigator, and Gloria Gerald, friend of Albert Barnard, who would have been a witness to the killing of Harris. It was my intention to thus avoid paying Harris his promised portion of monies recovered by him from the said Albert Barnard, who stole the money from my crooked gambling house, The Candor Club, Long Island. Harris killed my employee a few seconds before he was to have been shot. Now sign your name."

Gibb humbly signed, held out the note to Harris.

Steve looked at her and saw that in Al Barnard's last few words, he had killed her love for him. Steve saw that she was essentially decent, and he remembered what she had been willing to do to prevent Al from killing him, remembered how she had gotten his gun back to him.

He said, "Will you witness this, Miss Gerald? It goes into my safety deposit box as soon as I take you back to New York. I think we can keep the law off you."

When he looked back, Gibb was greedily ripping the oilcloth off the shoe box. He said, "I'll take my half now, Gibb."

"Half!" Gibb said in shocked surprise.

"Sure. I always raise the fee when clients try to cross me." He turned and smiled at Gloria and there was something in her eyes that he knew he had wanted badly to see there.

"Besides," he said, turning back to Gibbs, "my personal expenses are about to be doubled, I think. Glory, call the police."

THE END

You'll Be Back, Killer!

(Continued from page 121)

her eyes as I squeezed her arm gently.

I pushed her behind me and jumped quickly through the archway into the library. Nonie covered my back. Main saw me instantly, moved with the speed of a striking snake. He'd been leaning forward on his desk, his arms resting on the polished ebony. His hand held the gun with the silencer on it.

The sudden fire in his eyes was mocking and confident as he brought the gun up. I didn't use the knife this time. I fired as Main raised his gun, even before my feet hit the floor. My bullet caught him in his shoulder, threw him back.

His slug tore into the plaster over my head and I squeezed another shot at him, then threw one at the gunsel. Main jerked a couple times, then his face became fixed, his eyes glazed. The gunsel's gun slid off his lap to the floor.

I whirled as two staccato shots roared behind me from the living room. Nonie was standing stiffly, her smoking gun still held out in front of her. I followed it's direction to the sprawled figure of Vance just inside the doorway. He'd heard the shooting, ran in from the veranda and thrown one shot at Nonie. It came close.

"Why didn't you tell me who you were?" I asked her.

Her answer was reasonable. "I was sure you hadn't killed father, but . . ." she hesitated, "there was that chance."

I nodded. "That I might have," I admitted.

"I had to know," she whispered. "I was in South Africa on a tour when father was murdered. Word didn't catch up with me until I got to London four months later. I got a transcript of your trial and it didn't make sense that you could have killed my father. Especially after I went into your background."

"Satisfied?" I asked.

"Perfectly," she murmured, flashing me

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a dark smile that lifted me right off the floor. I finished the bandage around her arm, then we went into the library and plastered some adhesive over the hole in Main's chest. He wasn't dead, but he wasn't giving us any trouble.

"When father opened the Peacock several years ago," Nonie went on, "I knew he'd given Main and Potorski small interests. Main didn't know me, so I took the name of Nonie Verdun and went to work for him.

The police came then and our mouths fell open when Homicide Lt. Timothy McNeal strode in.

"Marty couldn't take time to do a real job," McNeal grinned. "A cleaning woman was in the hall, and after he clubbed me from behind, he pushed the knife in sideways as I fell." McNeal looked dubiously at Main, who was conscious but shivering. "What do we tag him with?"

"Kline's murder," I said.

Nonie looked puzzled and I said, "I gave him the snow job about Marty killing Kline just to play on his ego about what a perfect round-robin he'd planned. That was the only murder Main was afraid of, and if I was a witness that alibied him, so much the better. He didn't know whether he'd need one and he wouldn't be sure until he read the papers to see if I lied."

McNeal nodded thoughtfully. "That ties it up, Stewart." He frowned. "If we only had some way to prove you didn't break out of prison . . ."

I grinned. "That was my insurance premium," I said. "I had a photostat made of my phoney parole while Nonie sat in the cab holding my barbitol cocktail. I mailed it to myself at General Delivery."

Nonie purred nicely. "I had a photostat made too, darling."

Tim McNeal grinned. I liked him. Eventually he stood up for Nonie and me.

THE END

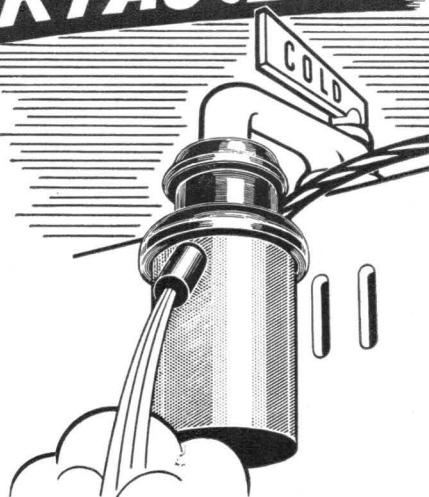
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